

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Ha'azinu

- Gidon Rothstein

This Haftarah is read with Ha'azinu only when Haazinu comes after Yom Kippur, if it is before Yom Kippur, this Haftara is replaced by that of Shabbat Shuva

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Haazinu (not Shabbat Shuvah), II Samuel 22:1-51

Déjà Vu All Over Again

This is also the haftarah for the 7th day of *Pesah*, so it allows us to see how one text can have different emphases. We will summarize rather than try to analyze all fifty verses in depth.

One Long *Shirah*

This *haftarah* is all one long section of text, as is *Shirat haYam*, the Song the Jews recited after being saved at the Sea, Devorah's Song, and Haazinu itself. This suggests that Song in Scripture, even if it has a few pieces, represents an expression in which all sections can be woven together into one whole. We tend to live fragmented lives, with many commitments, concerns, and interests; the ideal songs to God, the result of having experienced God's salvation in a direct manner, bring together those pieces.

Since we worship a God Who is One in the sense of being absolutely unified (as Rambam stresses), our goal is to forge a unity as close to that as we can from the disparate components of our lives. (This is probably what the angels' calling out to each other to say *Kadosh* is about as well, as we noted in the *haftarah* for Parshat Yitro). In moments of our greatest salvation, we achieve a glimpse of that grand Unity, and our leaders are able to record songs of praise that merge separate elements into a single unit.

The Shirah: A First Look

A summary of this rather lengthy composition will show how it revolves around a central theme. Going by groups of verses, the Shirah consists of the following:

Verses 1-3—God is my protection, etc. (emphasizing the stability of God's protection); Verses 4-7: When I call out to God, He responds so I can praise Him, when I am surrounded by troubles, including the threat of death, God saves me. Verses 8-16: He comes down to save me and the whole world is turned upside down, with darkness, high waves, fire, lightning, all of them fearsome. Verses 17-20: God saves me from stronger enemies, from water disasters; at the end of verse 20, David says it is because God is happy with me, which leads into the next section, a description of his merits. Verses 21-24—David lists how he keeps God's ways. Verses 25-28—God repays good and evil (rewarding David, also on a personal and national level). Verses 29-30: God is my light, with His help I can chase a whole battalion. Verses 31-49: God is generally powerful, with the end returning to how God helps defeat and destroy David's enemies. Verses 50-51: Closing, therefore David has to thank God.

A first glance might lead to the conclusion that the song has many different parts, with no overall unity, opposite what I have suggested. While the last 22 verses before the coda speak about David defeating his enemies, the first half doesn't seem to.

It's All About Defeating His Enemies

I see all of the subsidiary themes as connected by virtue of one notable lack in David's life, the experience obvious miracles. David is forced to flee Saul, has to cope with Goliath, with the king of the Philistines, with the Amaleki tribes he defeats in battle, and with building alliances with surrounding nations, all without any direct Divine intervention.

In such a life, David's references to God stepping in and saving him are expressions of faith, not incontrovertible facts. Since Haazinu's stress is on the Jewish people experiencing their faith in just this way, David's *Shirah* complements the parsha. For example, Saul's getting a message that the Philistines have attacked, just as he is about to catch David, and his decision to turn back because of that, are taken by David as reflections of God's Providence. The whole first part of the Song, then, is David making this faith statement over and over.

Two Brief Digressions

Midrash Tehillim 18;33 takes verse 42 to mean that non-Jews who pray to idols will, after their deaths, pray to God and not get an answer. Note that the Midrash does not say that when they get to Hell they will still call out to idols, or that they won't mean their prayers to God; it says that they'll pray to God.

The Midrash is informing us that this world and life are our only opportunity to build a relationship with God. Whatever the function of the next world, it is not a place where we grow and develop. In fact, the only convincing explanation for the resurrection of the dead in Maimonides' worldview (since he seems to think that the resurrected dead will then die again, returning to wherever they were before being brought back to life) is that it is another opportunity to further their relationship with God.

Tanhuma Pekudei 7 notes that David here refers to God saving him from Jews who would oppose him, apparently even other than Saul. I note that because I wonder whether we sometimes have a romantic vision of times gone by, assuming that Jewish leaders had only to express their good ideas and see them actualized. (As Harry Truman famously predicted Eisenhower would expect when he got to the presidency).

That King David had to struggle with opposition reminds us that very few of even our greatest leaders, if any, have had that kind of freedom. Imagining what David (or R. Yehudah haNasi, or Rambam, or R. Kook, etc.) might have accomplished without opposition makes us soberingly aware that even our greatest leaders have failed to achieve what they might have, and that we are the poorer for it.

Connection to Haazinu

David's Song offers an example of an important Jewish leader relating his life story to God's intervention in that life. In that way, it contrasts with Haazinu's warning that there will come a time when the Jews refuse to accept that perspective. As the Song says, *lu chachmu yaskilu zot*,

if the Jews were smart, they would understand this, and realize the need to return to God with all their hearts.

Haazinu seems to require us to figure out what God is trying to tell us when things go poorly (it's easier when everything's going well), and to respond appropriately. David, who lived a life filled with both tragedy and blessing, offers a paradigm for how to bring it all together as part of one's relationship with God.

Shabbat Shalom