

Parshat Haazinu**Listen Up and Hear****Dr. Wendy Zierler - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track, Class of 2021**

Are any of you familiar with the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*? In this film, the protagonist, Harold Crick, played by Will Farrell, is an IRS agent, a rational, mathematical sort of fellow. One morning, while getting dressed for work, he begins hearing a voice that narrates his life and then predicts his **imminent death**. Harold yells at the voice, asking why he has to die imminently and when. He asks other people if they can hear the voice. Eventually, he lands in a psychiatrist's office, where he is told that what is he is experiencing is schizophrenia. Harold insists that he is not schizophrenic: really and truly, he's been hearing this voice that is narrating his life and predicting his death, and given that, he wants advice about what he ought to do to save his own life. If that indeed is the case, the psychiatrist says: **"I'd have you speak to someone who knows about literature."**

This is my all-time favorite movie scene --- a Literature Professor's fantasy, wherein someone like me, a PhD, gets an urgent, interpretive referral from a medical doctor! **The idea that knowing literature could ever be that important! That lives depend on the reading and interpreting of stories and poems! What could be better for my business than that?**¹

A similar notion seems to be at work in the lead up to Parashat Ha'azinu and in parashah itself, where a poem or song—a work of literature! — is entrusted with a kind of life and death power over the future of the people. In Deut. 31:19, God tells Moshe:

יְיָ וְעַתָּה, כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, וְלַמָּדָה אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, שִׁמָּה בְּפִיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה-לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, לְעֵד--בְּבִנִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

19 Now therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me amidst the children of Israel.

God predicts that upon entering the land that people will grow fat on the milk and honey of the land and go astray, worshipping other gods, but that **this song specifically**, *Shirat ha'azinu*, will ultimately serve as witness for the people. Somehow, despite the corrupt backsliding of the people, this song will counter their moral turpitude, jog them back into some kind of awareness, and result in atonement. Imagine a poem that is potent enough to move an entire nation from corruption to expiation!

*I'm a literature professor, so I value poems. But really: how is that even possible? How can any poem have that kind of **superpower**? What makes it possible for Ha'azinu to transcend time and serve as a witness to an enduring covenant?*

On the face of it, there seems to be nothing new in Ha'azinu that we haven't already seen:

- 1) If one of the functions of the poem/song is warning, then the people have already been forewarned, several times over. They have been advised of potential punishments in several places in Parashat Ekev, including the famous "וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמוּעַ" parasha in Deut 11. They have participated in the liturgical ceremonies at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival respectively and have been admonished about the potential blessings of obedience and curses of disobedience. Nothing new on that front.
- 2) If one of the goals of Ha'azinu is memorialization and preservation of God's word for posterity, the people have already been given plenty of that too, having been instructed in Parashat Ki Tavo (Deut. 27) upon crossing the Jordan River to inscribe the entire Torah on huge, monumental stones.

¹ For more on this film, from a Jewish point of view, see Wendy Zierler, *Movies and Midrash: Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation* (SUNY Press, 2017), pp. 151-168.

3) If the poem is meant to serve as a witness or a sign of God's power and will, well that too has already been laid out previously in Ki Tavo: Deut 28: 46, where the people are told that the punishments that they will suffer for failing to obey God and to fulfill God's mitzvot, will serve as an everlasting, intergenerational sign and wonder:

מוֹ וְהָיוּ בָּךְ, לְאוֹת וּלְמוֹפֶת; וּבִזְרָעְךָ, עַד-עוֹלָם.

If these inevitable punishments are designated as a sign and a wonder, why the need for a witnessing poem?

Similar skepticism as to the singular, superpower status of Ha'azinu, comes from various classical interpretations on the commandment in Deut 31:19-20 to write down this Shirah:

וְעַתָּה, כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, וְלַמָּדָה אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, שִׁמָּה בְּפִיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה-לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, לְעֵד--בְּבִנִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

While the peshat reading of this verse is this commandment to write, teach, and place in the mouth of the people pertains specifically to parashat Ha'azinu, some insist that the mitzvah has to be about something bigger than a poem or song, and thus, that the reference to "hashirah hazot" refers not specifically to Parashat Ha'azinu but to the entire Torah. The Gemarah in Sanhedrin 21b (and Nedarim 38a as well) uses this pasuk as proof that it is incumbent upon each person in every generation to write an entire sefer Torah. The Rambam thus teaches in Hilkhhot Sefer Torah 7:1,

א מצות עשה על כל איש ואיש מישראל, לכתוב ספר תורה לעצמו: שנאמר "ועתה, כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת" (דברים לא, יט), כלומר כתבו את התורה שיש בה שירה זו--לפי שאין כותבין את התורה, פרשיות פרשיות. ואף על פי שהניחו לו לאדם אבותיו ספר תורה, מצוה לכתוב משלו.

For the Rambam, it couldn't possibly be that there is a special mitzvah to write down Ha'azinu and Ha'azinu alone, given that it is not the practice to write out individual parshiyot of the Torah.

(Now, that is an easily refutable assertion, since, **of course it is** the practice to write out certain chapters or sections: just think about tefillin and mezuzot.)

Implicit in Rambam's statement in Hilkhhot Sefer Torah, is his sense of incredulity that there could be a special mitzvah to write down a poem. It happens to be that the Rambam was not a major fan of poetry, insisting in the *Moreh Nevukhim* that "If the ignorant insist on piyyutim, i.e., religious poems, they should be said before the Shema," the beginning of the essential service. (See Guide 59: p. 141) The Rambam had his preferred intellectual disciplines and poetry was not one of them.

Against the grain of the Rambam, others trumpeted and defended the enduring and unique importance of poetry, in general, and Ha'azinu, in particular. Most famous is the statement from *Sifre Ha'azinu* (on v. 43, the final pasuk in the Shirah):

"גדולה שירה שיש בה עכשיו ויש בה לשעבר ויש בה לעתיד לבוא ויש בה לעולם הבא."
Great is this poem/song that has present, past and future and the world to come."

Devotees of Ha'azinu can be found not only among the rabbis of the midrash, but also among the secular modern Hebrew poets, a fact that itself buttresses the Sifre's sense of Ha'azinu's vast historical reach and relevance. Chief among these admirers was Haim Nahman Bialik, the great National poet of the Hebrew Revival. Of Shirat Ha'azinu Bialik writes:

הנשגבה מכל שירי התורה, ואולי גם מכל שירי התנ"ך, היא שירת "האזינו", שאין ערוך ליפיה ולעזוזה. אלו מכל הנבואות והתוכחות לא נשארה בידינו אלא שירת האזינו – היתה זו בלבד מספקת לנו להכיר על ידה את מהות השירה הנבואית בראשי סגולותיה ואת כל עוצם כחה הנצחי והדרת קדשה. אין זאת כי אם נבואת-הנבואות וחזון החזיונות, אשר לקולה "יִאֲזִינוּ השמים ותשמע הארץ"..."²

Most sublime of the poems of the Torah, perhaps even in the entire Bible is "Shirat Ha'azinu," that has no peer in terms of it/her beauty and power. If among the biblical

² From H. N. Bialik, "Al sefarim ve'ishim bamiqra," *Project Ben Yehudah*, <https://benyehuda.org/read/4177>.

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prophecies and rebukes of the Bible none would have been left none other than “Shirat Ha’azinu,” that would have been sufficient for us to understand the essence and unique qualities of prophetic poetry, its eternal power and holy splendor. Ha’azinu is none other than the prophecy of prophecies and the vision of visions to whose voice “the heaven and earth lend their ears.”

Unlike the Rambam, Bialik was an unapologetic devotee of Hebrew poetry writ large, hence his inclusion in his monumental *Sefer ha’agadah* of an entire section dedicated to rabbinic statements about poetry, including the following midrash from the Alef Beit of Rabbi Akiva:

אמר רבי סימון לא כל שרוצה אומר שירה אלא כל מי שנעשה לו נס ואומר שירה בידוע שמוחלין לו על כל עונותיו ונעשה בריה חדשה. ישראל כשנעשה להם נס ואמרו שירה נמחלו להן עונותיהן שנאמר ויסע משה את ישראל שהסיען מעונותיהן.³

Rabbi Simon said: Not everyone who wants to say a poem/or sing a song can; rather, they for whom a miracle has been done, who say a poem/or sing a song, it is known that all their sins will be forgiven and they will become new creations. Israel, for whom a miracle was done, and who sang a song, their sins were forgiven, as it is written, “And Moses transported Israel, that is, he transported away their sins.

According to R. Simon in the midrash, poems have the capacity to remake a person and carry away all of their sins.

Building on the appreciation for the past, present, and future relevance of Ha’azinu as expressed in the Sifre and by Bialik, and strengthened by the conviction expressed in the Aleph Bet of Rabbi Akiva of the miraculous, transformative, creative power of Hebrew poetry, I’d like now to return to my original set of questions about Shirat Ha’azinu and venture an answer as to what enables “Ha’azinu” to serve as eternal witness to the covenant and eventual atonement of the people.

To offer this answer, I need first to establish what it is that makes biblical poetry qualify as poetry. According to my teacher, Robert Alter, eminent Bible translator and professor of Hebrew and comparative literature, the defining feature of biblical poetry is **dynamic parallelism**. We all know that biblical poetry has a tendency to say everything at least twice. What Alter makes clear, however, in his now classic work, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, is that literary parallelism is never mere restatement:

Literature, let me suggest, from the simplest folktale to the most sophisticated poetry and fiction and drama, thrives on parallelism, both stylistic and structural, on small scale and large, and could not give its creations satisfying shape without it. But it is equally important to recognize that literary expression abhors complete parallelism, just as language resists true synonymity, usage always introducing small wedges of difference between closely akin terms.⁴

According to Alter, the seeming repetition in Biblical parallelism always involves some “movement of meaning” from one verse to the next, an intensification, or “focusing, specification, concretization, even one what one might call dramatization.” (p. 19) Among the many examples Alter adduces to demonstrate the dynamic parallelism of biblical poetry is one from verse 10 in Ha’azinu:

יִמְצְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר, {ס} וּבְתֵהוּ יֵלֵל יֵשִׁמוֹן; {ר} יִסְבְּכֶנּוּהוּ, יְבוֹנֶנּוּהוּ-- {ס} יִצְרְנֶהוּ, כְּאִישׁוֹן עֵינָיו. {ר}

“He found him in a desert land / in an empty howling waste.”

Alter explains that whereas the verse begins with a general term (*eret midbar*), it “undergoes a forceful realization in the second verset with its intimation of howling winds, jackals,” the onomatopoeic alliteration, “*yelail yeshimon*,” and through the use of the word “tohu,” an allusion to the primal, pre-

³ See Aleph bet derabbi Aqiva 1,

[https://www.sefaria.org/Otzar_Midrashim%2C_Midrashim_of_Rabbi_Akiba%2C_Aleph_Bet_of_Rabbi_Akiba_\(Version_1\).8?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Otzar_Midrashim%2C_Midrashim_of_Rabbi_Akiba%2C_Aleph_Bet_of_Rabbi_Akiba_(Version_1).8?lang=bi)

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 10.

Genesis void and chaos.”⁵ Presented here is no mere generic desert, rather a place that threatens the very idea of the created, ordered world. Against that terror of nothingness comes God who encircles and builds and considers the people, the second part of the verse thus concretizing this general image of surrounding care into the simile of an iris or eyelid that protects the pupil of one’s eye.

“Every literary tradition,” writes Alter, “converts the formal limitation of its medium into an occasion for artistic expression; the artist, in fact, might be defined as a person who thrives **on realizing new possibilities within formal limitations.**”⁶

I would argue that the notion of realizing new possibilities is crucial to the enduring power of Ha’azinu. Despite the seeming repetitiveness of the song; despite its presentation of what might be considered a deterministic story of Israelite affluence, waywardness and subsequent punishment, the historical sweep of the poem together with its poetic features testify to the possibility of change, development, and a turning away from a fatalistic script. The very fact that one can say something more than once in similar but sufficiently different ways, using words that intensify, specify, and move meaning forward rather than keeping it static and univalent, attests to the durability and permanence of the covenant, on the one hand, and the capacity of the people to grow and change, on the other. Both of these are crucial messages for this time in the calendar year.

The rabbis in Sifre Ha’azinu were not overstating the case when they argued that the poem includes past, present, future and the world to come.

The beginning of the poem calls upon “Hashamayim,” and “ha’aretz” to listen and hear, recapitulating the Divine creation of the cosmos as described in Genesis 1: וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ, בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. The next verse advances the Creation imagery, by referring to both עֵשֶׂב and דָּשָׁא as in, עֵשֶׂב, דָּשָׁא, תִּדְשֵׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׁא עֵשֶׂב, from the biblical account of the creation of plants and vegetation.

And so it goes, with each subsequent verse in the song, advancing through the Bible, touching upon yet another aspect of Biblical history from Creation to the formation of the people of Israel, with the famous line in verse seven -- זָקֵנוּךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָךְ שְׂאֵל אֲבִיךָ וַיְגִדְךָ -- recalling the Exodus story and the intergenerational commandment to tell the story to our children, to the settling and apportionment of the Land of Israel, the successes and excesses of the Israelite and Judean monarchies, the exile and punishments of the people, as well their eventual atonement. The final line of the song מִן הָרִנִּינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ repeats the call to sing and listen, but advances it crucially, subtly recalling the primeval human family and their sins but also the transformative capacity of teshuva:

מִן הָרִנִּינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ, {ס} כִּי דָם-עֲבָדֶיךָ יִקּוּם; {ר} וְנִקָּם יִשִּׁיב לְצִרְיֹו, {ס} וְכִפֹּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ.

43 Sing aloud, O ye nations, of God’s people; for God avenges the blood of God’s servants, and renders comeuppance to God’s adversaries, and expiates for the land of His people.

The references in the verse both to “dam avdav” and to “admato,” subtly bring to mind the murder of Abel by Cain, and God’s insistence to Cain that

אָחִיךָ, צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה קוֹל דָּמִי. But rather than reinforcing the idea that human beings are forever doomed to a destiny of murderous sin, the strange syntax of the final three words— וְכִפֹּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ – predicts a twin atonement not just for God’s people (*amo*) but for all of humanity and the entire created. The many varied metaphors for God in the song—Rock, Father, Nursing Mother, Eagle, Eyelid or Iris, Judge, Warrior, Avenger, Granter of Expiation—all suggest a dynamic theology and every developing relationship between the people of God. Add to this the musicality and wordplay in the language, demonstrating that even minute shifts in language can have epic consequence.

⁵ Alter, p. 25.

⁶ Alter, p. 24

הֵם קְנֵאוּנִי בְּלֹא-אֵל, says God, the words “lo” and “El” serving as two sides of the same orthographical coin: on the one side is aleph lamed, El; the other Lamed Aleph, Lo.

וְאֲנִי אֶקְנִיָאֵם בְּלֹא-עָם, -- I will arouse them to jealousy with a *belo-am*, a non-people. The end of the poem brilliantly reverses this wordplay, undoing the negative power of the “lo-am” with the similarly sounding but ultimately positive, final word, amo – God’s people.

It is for all of these reasons— the dynamic parallelism of the poem, which can be seen in each and every word and verse; its lush and varied metaphors; and its demonstration of the power of language to sing, modulate, advance, intensify, and grow in meaning, all indicative of a similar human capacity to build, develop, grow, return and change, that Ha’azinu gets the special billing that it does. Ha’azinu calls on all of this at this time of year, generation after generation, to listen up, hear, sing, imagine, take notice, heed, and exemplify its dynamic message.



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