

HA'AZINU

D'varim 32:1 - 32:52

(Plaut: p. 1555; Hertz: p. 896; Etz Hayim: p. 1185)

Ha'azinu is the 52d parashah of the year, and it contains 52 verses -- all of Chapter 32 of *D'varim* (Deuteronomy) -- and, according to some people, 613 words. (I question this last number. There is no definitive way to define a word in Hebrew, but, no matter how I count, I cannot get above about 550 words.) Ha'azinu is so important (or perhaps so short) that it is presented in full every year regardless of whether a congregation is using the annual or the triennial cycle. In most years the parashah conveniently falls on Shabat Shuvah, the sabbath between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur; on other years between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Back in Biblical days, the daily hymn of the *musaf* sacrifice was "*Ha'azinu*" (RH 32a).

The first 43 verses of *Ha'azinu* are a poem or song (the same word in Hebrew), as the Masorites -- the scribes who put the Torah into the form that we know it during the 6th to 9th century -- recognized. Their design of the sheet in the Torah scroll uses two columns, each with 1/2 verse, *the only time this format appears in the Sefer Torah*. The last nine verses are not part of the poem, and they shift back to traditional text format.

In my view, Parashat *Ha'azinu* should have ended with verse 47, which both finishes the theme and ends on an upbeat note. The remaining five verses of the parashah begin the story of Moses' death, which is a new theme and certainly downbeat. I have found no explanation for this change of pace. Perhaps it just served to lengthen a short parashah, or to re-emphasize the theme of teaching to which it refers.

The Poem As Oration

Encyclopedia Judaica refers to Ha'azinu as Moses' "valedictory song." Appropriately, the name comes from very first word, which is the imperative plural that instructs the whole congregation to listen, with the implication of listening intently (thus, the link to root for the Hebrew word for ear). And equally appropriately for a Biblical oration, *Ha'azinu* begins by calling on heaven and earth to serve as witnesses.

Moses knew a lot about giving speeches. He knows, for example, that you have to get the message up front, and that is exactly what he does. If you want an executive summary of *Ha'azinu*, read verses 4 through 9. Even shorter is Rabbi Plaut's comment (Plaut Chumash, 1555):

The poem warns; it instructs; it gives hope. Israel's past history has amply demonstrated God's love and care, and these will not be found wanting in the future. Rebellion against His Law may put Israel in dire straits, but in the end God will be shown not to have forgotten the people . . .

Figures of speech also work well in orations, and *Ha'azinu* is full of metaphor and simile. My favourite examples of simile come in verse 2, where Moses uses four different phrases to urge listeners to hear his speech as rain -- in effect, as food -- each time using a different word for rain:

- Matar (מטר) - rain
- tal (טל) - dew
- se'irim (שעירימ) - showers
- rivivim (רביבימ) - drizzle or droplets.

The classical rabbis were quick to see the four words as an invitation to commentary. According to *Or HaChayim* (Chaim ben Moses ibn Attar, 1696-1743, Morocco and Israel), rain and showers represent the written Torah; and dew and droplets, the oral. Rashi adds an almost amusing note: rain can be nuisance to some people, as with people out camping, so Moses added other terms to ensure that everyone could rejoice over water. Less successfully, *Shirah le-Hayyim*, written in Warsaw in 1817, tried to link the 613 traditional commandments to the supposed 613 words of the song.

Moses also loved colourful language. Some of his expressions are still quoted today (often by people who have no idea where they come from); for example:

- God guards Israel as the pupil [or apple] of his eye (10)
- Vengeance is mine (35)
- Lightning of swift sword (*Battle Hymn of the Republic*) (41)

Equally striking are the phrases based on opposites, written literally as not-gods, not-children etc. (לא). In a neat Chasidic interpretation, rebellion against God was represented by turning *EI* (Aleph-Lamed) into *Lo* (Lamed-Aleph) (Plaut, 1566).

Setting

The authorship and age of *Ha'azinu* are both uncertain, but it was probably written before loss of the northern kingdom of Judah, as “the poem does not mention exile as one of Israel’s misfortunes” (Plaut, 1563). Two of the three poems ascribed to Moses in the Torah* frame the wilderness experience: *Shir Ha-Yam* (Song of the Sea) comes near the start of his mission, just after the Israelites have safely crossed the Reed Sea, and there-fore focuses on their physical survival. *Ha'azinu* comes at the very end of his life – possibly on the day before his death – when the Israelites are finally ready to enter Canaan and therefore focuses on their spiritual survival.

Meaning

At its simplest level the meaning of the poem focuses on a tension among three agents, each dependent on the actions of the other two: God, Israel, Other Nations. God is bountiful; Israel is ungrateful (or at least becomes so as it gains in wealth); but, despite this disequilibrium, other nations will not be successful in overcoming Israel. God will --

* Moses final blessing to the tribes in Chapter 33 is also in poetic format.

for unknown reasons, commonly stated as protecting God's Name -- redeem Israel and overthrow oppressors. At opposite ends of the (earlier) traditional and reformist views, both Ramban and Mendelsohn see *Ha'azinu* as a history of Israel that encapsulates the past and the future (Leibowitz). According to *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Nahmanides wrote:

And behold there is nothing conditional in this song. It is a charter testifying that we shall have to suffer heavily for our sins, but that, nevertheless, God will not destroy us, being reconciled to us (though we shall have no merits) and forgiving our sins for his name's sake alone.... And so our rabbis said: 'Great is the song, embracing as it does the present, the past (of Israel) and the future, this world and the world to come....'

At a deeper level, *Ha'azinu* is more complicated, as illustrated by:

- Suggestions that God is ambivalent about what to do next (20, 26, 35), or wondering what would happen if . . . (20), or dreading the views of other nations (27);
- Words found nowhere else in the Torah and some nowhere else in the Tanach;
- Shocking anthropomorphisms -- eg, "suckling" used to convey feeding Israel (13);
- Disturbing concepts, as with "alien gods" (12 -- as if to imply they exist but are not for Israel) and with evident acceptance of killing captives (42).

Even in Mishnaic times, there were recorded disputes. Yehudah and Nechemia argued about whether phrases such as "devoid of counsel" (28) or "their gods" (37) refers to Israel (Yehuda's view) or to "the nations" (Nechemia's view). In *Sifrei*, the classic commentary on *D'varim*, the two sets of views are lined up side-by-side, as if to say both are right. Modern commentators tend to support Nechemia.

Structure (SKIP THIS SECTION IN ORAL PRESENTATION)

Ancient Hebrew poetry did not have rhyme but did use rhythm, meter and parallelism. (This according to Rabbi Plaut; according to Reb Seymour Mayne, it does not have meter in the conventional sense but rather in the patterns of sounds and accents, and in the trope.) Most of the poem consists of 2-line verses, each of which contains two 3-beat stanzas. Typically each half of the paired verses expresses the same thought, which is what constitutes parallelism. Verse 32, cited just above, is a good example with the parallel calls on heaven and on earth.

The number three also plays a great role, for the body of the poem has three main sections, each made up of four sets of three linked verses (ie, 4 x 3 = 12 verses each):

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Verses</u>	
Prologue	1 - 3	(3)
I. Gods's bounty	4 - 15	(12)
II. Israel's Ingratitude	16 - 27	(12)
III. Results for Other Nations	28 - 39	(12)
Epilogue	40 - 43	(4)

This is poetry, but not poetry as we know it. According to Reb Mayne, the Greeks were the first to use many of the formal structural elements of modern poetry and, more importantly, they introduced the notion of an author writing for him/herself or for/to another person – witness their erotic and satiric writing. In contrast, all known classical Hebrew poetry is communal in nature – meant to be read aloud for/to the whole community – and of course it is sacred in topic. At least that is the official view. *Shir Ha-Shirim* suggests to me that some Hebrew poets had more earthy things in mind.

Conclusion

As great as the intellectual discussion about *Ha'azinu*, even more of the literature focuses on the beauty of the poem, which, to no one's surprise, led to flights of imaginative fancy. Though time does not permit any discussion of this aspect of *Ha'azinu*, it is without doubt one of the most inspiring of all parashiyot. You can almost close your eyes and feel yourself in the hot desert sun listening to Moses. How tired he must have been, and disappointed at not being able to cross the Jordan into Canaan. Yet there must have been satisfaction too. At the time Moses sang *Shir ha-Yam*, the people he was addressing were little more than a ragtag bunch of runaway Hebrew slaves. Now, singing *Ha'azinu*, Moses is addressing a self-confident Jewish people ready to enter Canaan and to live out their destiny.

And what is that destiny? That too is given in *Ha'azinu*, in the poem, and given very clearly. All that the Jewish people have to do was to live up to the instructions given in God's Torah. As stated in a terse phrase in verse 47 (first half), "**For . . . it is your very life!**"

Shabbat shalom,

--x/0\X--

Bibliography

- Encyclopedia Judaica*, numerous entries from searching on Ha'Azinu.
Etz Hayim (New York: Jewish Publication Society for The Rabbinical Assembly, 2002).
 Freedman, R. H., and M. Simon, editors, *Midrash Rabbah: Deuteronomy* (London: Soncino Press, 1939).
 Hertz Chumash (New York: Soncino Press, 1958).
 Leibowitz, Nechamah, *Studies in D'varim*.
 Mayne, Seymour, professor, University of Ottawa; written communication.
 Plaut, Rabbi W. Gunther, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC, 1981).
Tz'enah u'R'enah: Devarim (Jerusalem: Mesorah Publications, 1984).
 Websites of Kolel and of Jewish Nature Centre of Canada.