

"That This Song May Answer Before Them Forever"

By Rav Tamir Granot

a. The Uniqueness of Parashat Haazinu

The song of Haazinu is relatively brief, and its principal messages are, no doubt, familiar to most of us. Nevertheless, in order to ensure a basic common denominator, let us review some of the main themes that appear in the song, especially those that uniquely characterize this text.

1. The cycle of history – the song gives poetic description to an historical cycle in the life of the nation, beginning with the selection of the Jewish people by God in His kindness, continuing through their inheritance of the Land of Israel, the subsequent sin of abandoning God and turning to idolatry, followed by punishment which is administered by the nations as God's emissaries, and – finally – a redemption, in which God punishes the nations and exacts vengeance on them for having harmed the Jewish people.

2. Selective history – some parts of the song are pseudo-historical, i.e., they describe the future as though it had already happened. The only part of the song which is truly historical – i.e., which deals with the history of the nation at its very start – omits some of the most important stages. We note, especially, the omission of the covenant with the forefathers, the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus, the narrative starting, instead, with, "He found them in a desert land" ([Devarim 32:10](#)). Considering the content of the other historical reviews in the Torah, and especially those recorded in Sefer Devarim, the omission of the Exodus is most surprising, while the fact that the song mentions nothing of a covenant between God and His nation is even more puzzling.

3. Determinism – The future is described as though it had already happened; i.e., all that is going to happen is set down here as fact. Thus, for example: "Yeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked... and abandoned the God Who made him" (32:15) – as though the nation had already grown fat, and kicked, etc. The song is, thus, of a strongly deterministic nature. Everything that is said about the future will necessarily take place; it is not dependent on anything – and especially not on the nation's choices.

4. No exile – the song describes terrible punishments, but it lacks the central element that is common to other

descriptions of punishment in the Torah – exile. Exile is the main and most central curse in the parashiyot of Bechukotai ([Vayikra 26:14-46](#)) and Ki-Tavo ([Devarim 28:15-68](#)), in the second part of the Shema, "And it will be, if you diligently obey..." ([Devarim 11:13-21](#)), in parashat Acharei-Mot ([Vayikra 18](#)), in the unit of "When you bear children and grandchildren..." ([Devarim 4:25-40](#)), and elsewhere. Exile is the most prominent manner of Divine retribution for sin going back to Sefer Bereishit, as we learn from the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden (3:23-24) and the wandering imposed on Kayin (4:10-16), Yaakov's flight and lengthy absence from home (chapters 28-33), and the exile of Yosef and his brothers to Egypt (chapters 37-50). The song of Haazinu, however, lacks this element of exile. Admittedly, it does explain, almost explicitly, why no mention is made of exile: "I said that I would scatter them (afeihem); that I could cause their memory to cease from mankind" (32:26). In other words, God had intended to exile Israel, according to the first interpretation of Rashi for the word "afeihem" (s.v. amarti), or to destroy them, according to an alternate interpretation cited by Rashi, but He does not carry out this intention for the following reason: "Were it not for the accumulated wrath of the enemy, lest their adversaries misunderstand, lest they say, 'Our hand is high, the Lord has not done all of this'" (32:27). However, this explanation does not sit well with the message that arises from the other Sefarim of the Torah, where exile is, indeed, the central threat.

5. No teshuva – the song does not describe the repentance of the Jewish people as part of the redemption or as leading up to it. The redemption comes only to prevent desecration of God's Name, and especially to prevent the nations from concluding that "Our hand is high; the Lord has not done all of this."

6. Redemption as revenge on Israel's enemies – finally, the description of the redemption addresses, primarily, God's revenge on the nations; it pays hardly any attention to the Jewish people and their fate at that time. This, too, is puzzling.

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Ramban, in his commentary on Haazinu (32:40, s.v. ve-hinnei), maintains that the song encapsulates the essence of all of Israel's history. However, even a superficial review of the text and the points that we have enumerated above demonstrate that some of the most fundamental elements of our historiography are missing. A concise Jewish history which contains no covenant, which involves no choice between good and evil, no exile and no repentance, seems very strange.

For the same reason, I see no reason to address a question which many commentators have debated: the reason for the repetition, in Haazinu, of that which has already appeared in Sefer Devarim, in Moshe's prose monologue. Haazinu is not mere repetition. The song describes a different dynamic, and maps out a different historiosophy, from that which was set forth in the preceding parashiyot. Our question must, therefore, be why this song presents an historical perception that is so different from the one we have come to know thus far.

b. Moshe's preface to the song: the determinist view

At the end of parashat Vayelekh, the Torah recounts:

Moshe commanded the Leviim, bearers of the Ark of God's covenant, saying: "Take this book of the Torah and place it alongside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, and let it be there a witness against you. For I know your rebellion and your stiff neck; behold, even while I am still alive with you this day you have been rebellious against God; how much more so, then, after my death. Gather to me all of the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words to them and call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death you will surely become corrupt, and turn away from the path that I have commanded you, and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do evil in the eyes of God, to anger Him with your actions." And Moshe spoke to all the congregation of Israel the words of this song until they were ended ([Devarim 31:25-30](#)).

With these words Moshe establishes the significance of the song, with harsh reproach: "I know your rebellion and your stiff neck," he tells them, in the most direct manner imaginable. "And since that is your nature, I also know what is going to happen to you – how you are going to behave, and what the results will be. Sin will surely come, as will the evil as punishment for your sinning." The words, "and call heaven and earth to witness against them" is unquestionably a reference to the beginning of the song: "Listen, o heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth" (32:1). What is the content of this testimony? To what will the heavens and the earth give witness? Apparently, to Moshe's declaration, that "I told you so!"

However, this interpretation is inherently problematic. If everything is, indeed, known in advance, if this is the nature of the nation and this is what they are going to do, then what is the point of saying "I told you so?" Testimony of this sort is meaningful when the speaker warns in advance that one path should be followed rather than another, while the listener refuses to heed the warning and takes the second path. In such a case, the speaker can legitimately declare: "I told you to take the first path and not the second, but you didn't listen to me, and therefore you have led yourself into trouble." The listener could then learn his lesson and know better for the future. But if the listener is not free to choose, if his future sin is already known and anticipated, then of what use are the advance warning and the testimony? He will claim – and justifiably so – "What could I do? That's how I am!"

If the song were to contain the elements of choice and warning, its function would be easier to comprehend. Insofar as it describes the sin and the evil that will come in its wake as a given fact, as though it had already happened, of what use is it?

c. God's preface to the song

Moshe's words of introduction do not stand alone. They must be read against the backdrop of God's preceding monologue:

God said to Moshe: "Your days are drawing close to die; call Yehoshua and stand, both of you, at the Tent of Meeting, that I may command him." So Moshe went, with Yehoshua, and they stood at the Tent of Meeting... And God said to Moshe: "Behold, you will lie with your fathers, and this nation will rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land into the midst of which they will come, and they will abandon Me and violate My covenant which I have forged with them. And My anger will burn against them on that day, and I will abandon them, and hide My face from them, and they will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day: 'Is it not because there is no God in our midst that these evils have befallen us?' But I shall surely hide My face on that day, for all the evils which they will have done in turning to other gods. And now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to the children of Israel; place it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For I shall bring them to the land which I promised to their forefathers – flowing with milk and honey – and they will eat and be satisfied and grow fat, and they will turn to other gods and serve them, and provoke Me, and violate My covenant. And it shall be, when many evils and troubles befall them, that this song will testify against them as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from the mouths of their descendants, for I know their inclination, [that] which they do [even] this day, before I bring them to the land which I have promised. So Moshe wrote this song on that day, and taught it to the children of Israel ([Devarim 31:14-22](#)).

This speech demands our close attention:

Firstly, this is the first, and only, revelation of God in all of Sefer Devarim. Note that the entire Sefer is uttered by Moshe, while in this excerpt we encounter God's direct speech.

Secondly, God reveals Himself here not to Moshe alone, but to Yehoshua as well. God chooses to describe the troubled future that awaits the nation, its future sins and God's anger that will be aroused as a result, to Moshe and Yehoshua jointly. Yehoshua must hear this too because he is meant to take over the leadership of the nation, and because God's prediction concerns the period after Moshe's death: "Behold, you will lie with your fathers...." However, this being the case, why does God not speak directly to Yehoshua? Why is Yehoshua only a secondary listener? This may hint to us that although, historically speaking, only Yehoshua – as the future leader of the nation – needs to hear what will happen in the future, the

message is of eternal significance. The text describes not only a chain of events that will come about after Moshe's death, but a dynamic that will be repeated in cycles throughout Jewish history.

Thirdly, God's speech here contains a clear repetition. The description of the cycle of contentment, abandoning God and violating the covenant, the hiding of God's face, and the evils and troubles, occurs twice: first in verses 16—18, and then again in verses 20-21. These two cycles are separated by verse 19, in which Moshe and Yehoshua are commanded to write down the song and to teach it to the children of Israel, in order that it may serve, in the future, as a witness for God.^[1] The reason for the repetition is obvious: the first description records an historical order of events, directly, for its own sake. The reason for the second description is to explain the purpose of the song. Following the completion of the first description there is the command to write this song – in other words, the song whose content is the words that have just now been uttered.^[2] In other words, God commands Moshe and Yehoshua to write the song describing the cyclical future that awaits the nation, as set forth in the preceding verses. The command to write the song is immediately followed by the second description, along with its purpose: "For I shall bring them to the land... and they shall eat and be satisfied and grow fat... and this song will be a witness against them." God explains that the purpose of writing the song is that it may serve as a witness against Israel at those times when the historical process is passing through its most difficult phase; the stage of the "hiding of God's face." Since the second description is meant only to explain the significance of the song, and not to repeat the course of the historical events, it is formulated concisely and appears as a temporal clause within a longer sentence: "For I shall bring them... and it shall be, when... then this song will be a witness against them."

Fourthly – the deterministic view of history, which we encounter in the song itself as uttered by Moshe, appears initially here, in God's words. The inevitability of sin and the punishment that will follow are not the sober analysis of an experienced leader filled with disappointment, but rather an explicit Divine prediction. This means that our discussion of determinism, which is the central principle of Haazinu, must begin with the knowledge that it has its source in God's word.

Fifthly, God's speech of introduction includes many of the elements which we noted as being curiously absent from the song itself. Here we find mention of the forefathers and the promise to them: "For I shall bring them to the land which I promised to their forefathers"; mention is also made of the covenant – "And violate the covenant which I forged with them"; and there is teshuva, or at least the acknowledgment of sin as the beginning of teshuva: "And they will say: Is it not because there is no God in our midst that these evils have befallen us?" All of this only serves to reinforce our previous question: why are these fundamental elements of the Torah's historical world-view not included in the body of the song itself?

Finally – the song is presented here as God's song, rather than as the song of Moshe. God treats the song as if it is His, and He commands Moshe and Yehoshua to teach it to Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, since the function of the song is to serve as a witness

between God and Israel, it is proper that it be uttered by God rather than by Moshe. The song itself, in contrast, appears to be uttered by Moshe. The opening declaration, "Hear, o heavens, and I will speak..." is certainly uttered by Moshe, as the continuation of the song proves it: "For I shall call on the Name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God" (32:3). Hence, we must try to clarify whether Haazinu is the song of Moshe, or the song of God.

d. Song of Moshe or song of God?

Before closing the circle and getting back to our questions, let us try to answer the question with which we concluded the previous section: is it possible to prove, from the song, whether it is God's song or the song of Moshe?^[3]

We have already demonstrated that the song opens as Moshe's declaration. As we continue to read we find that God's actions continue to be described in the third person: "The Lord alone led them... and they abandoned the God Who made them," (32:12, 15) etc. However, further on the song moves from a description of God in the third person to quoting His words in the first person:

You are unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you have forgotten God Who formed you. And God saw it and abhorred them, out of anger at His sons and His daughters. And He said: "I shall hide My face from them; [then] I will see what will become of them, for they are a perverse generation; children with no faith" (32:18-20).

Verse 18 still belongs to Moshe's song, since it describes God in the third person, and likewise verse 19. The transition occurs in verse 20: Moshe now quotes God in direct speech. It is immediately apparent that this technique is not meant as a sort of lyrical decoration, meant to intensify the description of God's anger, as one might at first imagine. The subsequent verses show that from this point onwards we are hearing God speaking to and about the Jewish people, with Moshe merely quoting the Almighty:

They have aroused My jealousy with a non-God, and have provoked My anger with their vanities; therefore I shall arouse their jealousy with a non-nation, and provoke their anger with a vile nation. For a fire is kindled in My anger, and it shall burn to the nethermost parts, and it will consume the earth and its produce, and will set fire to the foundations of the mountains (32:21-22).

From this point onwards, the song continues to refer to God in the first person, as God's song, with one exception:

Mine is vengeance and retribution, when their foot slides, for the day of their calamity is near, and that which is destined for them makes haste. For God shall judge His people, and will experience regret over His servants, for He will see that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left behind. And He will say, "Where are their gods, their rock in whom they trusted?" (32:35-37)

Verse 35 is still quoting God, but verse 36 is once again uttered by Moshe. This verse is of central importance in understanding the song, as we shall see below, and therefore we shall end the citation at this point. It should be noted, however, that immediately thereafter, Moshe goes back to quoting God's words, up until the end of the song:

See now, that I – I am He, and there is no god with Me. I put to death and I give life; I wound, and I heal; there is none other that can deliver out of My hand. For I lift up My hand to the heavens, and I say: I live forever. If I whet My glittering sword, and My hand grasps judgment, then I will render vengeance to My enemies and repay those who hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword will devour flesh; with the blood of the slain and the captive, with the head of the wild bands of the enemy (32:39-42).

Only in the very last verse of the song do we once again hear the voice of Moshe himself:

Rejoice, o nations, with His people, for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance to His adversaries, and will forgive His land, His people. (32:43)

As we can see, the idea mentioned in this verse – the idea of vengeance – has already appeared previously, in verse 41: "I shall render vengeance to My enemies." However, whereas in verse 41 it was quoted directly from God, it is now uttered by Moshe.

In light of the literary analysis above, it seems to me that the song includes a preface and verses of explanation by Moshe, but mainly and essentially it is, indeed, God's song. When God commands that the song be written down, He means the main part of it: the part beginning with the verse in which Moshe moves over to quoting in the first person: "And He said: I shall hide My face from them." Moshe adds a lengthy introduction, representing a sort of poetic version of the brief ideas that God had told him, but he does not include the main idea for the sake of which the song is uttered. The two extra verses which Moshe adds are, likewise, a supplementary explanation, in order for the nation to understand well the meaning of the song.

If we look at the opening line of God's song, we see that it connects seamlessly with God's prior words to Moshe and Yehoshua. According to His words there, the purpose of the song is to bear witness at a time of "hiding of God's face," when the children of Israel face many evils and troubles. According to God's words, the people may regard their suffering as a just punishment from God, but they may also be mistaken in thinking that God has abandoned them altogether, or even – heaven forefend – interpret their suffering as a manifestation of Divine weakness. In the introductory words, God expresses His hope that the nation will interpret correctly what happens to them: "And they will say: 'Is it not because there is no God in our midst that all of these evils have befallen us?'" – i.e., since we did not keep God in our hearts, and since God does not dwell in our midst and watch over us, all of this has happened to us.

At that time of evils and troubles, the song will be a testament to the fact that God is not weak, nor has He abandoned His people. Rather, He deliberately hides His face – but He will again reveal His face in the future. And indeed, God's song begins precisely at the point of the hiding of His face: "And He said: 'I shall hide My face from them...'"

e. The hiding of God's face

The Ba'al Shem Tov expounds on the double expression "I shall surely hide" (*haster astir*), explaining that it is a compound concept: there is "ordinary hiding," whereby an individual Jew, or the Jewish people as a whole, experiences suffering and does not encounter God's kindness, but nevertheless knows that God is controlling the world and guiding it toward some objective.

The "haster astir" described here, however, is a "hiding within a hiding": a person is in trouble, and God is so completely hidden from him that it seems to him as though there is no Godliness at all in his suffering. God is not hiding behind this trouble, nor is He waiting for it to end. A heart-rending description of such an experience has been left to us from the time of the Holocaust, in a composition entitled "Binat Nevonim" by Rav Barukh Yehoshua Rabinowitz, who, prior to the war was the Av Beit Din and a chassidic leader in Munkacs, Hungary. Following the war he renounced his position as rebbe and served as the Chief Rabbi of Holon.^[4] He describes as follows the "hiding of God's face" which he experienced during the Holocaust:

However, although we knew that through it all, all of this came upon us from God, and although we were ready, like *Iyov*, to declare, "Shall we then accept the good from God, but not receive the bad?!" (*Iyov 2:10*) – despite this, in our hearts we were not reconciled to it. For, while we could accept a Divine decree, we could not reconcile ourselves with the feeling that we had been cast out from before Him, to become ownerless, to be trampled. As though He had turned His face from us and did not wish to know what became of us; as though, after handing us over to our enemies, He had turned His back on us, not looking to see what those enemies were doing to us. Our prayers were not accepted; all of our cries were not answered. This feeling of being cast out from before God was one that we were altogether unable to overcome. Even King David, in the psalm cited above [in the book], after declaring his loyal cleaving to God no matter what happened to him, cries out and says: "Why do You hide Your face; Why do you ignore our suffering and our oppression?" (*Tehillim 44:25*)

"How can it be?" we cried out in our hearts. Our prayers are not being accepted, the best among us are being struck by the Destroyer, the righteous ones and the scholars among us are turning into ashes in the crematoria, as though they had never lived; masses of Jews are fluttering between life and death; "outside – the sword brings death, while inside there is terror" (*Devarim 32:25*). Each day the Jewish nation is diminished by thousands and by tens of thousands; entire cities are being emptied of their inhabitants, communities are disappearing one after another, day by day, leaving no survivor or refugee.

Jewish communities that were fortresses of Torah are falling and collapsing; they are the first to be destroyed.

Precisely because they are people of Torah, specifically because the image of God may be discerned within them, in their ways and in their clothing, in their beards and their pe'ot (sidelocks), their tzitzit and their tefillin, they are the first to die terrible deaths, with cruel beatings. Our Sages have taught ([Bava Kama 60a](#)) that Rav Yosef wept and declared: "Are the righteous truly considered so worthless?" yet it is they who are the first to die!

All of this gave us the feeling that the Holy One, blessed be He, had hidden His face from us, and was unconcerned as to what was happening to us. I cannot comprehend (heaven forefend) at all what the destroyers, who were given free reign, did to us. We could not reconcile ourselves to that at all. We trembled to our very bones as we read in the Torah, "My anger will be kindled against them on that day and I will abandon them, and I will hide My face from them and they will be left for devouring, and many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day: Is it not because there is no God in our midst that these troubles have befallen us? And I shall surely hide My face on that day, for all the evil which they have done" (31:17-18)

While we knew the interpretation offered by the commentators (Seforno 31:18, s.v. ve-anokhi): "I shall surely hide My face from them" – not as they thought, in declaring that I was not in their midst, but rather, wherever they are – My Divine Presence will be with them, as the Sages taught ([Bamidbar Rabba 7:10](#) and elsewhere): "Wherever they were exiled, the Divine Presence was with them." But I shall hide My face from saving them. In other words, they will think that there is no God in their midst, but the truth is that God is in their midst, and the essence of the "hiding of His face" finds expression only in the fact that their prayers are not answered. The same idea would seem to arise from Rashi (31:17, s.v. ve-histarti), who writes: "I shall hide My face from them – as though I do not see their troubles." In other words, in truth He does see, but He pretends, as it were, not to see...

We knew all the interpretations, but it did not settle our minds. The feeling was one of great abandonment: "Zion says: 'God has abandoned me, and God has forgotten me'" (Yeshayahu 49:14). We had a feeling which we were unable to overcome, that God had abandoned us, despite the powerful faith in our hearts that all of this was a heavenly decree. The feeling, however, was that after God had made His decree, He had handed us over to the nations and left us to our fate. He hid His face from us without following or watching what was happening to us. That feeling of being cast out and left alone among the nations was the worst of all the suffering and of all the sorrow and anguish that we experienced.

The loss of connection with God, with Whom we were so close, was more difficult to bear than all of the losses, in body and soul, for it brought upon us an unbearable loneliness and orphanhood. We needed to find a way to elevate ourselves from the despair that surrounded us. We needed to find a path to the living God, to know that, although He was not answering us in our time of trouble, He was continuing to look upon all that was

happening to us, collectively and individually. Despite the hiding of His face, He knows everything and sees everything.

God's concerns which led to the writing of the song are the very doubts that Rabbi Rabinowicz reveals as lurking in the hearts of the Jews of the Holocaust, and it is these that he tries to overcome.

The additional verse added by Moshe of his own initiative continues the subject of the hiding of God's face: "For God will judge His people, and will experience regret over His servants, for He will see that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left behind." Moshe halts the Divine song to explain the change in God's approach. The Jewish people have been punished to the point of almost complete annihilation: "I said, 'I shall annihilate them; I shall cause their memory to cease from mankind,'" but the possibility of their enemies declaring, "Our hand is high" causes God to punish the nations. This justification may create the impression that God does everything only for His Name's sake, and that in truth the hiding of His face from Israel is eternal, but this is not the case. Therefore, Moshe explains that God will "experience regret," as it were, over His servants, [\[5\]](#) and will once again protect them.

According to the song, God's approach following His judgment changes in two ways: firstly, God takes revenge on the enemies that harmed Israel at the time of judgment – "Mine is vengeance and retribution"; and secondly, God comes back to protecting Israel and watching over them: "I put to death and give life; I wound and I heal."

Why does God Himself not declare, in His song, that He will feel regret over the fate of His servants? Why, in this regard, do we need Moshe's explanation?

In truth, I believe that this is precisely the intention of the song. Before explaining this idea further, it should first be stated that there seems to be an important historical message here. The time of the hiding of God's face, which is a time of punishment for Israel for their evil deeds, is always also a difficult time from a spiritual point of view, because God's people ask themselves whether God still desires them. How can God signal to Israel that He is still with them at a time when He sends wicked nations to punish them? We might argue that God could relent and redeem them, but it is possible that the "appointed time" for redemption has not yet come, and that Israel has not engaged in repentance, such that God could "hasten it" (as in Yeshayahu 60:22, as interpreted in [Sanhedrin 98a](#)).

The answer to the question, then, is precisely the content of the song: God promises that if trouble and suffering befall His people through the hands of some other nation, then God will settle His accounts with that nation. When the Jewish people see that they continue to exist, even in exile, and their evil enemies are being defeated and punished, then they must know that God is still with them. There are times in history when God will not yet adopt the "other option" and redeem Israel, but even the punishing of the evil enemies who have caused Israel to suffer is a sign to Israel of God's presence within history. For example: the death of Haman, in the book of Esther (7:10, in the first month), precedes by a considerable time the miracle of the

salvation on Purim (chapter 9, "In the twelfth month"). When Haman was hanged, the decree against the Jews remained. In what way, then, did his death change anything? Would the altering of the decree, which came later, not suffice? The answer is clear, in light of this discussion. Revenge on the wicked, even if the time is not yet ripe for a repealing of the decree, is God's signal that He is acting in history on our behalf, and that everything that happens to the world is just.

In order that we are not mistaken into thinking that desecration of God's Name alone (i.e., God's "self-interest," as it were) motivates God to wage war against the nations, and in order that we understand that God is thereby signally to us that He is still watching over us, Moshe adds and explains that God will also act in the future because He sees the suffering of His people: "And feel regret over His servants...."

f. The principal ideas of the song

Let us summarize and sharpen the overall thrust: The essence of Haazinu deals with the period of the hiding of God's face, and, as we have seen, God's song starts with His decision to hide His face from Israel. Moshe's preceding words are, according to this interpretation, merely an introduction, intended to explain why God hides His face from Israel, on one hand, and why He will take special care of them in the future, despite their evil ways, on the other. Moshe's introduction is not meant as an additional historical survey, or a religious sermon of admonishment. It rests on two main points:

- i. "Is He not your Father, Who bought you...? For God's portion is His people..." etc. Namely, Israel is God's nation, like a son to Him, and by His kindness He grants him existence.
- ii. The Jewish people betray their connection with God and the Divine kindness: "The corruption is not His, but rather the blemish of His sons... will you attribute this to God?" It is due to this betrayal that they are deserving of punishment from God, concerning Whom it is said, "Whose work is perfect; for all His ways are justice."

This explains why we should expect the covenant, or repentance, or the like in Moshe's words, for these are self-evident and are included in God's introductory remarks. The song comes to tell us only about the hiding of God's face and its significance. Therefore it does not – nor should it – contain other elements which we have already learned elsewhere in the Torah generally, and in Sefer Devarim particularly.

At a time of hiding of God's face, according to God's words from parashat Vayelekh (see above), the song gives testimony before Bnei Yisrael. To what does it testify? To two things:

- i. The Divine justice of the hiding of God's face. Israel is justly punished for their betrayal of God and for their ingratitude.
- ii. The hiding of God's face is not abandonment or the nullification of the connection between Him and Israel. Rather, it is a punishment, and ultimately God will comfort Israel. The song testifies that God is still present, even when

He hides His face, and it teaches us to trace His presence in history, to seek it and to believe in it.

Why, then, does the song describe the historical process from a deterministic point of view, as though sin must necessarily come, followed by punishment? I propose two possible answers:

- i. Since the purpose of the song is to address a time of the hiding of God's face, the syndrome that precedes it is described as fact – not because it is inevitable, but because it is possible, and it represents the necessary background for the subject of the song. It is as if the Torah was saying, "If and when such-and-such happens, then this song will bear witness...." It is possible that it will not come about, but the song is not meant to address such an instance.^[6]
- ii. Given that the deterministic atmosphere is introduced already in God's words to Moshe and Yehoshua, prior to the song, it seems to me that we may propose a different understanding of it. The Torah usually talks about the free choice both of the individual and of the nation. From the perspective of human consciousness, free choice is a fundamental given; it is axiomatic. We experience our free choice with every step that we take in our lives. It is for this reason that Sefer Devarim as a whole is based upon this central principle: "See, I place before you life and good, and death and evil" (30:15). And, hence, the covenant, reward and punishment, repentance, and the other elements of Sefer Devarim, which is uttered by Moshe, represents – as we have explained on several occasions – the perspective of human consciousness in general, or – more accurately – the Divine will as absorbed through human consciousness.

Haazinu, however, deviates from the rest of the Sefer in that it records not Moshe's words, but rather God's own words. We have already noted above that God's words, preceding the song, represent the only Divine revelation in the entire Sefer. This being the case, Haazinu allows us to absorb directly the Divine perspective on history. From this point of view, there are aspects of the nature of man, society, or history that are absolute, and from God's perspective they are facts. That which appears to us as merely possible, may be known to Him as inevitable. From the Divine perspective, sin cannot be altogether prevented. Free choice arises as possible only after sin and punishment; i.e., within the framework of a situation of teshuva (repentance).

To clarify this point let us consider the Rambam's Hilkhot Teshuva. The first chapter deals with the commandment of confession, while the second chapter deals with repentance itself. Two chapters later, the Rambam addresses the matter of free choice (chapters 5-6). Why does the Rambam talk about free choice as part of his Hilkhot Teshuva? One might argue that the reason is that free choice is the foundation of repentance, but if this were so, it would be more appropriate that he first talk about the fact that free choice exists, and only then treat the laws of confession and repentance, rather than postponing the concept of free choice until chapter 5.

I believe that the Rambam is teaching us that free choice and the idea of teshuva are really synonymous. The assumption that a person, or society, is always able to choose good, is too naïve or optimistic. The nature of both man and of earthly life renders sin inevitable. However, a person – and a nation – may repent and return to God after sinning. The power to return to God is born within the situation of evil and troubles – because each individual Jew, and the Jewish people as a whole, contemplate their sins and assume responsibility for them, but also because they observe God's mercy towards them, and His Presence with them in their troubles. In other words, teshuva is born at that point where the Divine attribute of justice (punishment and the hiding of God's face) and His attribute of mercy (God's revenge on the nations, and His regret for His nation) converge.^[7]

Thus if there is no judgment, then there is no impetus for repentance. But if there is no mercy, and there is no faith in God's desire to accept us, then there can likewise be no repentance. Teshuva exists only where the opposite poles of judgment and mercy come together.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] Devotees of the "structural" exegetical approach might argue that these verses comprise a chiasmic structure, with the command to write and teach the song as the central axis. I believe that the parallel between the two descriptions is direct rather than chiasmic, with the first concluding in a command to write while the second ends with the execution of God's command.

^[2] Usually, the word "this" (ha-zot, as in "this song") must refer to something that is known, but these verses appear prior to the beginning of the song; the song does not yet exist. Perhaps there was some written document in front of them, which God pointed to, but it seems more likely that the word "ha-zot" is meant to refer to the content of the song, as suggested above: the song whose content is that which has just been said.

^[3] From this point onwards readers are strongly encouraged to have the relevant verses at hand.

^[4] After Sukkot I hope to initiate a VBM course, in Hebrew on "Faith and the Holocaust." Within that framework I will address, inter alia, the personality and the work of Rabbi Barukh Yehoshua Rabinowicz.

^[5] What the verse means is: God shall judge His nation, but, in the end will retract it (as in "God retracted the evil He had spoken of bringing upon his people" [\[Shemot 32:14\]](#)), stopping the evil due to the difficult situation of the people. That is to say,

it is not simply the desecration of God's name that motivates Him, but also His love for His people. An example of salvation coming to Israel in light of its difficult situation can be found in the prophecy of Yona ben Amitai (Melakhim II 14:25-26), in the time of King Yaravam ben Yoash.

^[6] If the song were meant to address every stage in the development of Jewish history, then the question would indeed be more complicated, for then there would be a need to include such elements as choice and good and evil. However, since the content of the song focuses only on the conditional, later stage of the hiding of God's face, there is no need for attention to such concepts.

^[7] In Kabbala, teshuva (represented by the attribute of "bina") is higher than both mercy and judgment, and incorporates both.

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