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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

For SHABBAT SHUVA
Re: Parshiot Va'yelech & Haazinu
The song and its intro

Who's to blame when something goes wrong?
In regard to tragedy that befalls the people of Israel, "shirat Ha'azinu" offers a very bold, yet fundamental answer.

In the following shiur for Shabbat Shuva, we will study the Torah's introduction to that song in Parshat Vayelech.

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, and how it relates to the main speech of Sefer Devarim. 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, quickly review that entire section, i.e. 31:14-30, noting how it forms an introduction to chapter 32 (more so than a continuation of 31:1-13).

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 / see 31:27-29!]

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 terrible 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 - i.e. it should explain how Bnei Yisrael should react in situations of national catastrophe. 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 a bit 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).

[See also Ramban on 31:17, where he entertains the first possibility (above) that Bnei Yisrael's statement reflects at least a minimal amount of remorse - however, Ramban understands this teshuva as only superficial (most probably, based on 31:18), and hence God will continue to hide His face, waiting for Am Yisrael to perform more intense teshuva - in order to deserve full redemption.]

AN IMPASSE

Let's consider this situation, as described in this introduction. God punishes His nation because of their unfaithfulness; but the nation interprets that punishment as a sign that God does not care about them. If so, we appear to have reached an impasse - for additional Divine punishment will only give more Bnei Yisrael more reason to leave God.

Therefore, to prepare Bnei Yisrael for this inevitable conflict concerning '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 31:21).

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.

SHIRAT HAAZINU
32:1-3 / THE PREFACE

Review the first three psukim (32:1-3), noting how they form a poetic preface to the song. In fact, 32:3 explains how Bnei Yisrael should answer with a refrain of 'praise to the Lord' - whenever Moshe will mention God's Name in this song.

[Our custom (to this day) of saying 'baruch Hu u-varuch shmo' - when ever we hear God's Name mentioned in a blessing, is based on this pasuk.]

This observation is important, for if 32:1-3 forms an introduction to this song, then we can conclude that 32:4 forms its 'opening statement'. Let's study that statement, to show how it relates to the theme discussed above.

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] when calamity befalls the nation:

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'/?/ question]

no - ['lo' - with an 'aleph/ the answer]

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 the first section of our shiur, 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 'patron god', taking care of every tiny need of his '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.]

That covenant was not only about privileges (i.e. promises of protection) - rather, its primary focus was responsibilities and obligations. Because His Name and reputation are at stake, 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.]

As divine punishment serves to remind Bnei Yisrael of their covenantal responsibility (should they go astray), 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. [Note the Torah's use of the word 'brit' in this context in 31:16 & 20!]

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 narrative]

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. [See Devarim 29:23-24 in the context of 29:21-27.]

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 TSC shiur on God's 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.]

Obviously, the goal of Chumash is that we should never need to experience a sequence of events, as 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 another 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 perform Teshuva, so that we can fulfill our destiny to become His special nation.

FROM BAD TO BETTER

As this week is "shabbat shuva", a small concluding thought based on the themes that we have discussed in Sefer Devarim (especially in relation to 26:19).

When discussing repentance, one could consider two types of "teshuva".

1) from 'bad' to 'good'

2) from 'good' to 'better'

The first type [bad to good] could be considered 'classic' teshuva, as it requires the resolve to be a 'good' person, and hence not to perform any bad deeds. However, this type of "teshuva" presents a challenge to the heart [or "yetzer"] more so than it does to the mind [or "sechel"].

In a certain sense, the second type of "teshuva" [from good to better] is more difficult, for it presents us with the challenge not only to do good, but to consistently think and consider how we can be better; to consider taking initiatives, to prioritize our goals and wisely budget our time and resources.

May our study and understanding of Chumash and its themes help provide us this coming year with guidance to become better individuals (as discussed in Shmot 22:20->23:9 and in Vayikra chapter 19), as well as better members of the people of Israel (as discussed in Sefer Devarim.

shabbat shalom,

Menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

Re: Parshat Va'yelech

1. Review 31:14-30 once again, noting how it breaks down as follows:

31:14- 15 - God summons Moshe & Yehoshua to the Ohel Moed

31:15-21 - God's commandment to Moshe

31:22 - God's commandment [or charge] to Yehoshua!

[did you ever realize this point - see Rashi/Ramban etc.]

31:23-29 - Narrator of Chumash telling us how Moshe finished writing the entire Sefer Torah (i.e. including shirat ha'azinu / compare with Devarim 31:9 - which relates only to main speech of Devarim and the mitzvah of Hakhel)

31:30 summary pasuk, introducing the shira in chapter 32.

2. After noting this structure, note how 31:22 is parallel to 31:7-8 - Note also parallel to Shmot 3:10-12 ["ki eh'yeh imach!"] when Moshe is given his first 'charge'!

Note as well how this relate to Devarim 31:6.

3. Based on the above shiur, why is the Sefer Torah more 'complete' [see "ad tumam" / 31:24 and 31:30] after shirat ha'azinu is added as a concluding warning to the nation?