
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

for PARSHAT HA'AZINU - 3 mini- shiurim

Shiur #1 - MOSHE RABEINU'S LAST DAY

Parshat Vayeilech 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.

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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)

Three others: ha'Yam, Devorah, & David, exhibit the pattern of:

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-- --
-- -- (pattern B)

The following table summarizes these five songs and the respective time period that each one concludes:

SOURCE	SONG	TIME PERIOD
=====	=====	=====
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'tarim (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 **neshama** (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 Noah 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-arets 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-arets 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 **arets** 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 **arets** (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-arets' 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 **arets** 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 **arets** 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 **arets** 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 **arets** 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-arets (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 arets 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