

# Parashat Ha'azinu האזינו

Torah: Deuteronomy 32:1–52

Haftarah: 2 Samuel 22:1–51

## The Song of Moshe — “The Song of Witness”

### General Overview

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “If you incline your ear to the Torah, then when you come to begin [speaking] the Words of the Torah all will remain silent before you and Listen to you, in the same way as you have inclined your ear to listen to the words of the Torah.” (Devarim Rabbah 10.1)

Many critics of the Scriptures would do well to heed the above admonition from the Jewish sages. Instead, modern scholars not only fail to “incline their ear to the Torah,” they go so far as to challenge its very authenticity. Many scholars are quite arbitrary in ascribing dates of composition for the original autographs. This practice has resulted in many people questioning the historical reliability of the Tanakh. This kind of criticism, known as “Higher Criticism” came into vogue around the middle of the 19th century, first in Germany and then it crossed the Atlantic. Presently, this is the assumed method of understanding the Tanakh in many theological schools around the world, including official seminaries of many of the major denominations both in Christianity and in Judaism.

The Higher Critical method of understanding the Tanakh has taken its toll on such portions of Scripture as our present *parasha*. On the one hand, even the Higher Critics acknowledge the antiquity of chapter 32 of Deuteronomy. This is evident from its fluid use of many archaic Hebrew forms, which make this passage rather difficult to both translate and to interpret properly. On the other hand, the critics do not seem to be willing to date this Song earlier than the 11th century BCE, the time of King Solomon. Such a conclusion leads the student to doubt Mosaic authorship, which the Song itself claims.

We believe that there is abundant evidence that allows us to accept chapter 32 at face value. One reason is the specific covenantal format that it uses, thereby providing a close tie with the rest of the book of Deuteronomy. (More on this format later.) As for the archaic Hebrew, we need to remember that this *parasha* is a poem, and an old one at that. Because of the uniqueness of ancient Hebrew poetry, we can expect to see difficult and even archaic Hebrew forms.

Thus, chapter 32, we believe, should be understood just as it presents itself — the “Song of Witness” (as some call it) that the Holy One gave to Moshe and Joshua to teach to the Israelites as they encamped on the Plains of Moab across from Jericho.

Ha'azinu is a majestic poetic piece, overflowing with strong images and full of feeling and lofty thoughts. Throughout the generations it has aroused the amazement of those who understand poetry.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yehudah Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: D'varim*, 1401.

Rabbi Nachshoni is, of course, speaking of Hebrew poetry, of which Ha'azinu finds few equal to it. Accordingly, Rambam tells us that this magnificent poem was always chanted to music. When was it chanted? The Talmud informs us that during the Second Temple period, Ha'azinu was always sung as part of the *musaf*, or additional Shabbat sacrificial service, in the Temple. In fact, we are told that it was divided into six parts and one part a week was sung for six weeks.<sup>2</sup>

We will attempt to analyse this *sidra* by proceeding through the text of the song expositionally with a few additional comments on verses 44–52 at the end.

## **Exposition**

The study outline is as follows:

### **The Song of Moshe — “The Song of Witness”**

- I. Introduction (Prologue) (32:1–6)
- II. Israel’s Past (32:7–15) — “The Loving Kindness of the Lord”
- III. The Generation of the Unfaithful (32:16–27)
- IV. Israel’s Future — Rebuke of the Nations (32:28–38)
- V. Epilogue — The Witness (32:39–43)

In this excerpt from Parashat Ha'azinu, we will focus on section V, The Witness.

#### **V. The Witness (32:39–43)**

So far we have seen that this Song of Witness predicted to Moshe’s generation a time when their descendants would fall away from the Lord and blatantly break the covenant. To help avoid this, Moshe appealed to them to remember what their Father did for them in the past. Sadly, this song indicates they would not learn from their history, God would inevitably have to unleash His wrath upon them and would do so through the agency of foreign powers. However, the song also predicts that enemy nations coming against Israel would themselves be so stuck with pride that it would be necessary for the Lord to judge them as well, and, in doing so, He would avenge all the pain they had inflicted on Israel.

Now, in verses 39–43, Moshe concludes the tragic Song of Witness on a powerful and hopeful note. He first takes us back to the beginning, the introduction, by appealing once again to the two covenantal witnesses, the heavens and the earth. Thus,

This Song begins and ends with a parallel invitation to the listeners to participate. The prologue calls to listeners: “Ascribe you greatness to God”; the epilogue: “Sing aloud Oh you nations of His people.”<sup>3</sup>

#### **A. God Asserts Himself**

Moshe opens the epilogue by letting God speak for Himself in first person, so adding power and authority to what is being communicated. The first thing the Lord asserts is that, “I, I alone am He.” In this phrase, the Lord re-establishes His unique oneness, as opposed to the multitude of puny idols to which His People would fall prey. He alone has the power to take and give life, to save and deliver,

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<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashanah 31a

<sup>3</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim*, 333.

to strike down and to heal — in contrast to the lifeless idols. In short, He teaches the ultimate lesson to His people, summed up as follows,

Let Israel now see from the calamities it has suffered from what it has learnt of the utter helplessness of the idols and their worshippers that the God of Israel is the only true God; and that with Him alone is the power of life and death.<sup>4</sup>

### **B. Israel's Enemies, Beware!**

Verses 41 and 42 reiterate what we have seen earlier, that God promises vengeance upon Israel's enemies. There is, however, an interesting addition to this promise in the epilogue. The cause for vengeance is elevated far above merely defending Israel, as if that were not sufficient. The truth of the matter is that when enemy nations lash their venom out upon Israel, in reality they are lashing out at God. The Holy One says in verse 41 that these nations really, "hate me!" The verb translated "hate" is, in Hebrew, found in the *piel* stem and, therefore, emphasizes the intense hatred the nations have for the God of Israel.

Psalms 2 gives us a vivid picture of this intense hatred as it depicts the nations of the world shaking their fists at the Lord and His Messiah. The book of Revelation illustrates the same scene when the armies of Israel's enemies unite to battle against the Lord. Because of this intense hatred the ungodly have for the Pure and Just One, He is forced by reason of His own justice to bring retribution upon them.

### **C. "Oh Nations, Sing the Praises of His People"**

One of the glorious aspects of the future vengeance of God will be the ultimate vindication of His covenantal people Israel. Some day the nations of the world, according to verse 43, will give due honor to the Lord because of Israel, both for the Land of Israel and for the People of Israel.

The Hebrew text of verse 43 says that God will *cause* Israel's enemies to praise Him, He will avenge Israel and He will also "atone" for both the Land and the people. The *ArtScroll Chumash* translates *kipper* (כפר) as "appease." However, it seems that this diminishes what the Lord promised to do for Israel. The Hebrew indicates He will "atone" for Israel. Ultimately, this promise finds its greatest fulfillment in the person and work of Israel's Messiah, Yeshua. He is Israel's redeemer. He is Israel's sacrificial atonement for the sins of any Israelite who puts his/her trust in Him. Moreover, the prophet Zechariah promises that to accomplish the salvation of the remnant of Israel, one day this atoning Messiah will come and rescue the land from Israel's enemies and establish His throne in Jerusalem.

This final concept in the "Song" puts to rest any notion of the centuries old church heresy called "Replacement Theology." Rabbi Nachshoni speaks about this issue in his anthology of rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy. He writes triumphantly,

This last section is a polemic against the Christians, who tried to explain these verses as having taken place, and that there is no future for the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 902.

<sup>5</sup> Nachshoni, *D'varim*, 1405.

We agree with Nachshoni. We certainly have seen many tragic fulfillments of the first part of this Song, where disaster is predicted for an unfaithful Israel, but we have yet to see the nations of the world praise God for physical Israel and the homeland He has provided for us. To be sure, even as we write, there are powerful forces in the world formulating sinister plans to not only deprive the Jewish people of their homeland, but ultimately to annihilate altogether the people of Israel. However, the Lord assures us in this Song of Witness that the boasts of our enemies will never come to pass. One day, even our enemies will praise God because of us.

We will conclude with the famous rabbinic story with which R. Nachshoni concludes his exposition.

It is told that Rabbi Akiva laughed when he saw foxes coming out of what had been the Holy of Holies, which the Romans violently destroyed in the year 70. When another questioned the Rabbi's strange laughter when most would be in tears, he answered that, just as the prophecy of the destruction of the Temple had been fulfilled, so too, therefore, will the prophecy of the redemption and restoration of Israel be fulfilled.

Rabbi Akiva certainly had no love for Yeshua, but he did understand the tenor of biblical prophecy, especially the full thrust of the last verse of the "Song of Witness." The final verses of chapter 32 tell us that Moshe and Joshua actually gave this song to the children of Israel. They implored them to obey "all the words of this Torah." They told the children of Israel, the Torah "is your life . . ." To be sure, obeying it will not give one eternal life. However, we, the modern day children of Israel know that following it by the power of the Spirit of God will enable all who are redeemed to truly experience that "abundant life" about which our Messiah spoke.