

PARASHAT HA'AZINU

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Last lesson, we noted the chiasmic structure of Ch. 31. One of the conclusions that emerged was the parallel between the writing of the Torah by Moshe, to the writing of the Song, with both documents serving as witnesses to the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people.

The relevant matching passages were:

(31:9) "Moshe wrote this Torah..." (31:22) "Moshe wrote this song"

and

(31:26) "Take this Torah and place it beside the ark... as a witness." (31:19) "...that this Song may serve as a witness."

Actually, the end of Parashat Nitzavim introduced a new witness: "I call heaven and earth today as witness that I have placed before you life and death, the blessing and the curse" (30:19). Here, however, the testimony is of an entirely different sort. Heaven and earth testify as enforcers of the covenant, as Chizkuni explains:

...if Israel fulfills its obligations, then rains shall fall in season and the earth shall yield its produce. If not, the heavens shall be stopped up, and the earth unproductive. (Compare this to the commentary of Bechor Shor.)

Thus, heaven and earth constitute the proverbial carrot and stick; the Torah and Song, on the other hand, embody the essentials of the covenant itself. Why the need for these latter two to constantly remind the people of the covenant and its consequences?

In order to address this issue, let us first examine the Song of Ha'azinu and its lessons. We shall divide it up according to an obvious literary device that characterizes its entire length, namely, the shift from third person to second. Whenever a section of the Song is completed, the second person is used, and this allows us to offer the following breakdown:

1) Verses 1-6 - a generalized beginning presenting Hashem as a righteous judge. Here Israel is addressed in second person: "...He fashioned you and established you."

2) Verses 7-14 - a description of Hashem's beneficence towards His people, beginning with Creation, continuing with the Exodus, and culminating with the entry into the Land. Here the passage opens in second person, "Remember the days of old," and then speaks in third person, "He found them in the wilderness."

3) Verses 15-18 - the people's ingratitude is highlighted, their repaying of Hashem's goodness with idolatry. The opening verse of this section switches from third to second person: "Yeshurun became fat and kicked, you have become fat and obese." It concludes in second person, with words reminiscent of the first section: "You have forgotten the Rock who bore you, the God who gave birth to you."

4) Verses 19-38 - Hashem's anger at His rebellious people, and their punishment, opens this section. Continuing in third person, it goes on to describe their future redemption and the punishment of their foes. The end of the section again addresses Israel in second person: "let those gods arise to help you, and be your protection."

5) Verses 39-43 - the end of the Song begins in second person: "Behold that there is no god besides Me," and goes on to speak of Hashem's mastery of the world, now speaking of Israel in third person.

Thus, the Song comes to describe Israel's future in their new land; they will enjoy Hashem's bounty, transgress His words and be given over to their enemies, only to be redeemed at the end. Over and above this obvious reading, the structure of the Song carries additional allusions. For example, the punishment and redemption of Israel are not presented as separate sections (as we might have expected), to indicate Hashem's desire not to allow the proverbial curtain to close on their fate before they are saved.

Having understood the general lesson of the Song, we can now reiterate our question more forcefully: Why is a witness in addition to the Torah required? In fact, the Torah itself, in Parashat Nitzavim, spells out the exact same process of punishment and redemption, making the need for this Song superfluous!

The verse in 31:19 seems to provide an answer: "Now write this Song and teach it to Israel so that they can recite it.... Moshe wrote the Song on that day and taught it to Israel." The recurring theme of these verses is the necessity of the people to know the Song by heart. In contrast, the Torah is a much more difficult text to master, and not everyone is intellectually up to the task. Not coincidentally, after Moshe records the Torah, he gives it to "the kohanim of the tribe of Levi who carry the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem and to the elders." The parallel verse concerning the Song states that Moshe "taught it to the people of Israel." Of course, the Torah is not to be made the exclusive preserve of the kohanim, turning them into the religious aristocracy. It is to be taught to all of Israel and once in seven years is to be publicly read before them. The people of Israel are expected to conduct their lives according to its directives. Nevertheless, the Song is to be communicated to the people directly, and committed to their memory. This explains its peculiar form which lends itself to memorization (it seems reasonable, in fact, that the Song of

Ha'azinu be taught musically in the schools in order to fulfill the Torah's intent that these verses be memorized).

According to the above analysis, the Torah and Song are in fact communicating the same ideas concerning the covenant, in complementary fashion. The Torah is more detailed, and the Song is easier to remember. It is surprising, though, that these two witnesses seem to offer different versions of Israel's redemption!

In Parashat Nitzavim, the "Torah" section, the verses declare (30:1-3): "After the blessing and curse befall you, you shall take these things to heart in the lands of your exile. You will return to Hashem and hearken to His voice as I command you this day.... Hashem will return your captivity in compassion, gathering you from among all of the nations into which He had scattered you." According to this passage, Israel's redemption is predicated on Teshuva, repentance.

In contrast, Parashat Ha'azinu, the "Song," suggests another cause for the redemption (32:26-27): "I thought of destroying them completely, but I feared the wrath of enemy who would have ascribed their victory to their own power and not to Hashem's acts." Thus Israel's redemption is presented here as a function of the desecration of Hashem's name. God will redeem His people irrespective of their repentance, in order to bring an end to the desecration of His name by the enemies who associate Israel's downfall with Hashem's perceived weakness. How can we reconcile the testimony of these two "witnesses," who seem here to be at variance with each other?

We might point out another significant difference between the Torah and the Song. The Torah sections concerning the covenant, Ki Tavo and Nitzavim, speak of choices. "Behold I place before you this day life and good, death and evil.... Choose life in order that you and your children may live" (30:15). Nitzavim presents sin as an option to be avoided and repentance (i.e. redemption) as a choice to be embraced. In contrast, the Song of Ha'azinu describes sin and redemption in almost deterministic terms. Human choice seems to be removed from the equation. How can we reconcile both of these descriptions? What really is the relationship between the Torah and the Song?

It seems to me that two possible approaches are possible. In the more straightforward approach, we might say that in fact there are two possibilities concerning redemption. It can come about as a result of Israel's initiative and repentance, or can occur in the absence of these factors as a response to the desecration of Hashem's name (see Yechezkel ch. 36 for a description of this harsher form of redemption). The Torah would thus be describing the first possibility, and Song the second.

On a more profound level, we might view the two versions as presenting two forms of Divine providence. One form, the "Torah," is a function of human choice and a response to it. The second, the "Song," is more transcendent and guides history according to Hashem's infinite perspective. According to our limited frame of reference, these two seem irreconcilable, but from the perspective of the Absolute Intellect they are the same.

Therefore, the two witnesses are not really testifying in an identical manner. The Torah operates according to the details which it describes; the Song provides testimony that Hashem guides the world according to a plan which He has determined.

[Translated by Moshe Hattin.]

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