

PARSHAT HA'AZINU - Part One
The song and its message

Who's to blame when something goes wrong?
In regard to tragedy that befalls the people of Israel, Parshat Ha'azinu offers a very bold, yet fundamental answer.
In the following shiur, we will study the introduction to 'shirat Ha'azinu' (found at the end of Parshat Vayelech) to show how it can help us understand what that song is 'all about'.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the words of shirat Ha'azinu are quite difficult to translate, its overall theme and purpose is quite easy to decipher. To do so, our shiur will first discuss the interesting introduction to this 'song' - which explains not only its purpose, but also the important questions that it is supposed to answer. Then, we will show how the 'shira' follows this theme, and answers those questions.

THE INTRO IN PARSHAT VAYELECH

At the conclusion of Parshat Vayelech we find a new 'parshia' that begins in 31:14. [Before continuing, it is recommended that you first quickly review that entire section, i.e. 31:14-30.]

This section begins with a rather depressing prediction, as God summons Moshe and Yehoshua to the 'ohel mo'ed', to inform them that Yehoshua (and whoever may take leadership afterward) can 'expect the worst':

"And God said to Moshe, you will soon die, but this nation may thereupon go astray after strange gods of the land... and they will leave Me and [hence] break My covenant... Then [therefore] on that day I will kindle My anger against them, and I will [appear to] abandon them, and **hide** My face from them, and many terrible things and tragedies will befall them, and they will say on that day, surely - it is because God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us" (see 31:14-17).

Even though God does not want this to happen, He appears to be quite sure that this scenario is inevitable. [God's experience with Bnei Yisrael over the last forty years in the desert may have led to this conclusion.]

However, the purpose of God's statement is not simply to depress Moshe and Yehoshua. Rather, it is to provide Am Yisrael with the necessary 'tool' that will help them cope (and properly respond) should such a situation arise. To prove this, simply read the next two psukim, noting how this introduction to the shira continues:

"And I will hide My face from them, for they have done evil and turned to other gods.

Therefore - write down this **shira** [song] and teach it to Bnei Yisrael... in order that this poem be My witness against the people of Israel - for when I bring them to the land flowing with milk & honey, as I swore to their forefathers, and they will eat and become satiated and grow fat - and will then turn to other gods and worship them, hence breaking My covenant."

Then, when these terrible things befall them, **this song** shall confront them as a witness, for it shall never be forgotten from their offspring - for I know their **yetzer** [evil inclinations], even before I bring them into the land..." (see 31:19-21).

Based on this introduction, we now know what to expect from shirat Ha'azinu. However, to fully appreciate its purpose, we must return to a key pasuk in this introduction (31:17), whose meaning (at first glance) appears to be unclear.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

Recall how God not only 'predicted' how Bnei Yisrael will stray after other gods, He also foresaw how they would react:

"And I will kindle My anger against them on that day [i.e. at that time] and leave them, for I will hide My face from them, and terrible things will befall them - and **they will say** on that day [at that time] - it is **because God is not in our midst** that these evils have befallen us" (31:17).

At first glance, the meaning of (Bnei Yisrael's response) : "it is because God is not in our midst" - is not clear. Are Bnei Yisrael blaming God for these terrible events, or are they blaming themselves! In other words, does their statement reflect a sense of:

* **remorse** ['teshuva'], understanding that they are at blame for they have left God.

or,

* **anger** with God - blaming Him for abandoning His people.

[See Seforno.]

However, the answer to this question lies in the next pasuk:

"But I will hide My face from them, for they have done evil and turned to other gods" (31:18).

God's insistence that He will continue to hide His face from them implies that Bnei Yisrael statement in 31:17 reflected their anger with God (and not their remorse from their deeds).

Thus, we appear to have reached an impasse, as God blames His nation for unfaithfulness; while Am Yisrael blames God for not caring.

[See also Ramban on 31:17, where he indeed understands Bnei Yisrael's statement as minimal teshuva; however (most probably due to 31:18), Ramban understands this teshuva as superficial, and hence God continues to hide His face, waiting for Am Yisrael to perform more intense teshuva before they can be deserving of redemption.]

Therefore, to prepare Bnei Yisrael for this inevitable 'showdown' of 'who's to blame', Moshe charges the nation before his death, teaching them shirat Ha'azinu - so that the 'answer' is ready for any future generation (see 31:22-30).

With this background, we can begin our study of the shira, with the goal of showing how it relates directly to the points raised in this introduction.

32:1-3 / THE PREFACE

Review the first three psukim (32:1-3), noting how they form a preface. In fact, 32:3 explains who Bnei Yisrael should answer with a 'praise to the Lord' whenever Moshe will mention God's Name (and hence our custom to this day of saying 'baruch Hu u-varuch shmo' - when ever we hear God's Name mentioned in a blessing.)

[In regard to the 'shamayim' and 'aretz' being called upon to witness, see Part Two of this shiur.]

This observation is important, for if 32:1-3 forms an introduction, then we can conclude that 32:4 forms the opening (and cardinal) statement of the shira.

32:4-6 / THE OPENING STATEMENT [Who's to blame!]

To confirm this point, review 32:4-6, noting how these psukim deal directly with the key question of 'who's to blame!' [i.e. God or the people]:

The Rock [i.e. God] - His deeds are perfect, all His way are just.

A steadfast God ['emuna' - see TSC shiur on 'mei meriva!'] and no injustice.

He is just and upright.

If so, then who should Bnei Yisrael blame when something goes wrong? Once again, the shira provides the answer:

[Do you attribute] injustice to Him? ['shichet lo']
no - ['lo' - with an 'aleph']

It is his children's fault ['banav mumam']

- A generation so crooked and perverse.

Shall you blame this on God?

- so foolish a nation- and unwise

For He is your father who created you

He made you and established you.

[And therefore, why would He want to cause you harm, unless there was a purpose.

Based on our introduction, it is clear why this must be the opening statement - for this is exactly the question that Bnei Yisrael will ask when they are confronted with tragedy. Since they are God's nation, they expect their God to protect them and save them from trouble.

However, this question stems from a terrible misunderstanding of the special relationship between God and His people. God did not promise to be a like 'fairy godmother', taking care of every tiny need of a spoiled child. Rather, God entered a covenant with Bnei Yisrael for a purpose - to represent Him before the nations of the world. [See TSC shiurim on Sefer Breishit., Noach, Lech Lecha, Vayera etc.]

This covenant contains not only privileges (i.e. promises of protection), but also responsibilities. Because the goal of this covenant is so important, God threatens to punish Bnei Yisrael should they be unfaithful to this covenant, just as he promises to be helpful should they be faithful. [This theme is repeated numerous times in Chumash, especially in the 'tochachot', and throughout Sefer Devarim.]

Therefore, the purpose of divine punishment is to remind Bnei Yisrael of their covenantal responsibility should they go astray. [Note the Torah's use of the word 'brit' in 31:16 & 20!] Hence, the shira opens by telling us not to blame God when the nation is plagued by tragedy. Instead, blame yourselves, for God has no reason to punish you - unless you have gone astray.

32:7-12 / REMEMBER WHY & HOW YOU WERE CHOSEN

The last point made in this section (i.e. 31:6) forms the introduction to the next section of the shira. Recall God's last remark: "Shall you blame this on God - so foolish a nation- and unwise? For He is your father who created you, He made you and established you."

Now, God explains how and why we should remember this point, by providing a quick review of Jewish History, from the time of Creation.

Remember the days of old, consider the ages past.

Ask your father, and he will tell you, so too your elders.

When Elyon [God] gave each nation its land,

As He divided up the nations [i.e. Migdal Bavel naarative]

He fixed the borders of these nations,

According to the numbers of Bnei Yisrael -

For God's **portion** is **His people** -

[The children of] Yaakov - is His allotment (32:7-9).

In other words, when God first established mankind, dividing them up into nations, He already had in mind this purpose of Bnei Yisrael to represent Him amongst these nations. [See TSC shiur on Parshat Noach - re: Migdal Bavel.]

The next three psukim (32:10-12) describe how God took Bnei Yisrael through the desert, taking care of their needs, and preparing them for their existence in the land of Israel:

He found them in the desert land...

... & watched over them as the pupil of His eye.

Like an eagle watches over his nestlings...

God alone guided them (thru the desert)

No other god assisted Him.

32:13-15 / From PROSPERITY to AFFLUENCE

At this point, the shira now shifts from past to future, projecting what may happen when Bnei Yisrael will enter the land; i.e. warning how prosperity may lead to affluence, and then to idol worship, and then to divine punishment. In other words, all of the points described

in the introduction (see 31:16-20), are now described in poetic detail.

He set them up atop the highlands

To feast on the yield of the earth

He fed them honey from the crag

And oil from the flint of the rock...

The best lamb, and rams, and goats

With the very finest wheat, and foaming grape drink.

So Yeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked

Fat, gross, and coarse.

He forsook the God who made him (compare 32:16)

And spurned the Rock (see 32:4) of his salvation.

32:16-18 / From AFFLUENCE to IDOL WORSHIP

They incensed Him with alien things,

Vexed Him with abominations.

They sacrificed to demons, no-gods.

Gods they had never known, new ones....

You neglected the Rock that gave birth to you

Forgot the God who brought you forth.

(again, compare with 32:4-6!)

32:19-25 / GOD'S WRATH IS KINDLED

As Bnei Yisrael have broken the covenant, God has no choice but to punish them, for what is the point of their existence if they are not fulfilling their covenantal purpose! Therefore, the next section describes this punishment. Once again, we find how the topic of 31:17 (& 31:21) is described in poetic detail.

The Lord saw and was vexed

He spurned His sons and daughters, saying:

I will hide My face from them ['hester panim' (see 31:17-18)]

Then see how they will fare in the end!

For they are a treacherous breed,

Children with no loyalty.

They incensed Me with no-gods...

I will incense them with a no-folk

Vex them with a nation of fools.

For a fire has flared in My wrath....

[read the rest on your own]

The sword shall deal death without

As shall the terror within

To young man and maiden alike,

The young babies as well as the aged.

32:26-38 / SAVED BY THE BELL

In the next section, God continues to explain how and why His anger is kindled, however He also explains why sooner or later, He must come to the aid of His nation (even though they may not be deserving).

I might have reduced them to nothing

Made their memory cease among men -

But, for the fear of the taunts of the foe

Their enemies who may misjudge and say -

"Our own hand has prevailed;

none of this was caused by the Lord

A comment is now added, noting how foolish the nation was for not recognizing the Hand of God in these events.

Were they wise, they would think upon this (compare 32:7)

Gain insight into their future:

How could one have chased a thousand,

And two put ten thousand to flight.

Unless their Rock had sold them....

[32:32-25 continues the rebuke]

Then, God explains how and why He will save His nation, so that this disgrace in the eyes of other nations should not become too great.

When God will judge His people

And have mercy upon His servants

For He will see that they are helpless...

Lest [the other nations] say - Where is their God?

The rock in whom they sought refuge...

[See Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Ramban, vs. Rashi]

32:39-43 / A CALL FOR REFLECTION

Even though God has promised ultimate redemption, He still calls upon Am Yisrael to recognize that He was the cause for both their punishment and salvation:

See, then, that I - I am He
There is no god beside Me
I bring death, and I cause life
I wound and I heal
No one can deliver from My Hand...

Finally, the shira concludes with a call to other nations to recognize the hand of God in the wake of these events:

O nations, acclaim His people -
For He will avenge the blood of His servants
Bring vengeance on His enemies
And His land shall protect [or cleanse] His People.
[translation of last phrase is difficult, see commentators.]

This final point is important as well, for it reflects back on the very purpose of God's covenant with Am Yisrael, to represent God among the nations. In the 'bottom line', God hopes that even when Am Yisrael (unfortunately) needs to be punished; the manner of that severe punishment may still lead to the recognition of God by other nations, hence serving the same underlying purpose

A HARSH CONCLUSION

As difficult as the message of shirat Ha'azinu may be, its theme is congruent not only with its introduction at the end of Parshat Vayelech, it also follows the very same underlying theme of Chumash that began with God's choice of His nation back in Sefer Breishit, and the demanding terms of God's covenant with Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai [see shiur on the 13 middot].

Even though Am Yisrael may reach the mistaken conclusion that God is 'hiding His face from them', the primary point of the shira is that God is always there, even though it may appear otherwise. [See 32:29!] It also not by chance that God is consistently referred to (in the shira) as the 'tzur' - a large rock, or bolder, that does not move. It is always there and can even provide protection, even though it often remains unnoticed, or may be taken for granted.

[In my opinion, the Torah's use of the word tzur may also relate to the events at 'nikrat ha-tzur' at Har Sinai - where God first explained to Moshe His attributes of mercy / see Shemot 33:19-22, and its context from 33:12-19, as well as our shiur on the 13 midot - 've-akmal' - i.e. a topic for a future shiur.]

Obviously, the goal of Chumash is that we should never need to experience the sequence of events described in this song. However, the shira remains as an eternal reminder for Am Yisrael to remember their covenantal purpose, as well as a call for proper teshuva in times of national misfortune.

As Yom Kippur approaches after a year of such terrible sorrow and tragic events, we pray to Hashem that He speedily fulfill His promise of ultimate redemption, as well call upon ourselves to fulfill our destiny to become His special nation.

[In Part Two will discuss other aspects of the shira.]

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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PART TWO

for PARSHAT HA'AZINU - 3 mini- shiurim

Shiur #1 - MOSHE RABEINU'S LAST DAY

Parshat Vayelech opens with Moshe's farewell to Bnei Yisrael, in which he informs them that he will soon die and reassures them that Yehoshua will take over and fulfill what God had promised (see 31:1-6). The opening pasuk of the parsha baffled the commentators: "Va'yelech Moshe - and Moshe WENT, and spoke these things to Bnei Yisrael..." (31:1)

Where did Moshe go? Where was he coming from?

Most commentators suggest that for his final farewell, Moshe left his own tent and 'went' from tribe to tribe to comfort each shevet individually. [See Ramban, Chizkuni, & Ibn Ezra.]

Ibn Ezra adds a very interesting insight to this interpretation. He understands that while Moshe visited each shevet to bid farewell, he gave each tribe their individual blessing, i.e. the blessing recorded later in Parshat V'zot Ha'bracha (33:1-29). [See Ibn Ezra on 31:1 inside!]

If Ibn Ezra is correct, then SHIRAT HA'AZINU becomes the final message of Chumash! This interpretation is supported by the final psukim of Parshat Ha'azinu, where God commands Moshe to ascend Har Nevo to die (see 32:48-52), which, chronologically, must be the last narrative of Chumash.

[See also Ramban on 31:24-26. Even though Ramban disagrees with Ibn Ezra with regard to the actual sequence of events, V'ZOT HABRACHA is still not Moshe's final message to Bnei Yisrael. It is merely his final blessing. The closing 'charge to Am Yisrael' of Chumash is definitely Shirat Ha'azinu, even though Moshe may have administered his blessings to the tribes later on that day.]

This observation can provide us with a better appreciation of the final events of Sefer Devarim. After Moshe Rabeinu completed his speeches [i.e. the main speech of mitzvot/ chapters 5->26, and the "tochacha"/ chapters.27->30], Chumash concludes with two mitzvot that guarantee the continuity of Am Yisrael.

- 1) HAKHEL (31:7-13)
- 2) SHIRAT HA'AZINU (31:14->32:47)

[Note that both these sections include the writing of the Torah, see 31:9 & 31:24-26!]

Let's explain:

After introducing Yehoshua as his successor (31:1-8), Moshe gives the written Torah to the KOHANIM and the elders (31:9), charging them with the responsibility of continuing what Moshe had begun - i.e. teaching this Torah to the entire nation. As we explained in last week's shiur, the mitzvah of HAKHEL is added in order to 'relive' the SINAI experience every seven years.

Note the conclusion of this unit:

"And the children, who do not yet know, will listen and learn to fear God all the days that you LIVE on THE LAND THAT YOU ARE NOW CROSSING THE JORDAN TO INHERIT." (31:13)

A similar conclusion closes SHIRAT HA'AZINU:

"For this is not an empty thing, for it is your life, and by keeping this, you will LIVE many years on THE LAND THAT YOU ARE NOW CROSSING THE JORDAN TO INHERIT." (See 32:47 and its context.)

Certainly, the teaching of the Torah guarantees the continuity of Am Yisrael; but wherein lies the importance of SHIRAT HA'AZINU?

As we explained in Sefer Breishit, God has set a goal for the Jewish people: to become a nation that abides by His Torah and represents Him by serving as His chosen nation. This stature of a

special nation entails not only privileges, but, even more so, responsibility. Therefore, to assure that Bnei Yisrael will keep His laws, it becomes necessary to punish them should they disobey and not fulfill that destiny. [That's what the "tochacha" is all about.]

The fact that God's covenant with Bnei Yisrael necessarily includes divine punishment creates an intriguing predicament. Specifically because of our status as His special nation, our plight becomes worse than other nations (see Amos 3:1-2!). When misunderstood, this can lead to a very dangerous conclusion. Instead of understanding punishment as a divine call for "teshuva," Am Yisrael may perceive it as proof that they are no longer chosen, and hence no longer bound by God's covenant. When things go bad, they will blame God rather than themselves. For example:

"The ROCK (the Lord)- His deeds are perfect, His ways are just, a faithful God, never false, He is true and upright, [but] SHICHET LO, LOA BANAV MUMAM... - Do you attribute the bad to Him? No! It is His children who are at fault, a crooked and perverse generation. Do you blame God for this, o dull and witless people? Is not He the Father who created you? He made you and fashioned you!" (loose translation of 32:4-6).

As SHIRAT HA'AZINU continues, God predicts the inevitable outcome of Bnei Yisrael's settlement in the land. They will become affluent and forget Him (see 32:15). He, in turn, will punish them or hide His face from them, but they will fail to recognize the reason behind their punishment (see 32:16-26). That is why we need the SHIRA. SHIRAT HAAZINU reminds us not only of God, but also of WHY we are chosen, that our stature and accompanying responsibilities remain applicable even when our situation is far from ideal. "ZCHOR Y'MOT OLAM..." - Remember, learn from your history... (see 32:7-13). God tells us how to relate to Him in trying times. If we remember WHY we were chosen, for WHAT PURPOSE, then we will understand why we have been punished. Hopefully, those thoughts will steer Am Yisrael back onto the proper path.

Finally, even should we not repent, ultimately God will redeem us (see 32:27-29), but once again, only so that we recognize our purpose. If not, then the awful process of punishment will start all over again.

This is how SHIRAT HA'AZINU guarantees the continuity of Am Yisrael. It is an eternal cry not only for TESHUVA, but also for the recognition of our purpose, and hence, it reminds us of the reason for both our reward and our punishment.

Shiur #2: THE FIVE SONGS IN TANACH

"Shirat Ha'azinu" is one of five 'songs' found in the Tanach. We begin this section by demonstrating that each song marks the end of an important time period. As we will see, this analysis can greatly enhance our appreciation of "Shirat Ha'azinu."

THE FIVE 'SONGS'

For the purpose of this shiur, a 'song' is defined as a parsha in Tanach written on the Torah scroll in a special pattern.

Two songs, Ha'azinu and Yehoshua, exhibit the pattern of:

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-- -- (pattern A)
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Three others: ha'Yam, Devorah, & David, exhibit the pattern of:

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-- -- (pattern B)
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The following table summarizes these five songs and the respective time period that each one concludes:

SOURCE	SONG	TIME PERIOD
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Shmot 15:1-19	"Shirat ha'Yam"	Yetziat Mitzraim (the Exodus)
Devarim 32:1-43	"Shirat Ha'azinu"	Bnei Yisrael in the desert
Yehoshua 12:1-24	"Shirat Yehoshua"	Defeat of the 31 kings
Shoftim 5:1-31	"Shirat Devorah"	Complete conquest of north
Shm.II 22:1-51	"Shirat David"	Establishing the Monarchy

Although all five songs mark the conclusion of certain time periods, it appears that the songs following pattern A, i.e. Shirat Ha'azinu and Yehoshua, mark the end of historical periods which fell short of their original expectations. On the other hand, the songs following pattern B - Shirat ha'Yam, Devorah, & David - relate to more ideal situations.

One could suggest that the structure of these two patterns reflects this distinction: 'pattern B' reflects a 'stable' existence, while 'pattern A' symbolizes a more 'shaky' reality.

YEHOSHUA IN CONTRAST TO DEVORAH

Even though Yehoshua conquered the entire land, his conquest was far from complete. The simplest proof is the psukim immediately following this "shira":

"And Yehoshua had become old, and God said to him, you have grown old, but there is MUCH MORE LAND which needs to be conquered"

(See Yehoshua 13:1-5. See also 18:1-3,23:1-16).

Even though the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef were successful in their conquest, the remaining tribes who were to settle in Eretz Canaan (see Yehoshua 18:1-6) had not captured their respective areas.

The primary area not conquered at that time centered around EMEK YIZRAEL (the Jezreel Valley), which sat on the major trade route from Egypt to Mesopotamia. It was not until the time of Devorah that the area was finally conquered, through the joint effort of the surrounding tribes. In the war of Barak and Devorah in Emek Yizrael, Israel's enemies in the north were defeated, thus geographically uniting the twelve tribes.

This explains the importance of SHIRAT DEVORAH and why it is written according to pattern B.

Later, during the time of the Judges, Israel lost control of this area. Only during the period of David did this area come back under Jewish control. David expanded his sphere of occupation to the north, east, and south, thus creating a political environment characterized by a stable monarchy and secure borders. His song -

SHIRAT DAVID - also follows pattern B, as it thanks God for His assistance in achieving the most complete conquest of Eretz Canaan.

SHIRAT HA'YAM AND SHIRAT HA'AZINU

We now turn our focus to the distinction between the two 'songs' found in Chumash - Shirat Ha'Yam and Shirat Ha'azinu.

Shirat Ha'Yam marks not only the completion of the Exodus, but also our total independence from Egypt. Recall that Bnei Yisrael were granted permission to leave Egypt just for a few days in order to worship their God in the desert (see Shmot 12:31-2). Therefore, when Pharaoh drove them from his land after "makat b'chorot," he expected them to return after just a few days. Thus, only after "kriyat Yam Suf" did Bnei Yisrael achieve TOTAL freedom.

Hence, Shirat Ha'Yam marks the conclusion of the first stage of the redemption process, as promised in Brit Bein Ha'btarim (see Breishit 15:13-20).

The generation of the desert, after receiving the Torah, should have conquered the Land within the first year. Had this come true, i.e. had Bnei Yisrael not sinned, then the next "shira" should have been the idyllic one - that of the conquest of the Promised Land with Moshe as their leader. Instead, that generation and the next consistently angered Hashem. Forty years later, as Bnei Yisrael finally prepare to enter the Land, their situation remained far from the ideal. Therefore, the ideal "shira" that should have been sung is now 'replaced' with a more 'realistic' one - "Shirat Ha'azinu," tailored to God's pessimistic forecast of what will happen after Bnei Yisrael enter the Land.

We can now better understand the psukim towards the end of Parshat Va'yelech which introduce this "Shira":

"...God told Moshe, you will soon die, and this Nation will go astray after the foreign gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter. They will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them.

Then My anger will flare up at them, and I will abandon them ('hester panim')... then they shall say: 'Surely, it is because God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us'...

Therefore, write down this 'shira' and teach it to the people... in order that this 'shira' may be My witness against the Nation, when I bring them into the Land.... For I know the very nature of this people (the way they will act) even before I bring them into the Land..."

(Devarim 31:16-21)

Moshe later repeats this pessimistic prognosis to the people, prior to teaching them this song:

"[Moshe charged the Leviim, saying...] Gather for me all the leaders, and I will speak to them these words... For I know that after I die you will act wickedly and leave the path which I have commanded you. Misfortune will thus befall you in later generations, because your evil actions will anger God. Moshe then recited this "shira" to the entire congregation..." (See Devarim 31:28-30)

Thus, the period of the 'forty years in the desert' ends on a very tragic note. It appears inevitable that Bnei Yisrael will fail to meet the challenge of establishing God's model nation in the Land. Despite this bleak forecast, "Shirat Ha'azinu" remains as an eternal reminder for Bnei Yisrael that the time will ultimately come, should they perform proper teshuva, when a new song will be sung ["V'nomar l'fanav SHIRA CHADASHA..."], a song of praise and recognition of God as the source of our victory, a song similar to "shirat David."

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Shiur #3 - The witnesses - 'SHAMAYIM VA'ARETZ'

In its preface, "shirat Ha'azinu" calls upon **shamayim** va-aretz ['heaven & earth'] to bear witness. On the one hand, the very mention of this 'Biblical duo' beautifully ties together the end of Sefer Devarim with the very beginning of Sefer Breishit.

In the following shiur, we discuss how the mention of "shamayim v'aretz" may also relate to a very interesting relationship between this song and a very basic theme of Chumash.

INTRODUCTION

Already in the introduction to shirat Ha'azinu (back in Parshat Vayelech), we find the mention 'shamayim va-aretz', as Moshe calls upon them to serve witness:

"Gather to Me all the elders of your tribes that I may speak these words to them, and that I may call **shamayim** va-aretz to testify..." (see 31:28-29 / note also 30:19).

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we find their mention at the very beginning of the song:

"Ha'azinu ha-**shamayim** va-adabera, ve-tishma ha-**aretz** imrei fi." - Listen **heaven**, and I will speak, and the **aretz** should hear the words of my mouth (see 32:1).

But why are specifically 'heaven and earth' summoned as witnesses? Although the answer may seem obvious at first, as we will see, there may be far more here than first meets the eye.

RASHI'S APPROACH

Rashi quotes the two classic answers, based on two Midrashim (Sifrei 306 and Tanchuma 1):

1) An eternal witness:

Heaven and earth exist forever and can thus serve as eternal witnesses. Whereas Moshe himself is mortal, he must summon the everlasting forces of nature as his witnesses. (See also Ibn Ezra.)

2) An agent of enforcement:

As explained in Devarim 11:13-17, 'heaven and earth' will reward Bnei Yisrael with adequate rainfall and plenty should they follow God's covenant, and punish them with drought should they disobey. (See also Rashbam.)

In truth, these two answers are not mutually exclusive. They provide a 'double reason' for God's choice of "shamayim va-aretz": not only do they provide eternal **testimony**, but they also help **enforce** the covenant.

Nevertheless, according to other commentators, these reasons alone do not suffice. We will now note how both Ramban and Ibn Ezra provide additional comments on this pasuk that point us back to Sefer Breishit.

BACK TO BREISHIT

Ramban begins his commentary by agreeing with the first reason brought down by Rashi [i.e. everlasting witnesses], and even offers additional proof from a similar incident - where Yehoshua designates a stone as an eternal witness to a covenant (see Yehoshua 24:25-28). However, afterward he adds a very interesting comment:

"... these are the original **shamayim** and **aretz** that are first mentioned in **Breishit**. Since they are entering into a covenant with Israel, they are told to listen..." (Ramban 32:1)

[Note how Ramban refers to this approach as 'al derech ha-emet' [lit. 'by way of the truth'], as opposed to his assessment of his first peirush, as 'al derech ha-pshat' [lit. 'by way of the simple meaning of the text']. We find this expression al derech ha-emet- quite often throughout the Ramban's commentary,

usually when he hints to a much deeper reason for why the Torah chooses a specific phrase, one which relates to a more general theme in Chumash. (See Ramban's introduction to Chumash.)]

Here we find that Ramban 'hints' to a thematic connection between shirat Ha'azinu and Bereishit, even though he does not explain the reason or significance behind this relationship.

Though somewhat obscure, a connection between Ha'azinu and the beginning of Chumash appears in the comments of Ibn Ezra, as well. First, he quotes Rav Sa'adia Gaon's suggestion that **shamayim** refers to the 'angels in heaven' and **aretz** to 'men on earth.' He then continues:

"... or the testimony [refers to] the rain that will come from heaven, and earth that will give [the earth's] produce. But what seems most correct to me is that they both exist forever [reason (1) above], and I have earlier alluded to the fact that the **neschama** (of man) is in the **middle** - between above and below..." (see Ibn Ezra 32:1).

What exactly Ibn Ezra has in mind is far from clear. However, it appears to be an allusion to his lengthy commentary on Breishit 1:26, where he explains the meaning of God's creation of man 'be-tzelem Elokim'.

Following this 'lead' alluded to by both Ibn Ezra and Ramban, we will explore a possible thematic connection (on a 'pshat level') between the **shamayim** va-aretz in the first pasuk of shirat Ha'azinu and the **shamayim** va-aretz in the first pasuk of Chumash.

A 'PROSECUTOR' OR A 'REMINDER'?

As we explained earlier, both explanations quoted by Rashi personify **shamayim** and **aretz**, treating them as actual witnesses who will enforce the covenant. This understanding implies that the purpose of this summons to **shamayim** va-aretz is to **frighten** Bnei Yisrael, so that they realize that 'someone' is always there watching should they break the covenant.

However, one could suggest a different function of **shamayim** va-aretz, based on an earlier instance in Sefer Devarim, where Moshe Rabbeinu summoned **shamayim** va-aretz to witness his final charge to Bnei Yisrael at the conclusion of his 'finale' speech:

"I call upon the **shamayim** and the **aretz** as **witnesses** today, for I am presenting the choice between life and death - the blessing or the curse - and you should choose life..." (see 30:19 & its context).

Commenting on this pasuk, Rashi offers a beautiful explanation. After first identifying their function as 'eternal witnesses,' Rashi then cites a different explanation, based on the Midrash:

"Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael: **look** at the **shamayim** that I created to serve you - do they ever change from their regular pattern? **Look** at the **aretz** that I created to serve you..."

According to this second interpretation, the **shamayim** and **aretz** are not personified; they take no active role. Instead, the pasuk calls upon Am Yisrael, to act! They must look at and contemplate the **shamayim** va-aretz, who now serve as a constant **reminders** to man, and thereby help him find purpose in God's creation.

In other words, God's selection of **shamayim** and **aretz** to witness the covenant is not in order to 'scare' us, but rather to 'teach' us that just as there is a purpose for God's creation of heaven and earth, so too there is a purpose for His covenant with Am Yisrael.

[See also Ramban on Breishit 6:18, in his peirush of the word "brit", where he adds al derech ha-emet that brit is connected to 'briya'. In other words, God's covenant with Noach directly relates to the very purpose of His Creation.]

This Midrash raises the fundamental question concerning the conclusions that man should reach when he contemplates the very

existence of 'heaven and earth'? What does man see in nature - pure coincidence? Or possibly the work of many gods (with a delicate balance between their conflicting powers)? Are these 'forces' beyond human comprehension, or does man perceive an organized universe created by One God - for a definite purpose?

It is precisely this question that the first two chapters of Sefer Breishit attempt to answer. They teach us that what we perceive as nature - i.e. shamayim va-aretz and all their hosts (see 1:1, 2:1 & 2:4) - is a willful act of God. Man, the pinnacle of God's creation, was charged to both serve God (see 2:15) and to rule over nature (see 1:28).

At the same time, however, it is precisely shamayim va-aretz that may cause man to arrive at the exact opposite conclusion. He may indeed perceive Creation as an act of God, but the vast abyss separating **shamayim** and **aretz** seems too wide to bridge. Indeed, God is in heaven - but man remains on earth, with no means by which to connect to the heavens. God may exist, but there may be no 'hashgacha' [divine providence]. Even though man may perceive and recognize divine Creation, he can still question how that Creator relates to his own daily life.

The Torah provides the answer, presenting the 'prophetic history' of God's relationship with man, himself a 'mixture' of **shamayim** and **aretz** (see 2:4-10, note 'neshama' / this may be what Ibn Ezra is referring to in his commentary to Devarim 32:1). Each brit found in Chumash exemplifies this relationship.

In fact, we find a similar use of the words 'shamayim va-aretz' in relation to events that took place when the Torah was given - at Matan Torah - the most intense 'brit' between God and Am Yisrael:

"From the **shamayim** He made his voice heard... and on the **aretz** He showed you His great fire, and you heard his words from that fire..." (see Devarim 4:36).

The beginning of that parshia - 4:26 - is the first time we find **shamayim** and **aretz** as witnesses! Find the other parallels between chapters 4 and 30-31.)

HASHGACHA

We may now, therefore, suggest an additional reason for God's invocation of **shamayim** and **aretz** to witness the covenant. Let's return to the psukim in Parshat Vayelech that outline the **reason** for shirat Ha'azinu:

"... and they will leave Me, and I will hide My face from them, and terrible things will befall them, and they will say on that day - it is because God is not in our midst that these terrible things have happened. But I will continue to hide My face... Therefore, write down this **shira**... and teach it to Bnei Yisrael in order that it be a **witness** for Bnei Yisrael..." (see 31:16-19).

God here threatens 'hester panim' - hiding His face, the most severe punishment Bnei Yisrael can experience. This dreadful reality raises a critical theological question: how can Bnei Yisrael find God if He seems to pay no attention to them? God's answer to this question is the **shira**. God expects Am Yisrael to find Him by contemplating their history and the reason for their existence. Even when God appears to conceal Himself, He continues to guide our fate - like a parent who 'punishes' a child by ignoring him. The parent does so not because he doesn't care, but rather to educate the child so that he'll come to realize on his own the importance of parents.

The same 'self-taught' lesson that **shirat Ha'azinu** demands of us (see 32:7) may be the lesson of the opening pasuk in particular. **Shamayim** and **aretz** are summoned as witnesses to help us recognize God's **hashgacha**, even when it appears to be hiding from us.

[Iy"h, in our shiur on Parshat Breishit we will discuss the meaning of **raki'a** - created on the second day, that appears to divide between shamayim va-aretz (note the absence of 'ki-tov' on that day). Similarly, in our study of Sukkot, we will discuss how the **s'chach**, which divides between our **sukka** on the aretz and the shamayim above, yet needs to remain partially open - so that we can still 'see the stars!']

As you study shirat Ha'azinu, note how this theme of historical perspective emerges as a primary topic. Furthermore, note how it demands that we contemplate not only nature, but even more so - historical events - as it provides an eternal guide for the pattern of God's dynamic relationship with His people.

shabbat shalom,
menachem