

Ha'azinu

- Mordechai Elon.

The translation, "Poem," throughout this article, for the Hebrew word Shira, conveys the multiple dimensions, intrinsic to Shirat Ha'azinu & the entire Torah, which is also called Shira.

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"This Poem" *

"And God will reconcile His Land with His People"

*The translation, "Poem," throughout this article, for the Hebrew word Shira, conveys the multiple dimensions, meanings and interpretations that are intrinsic to the Shira in Parashat Ha'azinu and indeed, the entire Torah, which is also called Shira. (It is not based on modern Hebrew.) The word "Poem" may also suggest internal contradictions and invites the interaction between the reader and the text. This approach conveys a melody as well.

The English translation of the Scriptural text is taken from the Torah, published by Koren Publishers, Jerusalem,
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...When They All Saw Mordechai's Royal Blue Robes
Shoshanat Yaakov, prayer after reading Megillat Esther

...the blue thread, which alludes to the attribute which includes All, is in All, and is the aim of All.

Therefore He said, And they shall put upon the fringe of each corner a thread of blue...that you may look upon it, and remember All, which comprises the commandments of the Lord.

This is why the Rabbis said: "Because blue resembles the sea, the sea resembles heaven and heaven resembles the Throne of Glory..."

Nahmanides, Numbers 15:39

5.

"This Poem"

A. "And this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land." • B. "Write this Poem for yourselves." • C. "Write for yourselves a Torah that includes this Poem." • D. "For it contains everything in their future." • E. "And God will reconcile His land with His

people” • F. “His nation.” • G. “And this Poem will testify before Him as a witness.”

The words of the Poem in our Parasha, Ha’azinu,

As the small rain upon the tender herb and as the showers upon the grass...

reflect the beauty of this composition. The words of this portion encompass and include everything. Although they are few in number, they are wider and deeper than any other Poem, indeed wider and deeper than any ocean.

This Poem is all inclusive. It talks about Ascribe greatness to our God, Whom we perceive in so many different ways. This is our God, our Rock, Whose work is perfect, and Who is righteous and just. This is also our God who gazes angrily upon His sons and daughters, Who says: “I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end will be.” And this nation, which is crooked and perverse, foolish rather than wise, will in the end abandon God Who created it and degrade the Rock of its salvation. All of the experiences of this nation appear in the Poem of Ha’azinu—from the very beginning of time,

When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, When He separated the sons of Adam.

All of the history of this nation—from its beginning to its end; all of the events, all of the secrets, the past and the future, the revealed and the hidden, is found in this Poem. As the Midrash states:

“Great is this Poem, for there is in it the present, the past, the future, and there is in it this world and the World to Come.”

6.

A. “And this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land.”

The introduction to this Poem of Ha’azinu actually appears near the end of the previous Parasha, Vayelech. There, the Holy One Blessed Be He turns to Moses and presents the Introduction to this Poem and the commandment to write it:

And the Lord said to Moses: “Behold, you shalt sleep with your fathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land, into which they go to be among them, and will forsake Me, and break My covenant, which I have made with them.

The language of the text is confusing—“And this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land.” One would imagine that the text would say something like “this people will fall” or “descend,” but “rise up”? So asks the holy Or HaChaim and thus he responds:

...Perhaps it intends to say something in the manner of “But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked” in speaking of the people “rising” [kam]. Its meaning is that the nation achieved its rising and

ascendancy [kima] in the world through inheriting the land, wealth and honor, and the nation became fat. Consequently, the nation rose up and went astray. And that is why the nearby verse [v. 19] says “Write this Poem for yourselves...” This is because “When I shall have brought them into the land...they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and grown fat; then will they turn to other gods.” Thus, “eaten and filled themselves” precedes “they turn to other gods.” Similarly, the verse that is before us first says “rise up” [i.e., “ascending”] and then “go astray.”

“Will rise up and go astray.” This is a basic Jewish characteristic that is essential to recognize and understand. Only when this nation will rise and live in its own land and everything will go well, when the nation will not suffer from trouble and distress, only then will it abandon the God Who created it and degrade the Rock of its Salvation. Only then will it feel the need to liberate itself from the yoke of this God, from His Torah, from His Unity. The nation will do this in order to find its own space, to be like all the other nations. Always, when “I shall have brought them into the land of which I swore to their fathers, one flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and grown fat”—only then will the next stage occur: “Then will they turn to other gods and serve

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them , and provoke Me and break My covenant..” This is the historic process that will always characterize this nation, through all the years of its existence, as the Poem will immediately describe in the following verses:

So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with Him.
He made him ride on the high places of the earth, and he did eat the fruit of the fields;

So then, when the nation is finally in its own land, what will occur then?

But Yeshurun grew fat, and kicked, thou are grown fat, thou art become thick,
thou art covered with fatness;
Then he forsook God Who made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation. They
provoked Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations they provoked Him to anger.

And the Holy One Blessed Be He, what will He do? This is how He describes it to Moses in the Introduction to the Poem in the preceding portion of Vayelech:

Then My anger will burn against them on that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say on that day: Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide My face on that day for all the evil which they shall have perpetrated, in that they have turned to other gods.

And similarly, the Poem describes:

And when the Lord saw it, He abhorred them
because of the provocation of His sons, and of His daughters. And He said, I will hide My face from them,
I will see what their end shall be... I will heap mischiefs upon them;

I will spend My arrows on them... The sword without,

8.
And terror within.

So we see the very same principles, the very same events are mentioned in the Introduction to the Poem and the Poem itself.

B. “Write this Poem for yourselves.”

In the midst of this Introduction, the Holy One Blessed Be He commands the writing of this Poem:

Now, therefore, write this Poem for yourselves, and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this Poem may be a witness for Me regarding the children of Israel.

Which poem is Moses commanded to write down? Apparently, it is this Poem, the Poem of Ha’azinu, the Introduction of which we are now examining.

This is how Rashi, for example, understands the verse:

“This Poem—from ‘Give ear, O heavens’ [the beginning of the Poem] to ‘And God will reconcile His land with his people.’ [the end of the Poem]”

Nahmanides also understands the verse in the same way:

“This Poem—the Poem that I will now tell you, this being Ha’azinu. It is called Poem because Israel would recite it with song and psalm. It was also written in the style of a Poem...”

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However, the Sages did not understand this verse in the same way. According to them, “this Poem” refers to the entire Torah. And the “write for yourselves” is the 613th and last of the 613 commandments—the commandment that each Jew should write a Torah scroll for himself and by himself.

Rava said: “Even though your ancestors left you a Torah, it is a commandment to write your own, as it says, ‘Now, therefore, write this Poem for yourselves.’”

No commandment could be more appropriate for number 613 than “for each Jew to have his own Torah.” For this commandment, at the very end of the Five Books of Moses, completes the entire set of the commandments, includes them all and encompasses them all, following all of the individual details and particulars of the prior 612 positive and negative commandments. There is no doubt about this. But for the source of this commandment, the Sages can only find: “Write this Poem for yourselves?” How can that be, when the plain meaning of the text, as well as almost all the commentators, agree that “this Poem” refers to the Poem of Ha’azinu, which appears in the verses that follow? How does “this Poem,” then, suddenly refer to the entire Torah

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This question about the Sages' approach is really a question on the Torah itself, and about Moses our Teacher himself. For it appears that Moses himself understood "this Poem" as "this Torah," as attested to by the Torah itself, which Moses wrote:

Moses therefore wrote this Poem the same day, and taught it the children of Israel...and when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this Torah in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying: 'Take this Book of the Torah, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord...

So Moses wrote "this Poem" but clarifying this to mean "the words of this Torah?" How does "this Poem" come to be the entire Torah? What is Moses

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writing? And furthermore, this same reference, namely to the entire Torah, appears at the end of the Poem, after:

And will render vengeance to His adversaries and God will reconcile His land with His people, when Moses sums up the words for the second time.

And when Moses made an end of speaking all these words to all Israel; and he said to them, Set your hearts to all the words which I testify among you this day, which you shall command your children to observe to do, all the words of this Torah.

"All these words" that Moses finished speaking to all of Israel: Are they this Poem or the entire Torah? What is Moses referring to?

C. "Write for yourselves a Torah that includes this Poem."

Maimonides also quotes the Sages and counts the "Write this Poem for yourselves" as a positive commandment for every Jew to write for himself a Torah scroll. However, he understands the plain meaning of the verse as referring to the Poem of Ha'azinu, and not to the entire Torah. This is how Maimonides formulates the commandment and its source:

"It is a positive commandment for every Jew to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says: 'Now, therefore, write this Poem for yourselves...'"

Up until this point, Maimonides is quoting the words of the Sages. However, he then adds his own interpretation of the words:

"That is to say...write for yourselves a Torah that includes this Poem."

In other words, "this Poem" does not refer to the entire Torah, but rather only to the Poem of the

portion of Ha'azinu! If so, then, why does one have to write the entire Torah? Maimonides continues and states:

11.

“...Because it is not permitted to write out individual Parshiyot [portions] of the Torah.”

Amazing! In essence, says Maimonides, the verse about writing down the words refers only to the Poem in the portion of Ha'azinu. This is what the Torah intended and what one was obligated to write. However, since individual Parshiyot (portions) of the Torah are not to be written out, therefore—in the midst of the commandment to write the Poem—appears the commandment to write the entire Torah.

This is difficult to comprehend. Is it indeed forbidden to write out individual portions of the Torah? What about the sections of the Tefillin [phylacteries]? What about the parts in a Mezuzah? Since there are four Torah portions in the phylacteries, why are we not required to write four entire Books of the Torah which include those four sections? And the two portions of the Mezuzah? How can they be written separately? Perhaps this Poem is so important and significant that it has been specifically decreed to write this Poem down separately. Why only here may we invoke the general rule not to write out individual Torah portions? And even if this is truly the meaning, why didn't the Torah spare us this confusion and state specifically : “Write for yourselves this Torah?”

D. “For it contains everything in their future.”

It appears as if the Torah intentionally intertwined the issue of the source of the commandment to write a Torah scroll with the writing of this Poem. The Torah appears to want to convey that the way to understand the writing of the entire Torah ensues from writing this unique yet all-encompassing Poem of “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.” There is something special in this Poem that stands out from any other specific chapter of text related to one event or another. This Poem includes everything, similar to the entire Torah.

How can this be?

The opening of the Poem is similar to Genesis. It presents a similar process of the creation of the entire world, the heavens and earth:

12.

Give ear, O heavens and I will speak, and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.

And here the Torah makes one request:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations,

Ask thy father and he will recount it to thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee.

“Remember the days of old”—from the time of “In the beginning ,” from the days of Adam in the Garden of Eden, the manner of the first sin, the fall of the world, and the way of the great repair that comes about through the process of history. Remember the days of old, including the

years of each generation, through all generations, from the most crooked and perverse to the generation of the great repair and great Return that will occur. In those days, God will avenge the blood of his servants and bring vengeance upon His enemies. And finally, there will be the great redemption of “And God will reconcile His land with His people.”

Nahmanides’s words (Deut. 32:40) about this Poem are something of a poem in themselves:

“Now in this Poem, there is no condition of repentance or service of God as a prerequisite for the coming redemption, but it is a testamentary document that the evils will come and that we will endure them, and that He, blessed be He, will do with us in furious rebukes—but He will not destroy our memory...”

As the last of the 613 commandments, this Poem does not concern itself with man’s service, nor with reward and punishment. This Poem is, above all else, testimony:

Now, therefore, write this Poem for yourselves, and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouth, that the Poem may be a witness for Me regarding the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land of which I swore to their fathers, one flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and grown fat; then will they turn to other gods, and serve them; and provoke Me, and break My covenant. And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles have befallen them,

13.

that this Poem shall testify before Him as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed...

So this Poem is a testament to what will occur in the future, including all the downfalls and rebukes, including all of the wrath that will ensue, but a testament that despite everything—the Eternity of Israel will never be compromised, and despite everything, this Torah will not be forgotten from the mouths of His seed.

“And He will return and be comforted and will punish the enemies with His sore and great and strong sword, and forgive our sins, for His Names’s sake.” (Nahmanides, Deut. 32 :40, Chavel, *ibid.*)

“And forgive our sins” is parallel to the end of the Poem, “And God will reconcile His land with His people.” This is the final redemption and complete return that will occur in the days to come. And Nahmanides continues:

“If so, this Poem is a clear promise of the future redemption—the infidels notwithstanding. And so the Rabbis mentioned in the Sifre: ‘Great is this Poem, for there is in it the present, the past, the future, and there is in it this world and the World to Come.’ It is to this that Scripture alludes in saying, And Moses came and spoke all the words of this Poem in the ears of the people. It mentions all [‘all’ the words] in order to indicate that the Poem contains everything that is to come upon them although it is brief in words...”

How, exactly, does this Poem include everything?

14.

E. “And God will reconcile His land with His people.”

The final, concluding verse of the Poem deals with the future redemption and the ultimate atonement.

Sing aloud, O ye nations, of His people, for He avenges the blood of His servants
And renders vengeance to His adversaries and God will reconcile His land with His people.

What is the meaning of this atonement? What does it mean to “reconcile His land with His people?” What will be atoned for, His land, or His people? Or both of them? And if this refers to both of them, then what is this atonement? Is atonement for humans similar to atonement for the land? And what, in fact, is atonement for the land? And what is His atonement for His people?

The Chizkuni defines this atonement with one word, which is the key to understanding all of these matters.

“And He will atone—this is the language of reconciliation, as in ‘I will placate His presence.’”

So we are not speaking here of atonement in terms of God forgiving His nation or His land. This is just one stage. The true redemption of the world will come about when there is a necessity of reconciliation between humanity and the land. Not just between man and the land, but something more—between the nation—“His nation”—and its land.

This atonement, this great reconciliation, is the conclusion of the Poem of “the heavens and the earth.” This refers to the redemption of the world, which from the very beginning of heaven and earth, from the time of Adam’s sin, has been deteriorating, has been heading downwards. The repair of Adam’s sin and the return of the world to the spiritual level of the Garden of Eden can come about only by reconciling man and the land.

Why?

15.

This is because, essentially, from the beginning of creation, man has been tested by his relationship to the land. Indeed, this relationship is the very reason for the creation of humanity:

And there was not a man to till the ground.

Man’s task in this world—for which he is called adam in Hebrew, is to create harmony between humanity and the land [adamah]. His task is to pray for rain to fall on this land, thus connecting the heavens to the earth. His prayer will determine the fate of the land and all that will sprout from it. Everything depends on man’s prayer, man’s service. From the time of man’s first sin, the harmony between man and the land has deteriorated. Since that time, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake” [Gen. 3:17]. Man will sow and the land will produce thorns and thistles. From that

moment on, man who was placed in the Garden which he was “to till it and to keep it,” he will glimpse the Garden of Eden through the bright blade of a revolving sword. From now on—“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”

F. “His Nation.”

From that point on, the world has been trying to return to the lost Garden of Eden, to return and become reconciled with the land. Ten generations from Adam to Noah will continue to provoke anger, until the birth of that first sign, which suddenly, in a very short time, will succeed in creating a certain reconciliation between man and the land. This is Noah [meaning “comfort”], who is named because:

This one shall comfort us for our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed.

However, even this consolation does not succeed in achieving complete reconciliation between man and the land:

“And what is the meaning of ‘our work and the toil of our hands?’ Before Noah was born, when people sowed they did not reap. Rather, they would sow wheat

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and reap thorns and thistles. Once Noah was born, the world returned to its stability. People reaped what they sowed. If they sowed wheat, they reaped wheat. If they sowed barley, they reaped barley. Furthermore, before Noah was born, they worked with their hands. Thus it is written “the toil of our hands.” Once Noah was born, he forged plows and sickles and axes and all tools of labor.”

When no harmonious relationship exists between man and the land, and there is no natural flow of vegetation, plows, sickles and axes are necessary to work the land. And when Noah, this comforter, emerges from the Ark, after the greatest holocaust in the world, he will conduct only one test in this renewed world to which he is going out—the test of man vis-à-vis the land.

And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard.

He will examine whether this land, which has been cursed for 10 generations, has returned and will respond to a human who plants in it. And the land duly responds, and a vineyard appears. However, man falls once again, in how he eats and drinks from the fruits of the land, and he becomes intoxicated. Once again he misses, falls and gets drunk.

And again, 10 generations from Noah to Abraham provoke anger culminating in the generation of the Tower [of Babel], who forget the God Who created them and build a Tower and seek to rebel against heaven. Then Abraham is born into the world, Abraham the Hebrew [Ivri], who stands on one side [ever] of the riverbank, opposite an entire world that has lost itself and has lost its God, and consequently, it has lost its connection with its land. Now, with the birth of Abraham, the world progresses to a new process. From now on, the redemption of the world will

progress and be made clear not by means of individuals, but by means of an entire people, a nation. From now on, the task of this nation will be to return this world to the heights of the Garden of Eden, to reconnect man [adam] and the land [adamah]. And with the birth of this nation, there is only one way to achieve this goal:

If you hearken diligently to My commandments which I command you this day...that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the early rain and the late rain,

17.

that thou mayst gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thy oil. And I will send grass in thy fields...

And if, heaven forbid, you do not listen to My commandments, then immediately:

that the land yield not its fruit.

From this moment on, the world passes from the universal, general level to the national level. True, this perhaps gives rise to tensions, and perhaps this is not as pleasant, but this is the only way to return and to elevate the world. This moment, this global transition, is what “This Poem” asks us to remember:

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations:

Ask thy father, and he will recount it to thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee.

When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam,

He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel..

Rashi comments on the above:

“When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance”—When the Holy One Blessed Be He gave to those who provoked Him the portion of their inheritance, He inundated them and caused them to drown. “When He separated the sons of Adam”—when He dispersed the generation of the Separation (Gen. 11)...

When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance and when He scattered humanity—it was then that the world made the transition from the universal level to the national level. And this was accomplished by means of a nation that was created to reconnect heaven and earth. From this moment on, the harmony between man and land will return only when God reconciles not only man and his land, but specifically, His nation and its land. In this way, this nation will return and be upon its land at the final redemption.

18.

G. “And this Poem will testify before Him as a witness.”

This great lesson—the transition of the world by means of the stage of “He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel,” the formation of this Hebrew nation,

which stands on the opposite side of the river and strives for the redemption of the entire world—this lesson must be recognized and understood not only by the world. Most importantly, they must be understood by this nation itself.

This nation has two missions to fulfill in the world. First, the universal mission, which includes its being a “light to the nations” and its desire to join with the other nations of the world and work together with them. Second, there is the national internal mission of preserving the national identity and uniqueness. However, this national mission does not imply nationalistic egotism. Even the house of prayer for this people strives to transform itself into a house of worship for all nations. However, whenever this nation almost succeeds in bringing about reconciliation with its land, each time it returns to its land, it will do the opposite of what it is meant to do. Instead of engaging in manufacturing, it will import goods. It will connect with the world, because it has the basic striving to do so, but when it does so prematurely and incorrectly, it will go astray after the foreign gods of the land. Because this nation does not yet know itself, it therefore destroys itself. And when the nation is exiled from the land, it will encounter many troubles and evils, only then will it suddenly remember to look inwards and say to itself: “Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?” For suddenly, this nation will be reminded that in its own hand is the key to the redemption of the world. And this key is not a foreign god. This key is “If you hearken diligently to My commandments.” This key is all of the words of this Torah.

How will this nation be reminded of this truth?

And this Poem will testify before Him as a witness...

And what is the testimony that the Poem will provide for the nation?

For it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed.

19.

Not “that it will not be forgotten from the nation’s mouth,” because it is certainly possible that it will be forgotten from the mouths of the nation. It is absolutely possible that a crooked and perverse generation will arise, which will go astray after foreign gods of the land and forsake its God, its sheltering Rock. It certainly may be that this Poem will be forgotten from the mouth of the father. However, this Poem testifies that the son will remember it. It may be that the father will go astray after the foreign gods of the land and will exchange the Torah for a thousand other “isms.” But even if it takes 70 years—or 700 years—with all of this, this Poem will not be forgotten from the mouths of the nation’s seed.

And reflecting on the question we asked, why is “Therefore, write this Poem for yourselves” the source for writing one’s personal, private Torah, which is commanded to every Jew? Why is the commandment—according to Maimonides—“Write for yourselves a Torah that includes this Poem?”

This Poem is a warning. A significant one. In it is written everything that will occur, everything that will happen if Yeshurun becomes fat and if, heaven forbid, it kicks, if it forgets its God and

degrades the Rock of its salvation. This Poem describes everything that will happen if the nation does not take the antidote. And what is the antidote? All of the 612 commandments that precede this 613th commandment. Everything by means of which Israel will restore itself and the entire world to perfect harmony—of man and a nation reconciled with its land.

The Torah intentionally “challenged” us with “Now, therefore, write this Poem” because the Torah meant to teach us and to warn us that it is possible for every Jew to write his own complete Torah, to know each of its particulars, but in no way understand its entire magnificence--this Poem, which is composed of all of the details of the Torah that are necessary to bring man to reconnect nation and land, world and land.

The Poem of Ha'azinu is not just another portion, such as the four portions of the Tefillin [phylacteries], or the two portions of the Mezuzah. This is not a portion that asks us to remember the Exodus from Egypt or any other specific matter.

This portion, this Poem, which begins with the testimony of the heavens and the earth, includes everything—the past, the present and the future. It includes the entire process of the world from the time that the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the children of men by means of

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setting the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel, until the final redemption, may it become a reality speedily in our days by means of this process, until finally, “And God will reconcile His land with His people”