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Parashat Ha'azinu Part I Overview of the Shira

1. Context and Purpose

After leading Israel through reaffirmation of the covenant with G-d, actually, as a conclusion to it, in Deuteronomy 32 Moses turns his attention to a poetic composition looking toward the future. The *shira* of *Ha'azinu* is the climax of his great efforts recorded in the latter portion of Deuteronomy to encourage a future generation of Israelites to reaffirm their allegiance to the covenant. The *shira* (literally “song,” but which in biblical Hebrew may readily carry the connotation of a serious poetic composition), is especially focused on a time when the Israelites may have had a major spiritual decline and had become alienated from G-d. It strives to implant hope for the future even when the nation finds itself in a spiritually deteriorated state. Through it Moses conveys the idea that such hope is meaningful and can be based on awareness of G-d’s interest in reconciliation with the nation no matter how disloyal it had been. Indeed, when the nation is in an acutely distressful situation He is committed to help it – somewhat surprisingly – even when it has not made a proper repentance.

The several preceding chapters set the stage for the *shira* – we may say foreshadow it – by stressing related themes concerning the nation’s possible sinful future. These end-of-Deuteronomy elaborations, presented together with interspersed motivational statements intended to avert the major transgressions, looked to the future from several different perspectives.

The awesome chastisements detailed in chapter 28, depicting a future of misery for the Israelites if they disobeyed G-d, were part of standard covenant protocol in which a blessings and curses section was attached to the stipulations. They were formulated in the conditional mode, addressing the nation’s exercise of its free will, and no overt pessimism regarding the

future is expressed there. Upon concluding that recitation, however, Moses articulates the view that the people still do not appreciate what G-d had done for them, hinting at potentially major problems in the offing (Deut. 29:3).

At the covenant assembly that follows (29:9 ff.), Moses describes the devastation that would result from noncompliance in a most vivid manner, obviously intending to instill fear of it in the nation. The succeeding passage – proclaiming the repentance principle – begins with a focus on a time when the curses had come to pass and the nation was in exile (30:1 ff.). Subsequently, in fulfillment of the covenant protocol requirement to have witnesses, Moses called on heavens and earth to bear witness to the warning he is presenting and the retribution in store for disobedience, emphasizing the latter’s conditional nature and the possibility of a spiritually successful future, remaining in the land indefinitely.

In chapter 31, several additional covenant particulars are addressed – the writing of the teaching, transmission of the written document to priests and elders and instructions for the ceremony of *haqhel*, the septennial assembly at which “this Torah” is read and taught to everybody. The latter constitutes a “mini” covenant renewal. This is followed by G-d’s statement to Moses concerning Israel’s future idolatry and national estrangement from Him.

It is at that point that G-d introduces the *shira* of *Ha'azinu*, designating it as a witness. When the people commit idolatry, annulling the covenant and receive severe retribution, the *shira* will be there to testify against them (31:21). In short, it attests to G-d’s integrity and faithfulness to the covenant, contrasted with Israel’s lack of these traits, and to the justice of His chastisements. It also makes a major point of His abiding interest in Israel and its future.

The *Sefer Torah* (the document that comprises the written teaching) is also designated as a witness. It serves as a guide to proper living and a deterrent to transgression. The combination of the teaching and the *shira* as witnesses reflects the alternating passages and tensions of recognizing free will and the nation's tendency to sin. However, as we pointed out in our study on Deuteronomy 31 (*Parashat Vayelekh Part II*), free will is a foundational principle of the Torah and statements apparently predicting transgression should not be taken as abrogating it. To the extent that it is philosophically necessary, such statements should be understood as "if and when." Perhaps that is why the statements foreseeing future transgressions are interspersed among assertions of, or that assume, free will.

Ha'azinu's description of future retribution to Israel, contrary to chapters 28–30, does not include exile from the land. This is a continuation of chapter 31 in which exile was not mentioned, neither in G-d's notification to Moses regarding the nation's future retribution (31:17-18) nor in Moses' statement to the people on this subject (31:29). It appears that the statements concerning the future depicted in chapters 31–32 are directed first and foremost to a time after Israel has been severely chastised but before its exile. They are calculated to give the people of that time hope that they could avert exile with a return to the covenant with G-d.

As we have previously remarked, apparently definitive predictions of future sinning and retribution may serve a positive purpose. In their chastisement, the people might view the situation as follows: Although G-d knew that the nation was going to backslide into idolatry and receive retribution, He nevertheless entered into a covenant with it and granted it the promised land. Accordingly, there must be hope for a better future after the retribution. Sincere repentance would be accepted and reverse the situation. And just as the retribution was foretold, so, too, His relenting and having compassion upon Israel was also foretold, and could come about at any moment. And the restoration might be everlasting.

Regarding the *shira's* composition the following may be said. In the first mention of it G-d instructed Moses and Joshua, "And now, write you this *shira* and teach it to the children of Israel, place it in their mouths"

(31:19). Speaking of it as "this *shira*," that is, of an already existing item, implies that He was presenting to them a composition that they should transcribe and teach to the Israelites. However, its text contains many statements that are clearly spoken from the human perspective, presumably uttered by Moses. To reconcile this matter without trivializing the prophetic process, it appears that G-d presented the essence of a poetic composition and asked Moses (and perhaps Joshua) to engage in expanding it. Moses provided a framework that included a prologue and epilogue as well as connecting links and interspersed comments (v. 22). Thus, the *shira's* outward structure is from Moses' perspective, appearing as his own composition, but it contains a substantial amount of quotations or paraphrases of G-d's words.

2. Synopsis

In recounting G-d's faithfulness and extraordinary past benefactions to the Israelites, *Ha'azinu* stresses that it had been incumbent upon them to remain loyal to their benefactor but they did not do so. Accordingly, He is justified in meting out retribution to them. But – and here come the two unique points of the poem, the first coming straightaway in a pronouncement from G-d – even at the bleakest moment, when He might think to eradicate the Israelites from the face of the earth for their sinfulness, He will refrain from doing so. Such an act might be misinterpreted by the enemy, who might mistakenly assume that they prevailed over Israel because of their own prowess, not that it was a providential matter of G-d's doing. And furthermore, in the nation's helplessness, He will intervene on its behalf and have compassion on it.* This is stated without any explicit mention of repentance, merely making reference to "His nation" and "His servants," apparently indicating the Israelites' acknowledging their identification with Him. These thoughts foster the feeling that there is always hope for a renewed national future.

The *shira* employs a whole set of biblical poetic devices. Parallel clauses, with intensification or enrichment in the later clause, run throughout the composition. There is a significant degree of assonance, various types of rhyme, rare words, quaint forms** and archaic locutions. It is replete with vivid similes and metaphors. G-d describes the *shira* as

“never to be forgotten” by future generations (Deut. 31:21). This anticipates such a deeply rooted appreciation of the essential principles that there will always be a remnant in the nation attentive to its heritage. Following is a brief summary of the *shira*, divided into what appears to be its thirteen elemental sections based on subject matter, style and intimations from its poetic devices.

Strophe 1, Prologue (Deut. 32:1-3): Moses indicates the solemnity of the composition by summoning heavens and earth to witness his words. (Shortly before, in 30:19, he had called heavens and earth to witness that the Israelites had the choice before them of life and death, the blessing and the curse, and that choosing life – faithfulness to Hashem – would lead to their remaining on the land indefinitely.) He hopes that his message will descend upon his audience as rain and dew upon the grass, that is, as beneficial bounty that will generate positive results. He asks that when he “calls” Hashem’s name – probably meaning that when he invokes His name in a proclamation that relates His characteristics and deeds, which he will soon begin doing – the audience should ascribe greatness to Him, acknowledging the validity of the statements. (See Exod. 33:19 and 34:5, where calling His name is attached to elaboration of His characteristics; in Ps. 105:1, it is parallel to making His deeds known to the nations.)

This latter verse that speaks of ה' שׁוֹמֵר (“Hashem’s name”) concludes the prologue. Not surprisingly, the three verses of the prologue contain twenty-six words, the *gematria* (numerical value of the letters) of the Tetragrammaton. This is comparable to the first strophe of the Song at the Sea (Exod. 15:1b-3), which concludes with ה' שׁוֹמֵר (“Hashem is His name”) and also contains twenty-six words. The latter is thematically linked in the inner structure of the book of Exodus to G-d’s revelation of His name to Israel (“*Ani Hashem*,” Exod. 6:2-9). The latter passage contains a unit of twenty-six words, as well as units of its multiples, clearly related to the various appearances of the Tetragrammaton in that context. Those units are also intrinsic to the structure of that passage. (See our study on *Parashat Va’era Part I*.)

Strophe 2, Basic Principles (vv. 4-6): G-d’s doings are without blemish, all His ways are just; He does not mete out unfair treatment, as He is righteous and

upright. In contrast, Israel has acted corruptly, being a crooked and perverse generation, treating Hashem, the nation’s father and maker, ungratefully.

Strophe 3, Israel’s Selection (vv. 7-9): The nation is called upon to contemplate history and tradition to verify G-d’s extraordinary benefactions to Israel. When He separated nations and apportioned them their lots He selected Israel to be His very own.

Strophe 4, The Foundling Metaphor (vv. 10-12): G-d found Israel in a wilderness, in an abandoned and precarious situation; He raised it, nurtured it and protected it. He alone guided it forward; no other god was involved.

Strophe 5, Prosperity (vv. 13-14): He brought the nation to a high level of material success, providing it “honey from the rock and oil from the flint stone,” that is, supernatural leadership. (The metaphor may be picturing an abundance of honeycombs among the rocks and olive trees growing upon stony earth.)

Verse 14 is one of only two verses in the *shira* – the other being verse 39 – that contain an odd number of colons. (Both these verses comprise five colons each; all other verses contain either two or four colons.) The traditional manner in which the poem is written is in two solid, balanced columns of equal length, with each line composed of two colons, one in the right column and one in the left. The first verse with an odd number of colons creates an imbalance of sorts, such that that verse and those following conclude in mid-line. The second verse with an odd number of colons rebalances the structure. These two “exceptional” colons appear to be markers for special attention. The first seems to indicate that a large section of the poem has concluded. Indeed, strophes 2–5 do constitute a distinct section that articulates Hashem’s leading Israel to its zenith, reflecting a most positive relationship. It contains 130 words, in accordance with the symbolism of thirteen and its multiples (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*). The second odd-numbered verse will add to the symbolism, a matter we will discuss when we get to it.

Strophe 6, Transgression (vv. 15-18): Speaking of a future time, the prosperity G-d provided Israel is contrasted with the nation’s gross unfaithfulness.

Amid affluence, perhaps prompted by it, the previously “upright” nation (here called יִשְׂרָאֵל from יָשָׁר, meaning “straight,” apparently a play on יִשְׂרָאֵל) turned to idolatry. The point is made that their new gods had recently arrived on the scene, gods unknown to their fathers, while they “neglected the Rock that begot [them].” Of course, idolatry is idolatry, whether new or old, but rejecting their fathers’ faithful practices for new idolatry is even more blameworthy.

Strophe 7, Retribution (vv. 19-25): G-d is vexed and spurns His “sons and daughters” in that coming time for straying from Him. Verse 20 introduces His first-person speech, the tense in which much of the remainder of the composition is set. He expresses His anger at Israel and describes the extensive chastisement He will mete out to it. This includes bringing a base “non-nation” against it, corresponding to the “non-gods” they angered Him with. There will be famine, plague, pestilence and more.

Strophe 8, Change of Heart (vv. 26-28): Suddenly, G-d’s tone changes. Although He had thought to make an end of Israel, He will not do so. He is concerned with the vexation the enemy might cause by misinterpreting their overwhelming victory, thinking that Israel’s elimination was their own accomplishment, not the result of divine retribution. This consideration is somewhat reminiscent of Moses’ prayers following the episodes of the golden calf (Exod. 32:12; Deut. 9:28) and the scouts (Num. 14:13-16) in urging that G-d should not destroy Israel if His act would be misunderstood. No repentance on the nation’s part is mentioned.

It is not clear if verse 28, “For they are a nation bereft of counsel and in them there is no understanding” is a comment on the enemy and elaborates on the concern expressed in verse 27 or refers back to Israel and continues the statements of verse 26 and preceding verses. (In the Sifre, Rabbi Nehemiah and Rabbi Judah dispute this matter as well as the statements through verse 35).

Strophe 9, Parenthetical Note (vv. 29-31). As these verses are somewhat ambiguous, continuing the ambiguity of verse 28, we will briefly comment on them. Verse 29 reads: “Had they become wise they would have understood this, they would have gained insight into their later times.” To gain insight into

what would happen to them in the future appears to be a tangential statement at this point if referring to the enemies. It appears more fitting to be said of Israel. Verse 30 articulates the amazing occurrences from which they should have gained insight: “How could one pursue a thousand and two chase ten thousand if not that their Rock ‘sold them’ and Hashem delivered them [into their enemies’ hands]?” Verse 31a, “For not like our Rock is their rock,” is a declaration of Moses, an interposition into Hashem’s words. It explains what should have been understood, that there is no other explanation for the enemies’ rout of Israel, for their gods are incomparable to Hashem and do not have power to accomplish what Hashem did. The concluding clause of verse 31 states וְאֵיבֵינוּ פְּלִילִים (“and [even] our enemies so judge the situation”). (For the basis of this translation see Exod. 21:22 and Gen. 48:11.)

Although the words flow smoothly, there is some question regarding several statements as to whether they are G-d’s words or those of Moses.

Strophe 10, Retribution to the Enemy (vv. 32-35): The enemies have great shortcomings and retribution awaits them. Using imagery of the vine of Sodom and Gomorrah, G-d has the toxic wine “sealed in My storehouses” for them, understood as prepared for them to drink, as rendered by the Targumim in accordance with the common biblical metaphor that associates such drinking with their retribution (Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15-16; Ezek. 23:31-34; Ps. 75:9; Lam. 4:29). In due course they will stumble. (The metaphor of heavenly storehouses was popular in the ancient Near East, see Job 38:22.)

Strophe 11, Delivery (vv. 36-39): G-d will eventually vindicate His people and have a change of heart concerning His servants. (“His servants” is here used loosely, as a parallel to “His people.”) This will occur when He sees them utterly helpless. He will mock their past idolatry and call to them to recognize that it was He alone behind everything. It is He who metes out death and life, He wounds and He heals. Verse 39 contains His proclamation of His incomparability and omnipotence and appears to be the climax of the composition. The fifth colon in this verse וְאֵין מִדֵּי מִצִּיל (“and there is none who can rescue from My hand”) calls for special attention and seems to mark the conclusion of a large section.

This fifth colon recalls the only other fifth colon in a verse of this composition (in v. 14). Ronald Benun has pointed out that counting the previous fifth colon as number one, this second one is the eightieth colon, a sign of the covenant that is reflected in G-d's intervention. Notably, that first fifth colon concludes with the 130th word of the section, as pointed out earlier, creating a successive attachment of 130 and 80, as we have so often found. The total number of lines in the *shira* in the Masoretic Text is seventy.*** This appears to reflect a sub-covenant status of Israel, as the *shira* depicts the nation at a point of not yet having returned to the covenant. (Once again, we refer the reader to our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*)

Strophe 12, Hashem's Oath (vv. 40-42): G-d confirms His decision to bring His enemies (those who oppressed Israel) to justice and punish them.

Strophe 13, Closing (v. 43): A call for rejoicing in G-d's decision to provide solace for His people and a conclusion on the note of purifying its land. It appears noteworthy that this is a thirteen-word verse, one of seven verses in the *shira* containing thirteen words.

Endnotes

* This is similar to the case of G-d's intervention on behalf of Israel in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, related in 2 Kings 14:23-27. That passage articulates

the concept the text is dealing with here and uses some strikingly similar language. The idiom there *וְאֶפְסָ עֶזְרָא* (2 Kings 14:26) parallels our *וְאֶפְסָ עֶזְרָא* (Deut. 32:36) even if the translation there would be slightly different. The following verse there, *וְלֹא יִכָּרְהוּ לְמַחְזוֹת* ("And Hashem had not declared to wipe out the name of Israel from under the heavens" [2 Kings 14:27]) is similar to Hashem's statement in the *shira* of His refusal to carry out the total destruction of Israel, *אֲשֶׁבִיתָהּ מֵאֲנוּשׁ וְזָכְרָם לִוְלֵי נֶגֶד* ("[I had declared] I would make their name cease from among mankind were it not..." [Deut. 32:26-27]).

** A primary example is the quaint *mo* pronominal suffix, such as *עָלִימוּ* instead of *עָלִיָּהֶם* in verse 23, a form that appears seven times in the composition. This form also appears in the Song at the Sea (Exod. 15), where it is attested eight times. Interestingly, in the latter it is only attached to verbs while here only nouns were so constructed.

*** There is a dispute on this matter. The Aleppo Codex divides the *shira* into sixty-seven lines, with some unusual line formations (which raise questions concerning the authentic tradition on this matter), while the Leningrad Codex has seventy. Critical analysis supports the tradition of seventy and present-day Torah scrolls are so written.

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