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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT HA'AZINU

The Testimony of the Song

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Now therefore write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the Israelites. (*Devarim* 31:19)

The song of *Haazinu* (*Devarim* 32:1-43) should be as familiar and habitual to us as is the recitation of *Shema*.¹ It is meant to serve as a witness – but what it is that this song testifies to?

The song is a unique prophetic testimony given to Moshe to teach the people during the final days of his life, and it describes the history that will unfold after his death: it includes the periods of the Judges and of the monarchy, the battles that would be waged against Israel by Moav and Ammon, as well as Sisera and Midian, the Pelishtim and Aram; up until the siege of Samaria and the salvation from Aram – all the troubles that precede the stage where God's punishment began to involve the world powers, destructions and exiles. An allusion to this is to be found in the song's echoing of the prophecy of Yona ben Amittai concerning Israel's deliverance from the crippling oppression of Aram, "For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel that it was very bitter, for there was not any shut up, nor any left free, nor any helper for Israel" (*Melakhim* II 14:26)

On this basis, we may say that there is no exile in the song of *Haazinu*. Indeed, although the song mentions such a possibility – "I said, I would scatter them into the corners" (26) – it goes on to reject it: "Were it not for the heaped-up wrath of the enemy, lest their adversaries should misinterpret, lest they should say, Our hand is high..." (This is how Rashi reads it.)

Clear proof that there is no exile in the song of *Haazinu* is to be found in its skipping from the period of the forefathers ("the days of old," v. 7) to the period of wandering, with no mention made of either the exile in Egypt or the Exodus. If no mention is made of this exile, then there is no room for exile at all.

The model of "destruction, exile, and redemption" stands at the heart of the covenant of the curses (*Devarim* 28-30), but

Haazinu is built on a different model: that of distress and salvation. The problems and troubles are caused by small, irritating neighboring enemies, with no great world powers invading from the end of the earth, no destruction and exile, no redemption and repentance; instead, God saves His people upon their land, for the sake of His great Name.

In our times, too, following the decimation of the Diaspora in the Holocaust and the ingathering of exiles from all the nations (*Devarim* 30:3), we find ourselves in our tiny land confronting a non-people,² a foolish nation (32:21) that provokes and attacks us unceasingly, after we have already left exile behind; but the song's warning "Yeshurun grew fat and kicked" (v. 15) is still an urgent and accurate one.

Admittedly, Ramban (v. 40) maintains that the song includes all the exiles:

"I said, I would scatter them into the corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men" – I would scatter them in every direction, to the ends of the earth, but I would not cause the remembrance of them to cease from among men because of the heaped-up wrath of the enemy.

According to this explanation, the song includes all the days of old, including the exiles and the entirety of Jewish history. Nevertheless, even according to Ramban, there is a great difference between the song of *Haazinu* and the curses (*Devarim* 28-30). In the covenant of the curses, the return from exile is dependent upon Israel's return to God (*Devarim* 30), but in *Haazinu* the salvation is in no way conditional upon *teshuva* and service of God. This, in Ramban's view, is the strongest proof that the Torah offers against Christian claims, because God's salvation of Israel will eventually come about for the sake of His great Name (as in Yechezkel's prophecy, chapter 36). Hence God's promise at the end of the song: "For I lift up My hand to heaven and say, I live forever." (40)

Understanding the song³

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.

According to Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban (et al.), the heavens and the earth exist forever, and therefore they are witnesses both to the covenant of the curses (*Devarim* 4:26; 30:19) and to this song, which foretells a difficult future after

¹ My wife's uncle, R. David Brisk z"l, once asked me if I knew the song of *Haazinu* by heart. To his surprise, I recited it from beginning to end. He then recounted how he and some other Jerusalemite boys who had volunteered for the Jewish Brigade in the Second World War, came to take leave of their teacher – Rabbi Shraga Feivel Frank z"l. The rabbi asked them, "Do you know the song of *Haazinu* by heart?" They answered that they did not. He told them, "Every Jew is obligated to know it, for it is written, 'for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their progeny' (*Devarim* 31:21), and this applies to the entire Torah,

but particularly to the song of *Haazinu*. Recite this song every day at the end of the prayer service, and it will protect you." And indeed, so it was.

² Instead of arguing as to whether the Palestinians are a nation or a non-people, it is important to understand that God can afflict us with a non-people as well.

³ The English translation here is based mostly on the Koren *Tanakh*, with some slight changes.

	Moshe's death (ibid. 31:19, 28). For this reason, the song – which itself constitutes testimony – starts with a request that the witnesses listen.
My teaching shall seep as the rain	The words of the teaching will fall gently, like rain falling through fog.
My speech shall distill as the dew	The messages are conveyed through metaphor and poetry.
As the showers upon the grass, and as the soaking rain (<i>revivim</i>) upon the tender herb.	<i>Revivim</i> refers to the soaking winter rains that fall after vegetation has sprouted, in contrast to the <i>yoreh</i> , which strikes powerfully on the dry, exposed earth, before anything has grown.
Indeed, I shall call on the Name of the Lord:	The lesson begins with an invocation of God's Name.
Ascribe greatness to our God.	As prior to his public reading of the Torah: "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, amen" (<i>Nechemya</i> 8:6).
[He is] the Rock (<i>tzur</i>) Whose work is perfect	<i>Tzur</i> is an appellation for God, since a rock does not move and one may lean and rely upon it (Saadia)
Indeed, all His ways are justice,	His work is perfect and all His ways are just and right.
A God of faith (<i>emuna</i>) and without iniquity; just and right is He.	<i>Emuna</i> means security and uprightness, inviting confidence.
Not His the corruption, but the blemish of His sons,	The <i>Mesora</i> punctuates this verse in such a way that it cannot be mistakenly read: not His sons. Even children who are corrupt are still called children (following Onkelos and Rashi).
A perverse and crooked generation.	They follow a crooked path that is not straight
Will you thus repay the Lord?	According to the <i>Mesora</i> , the letter <i>heh</i> with which this verse opens, indicating a question, is written large, as though standing alone, thereby intensifying the puzzlement over the nation and its behavior.
O foolish (<i>naval</i>) people, and unwise	<i>Naval</i> means someone who is both wicked and unwise; wisdom and good go hand in hand.
Is He not your Father, Who owns you;	The Creator is also "the most High God, Owner of heaven and earth" (<i>Bereishit</i> 14:19).
Has He not made you and established you?	He created and formed you (possibly even as you chose to be formed).
Remember the days of old;	This is the beginning of the actual body of the song, following on after the call to the witnesses and the blessing of God;
Consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will recount it to you;	After declaring the praise of the Creator's justice towards us, we must remember history and the tradition of the generations, passed down by the fathers and elders, an allusion to the genealogies recorded in <i>Bereishit</i> ,
Your elders, and they will tell you.	These are the grandparents and the leaders of families and tribes.

When the most High gave the nations their inheritance	It was the most High God Who divided the lands among the nations, as recorded in <i>Bereishit</i> .
When He separated the children of Adam	"And from these were separated the nations in the land after the Flood" (<i>Bereishit</i> 10:32) – the sons of Noach are the children of Adam.
Setting the bounds of the people	The book of the "generations of the sons of Noach" (<i>Bereishit</i> 10) lists 70 names of nations around the world
According to the number of the Israelites.	And, correspondingly, at the end of <i>Bereishit</i> (chapter 46) we find the 70 children of Ya'akov who go down to Egypt.
For the Lord's portion is His people; Ya'akov – the lot of His inheritance.	God has chosen Ya'akov to be His people and His inheritance, corresponding to all the nations – 70 vs. 70 (Rashi and Rashbam).
He found him in a desert land, and in the wasteland's howling wilderness;	The song now skips the entire period of Pharaoh and Egypt, culminating in the Exodus, and moves directly from <i>Bereishit</i> and the choosing of Israel, to the desolate wilderness
He surrounded him, He instructed him. He kept him as the apple of His eye.	Where God enveloped the nation, building and strengthening and also imbuing them with understanding.
As an eagle <i>ya'ir</i> its nest	Protects, as in <i>Iyov</i> 8:6; or leads (Saadia, Rashi, Ibn Ezra)
<i>Yerachef</i> over its young	This is the term used for the wind of God in <i>Bereishit</i> 1:2, understood either as moving powerfully, as in a storm (Onkelos) or as hovering gently (Rashi ad loc. and here); but the same root indicates rattling or shaking, as in "All my bones <i>rachafu</i> " (<i>Yirmeyahu</i> 23:9). God protects His nation with His wings, the cloud and fire.
Spreading its wings and taking them	As each of the eaglets spreads its wings and learns to fly, the parent leads it
Leading them with its pinion	Like an aerie of eagles which fly behind the leader. [The meaning of this metaphor is:]
So the Lord alone led him	God led His people alone, with no foreign power, with no foreign influence.
And there was no strange god with him.	The Jewish people has no foreign god (Ibn Ezra); alternatively, there is no foreign [entity] with God.
He made him ride on the high places of the earth, and he ate the produce of the fields	God raised His people onto high places, fields, open spaces, to eat of the produce

And He caused him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock	The honey of dates and the oil of olives, which grow in rocky mountains
The butter of cattle and the milk of sheep	Cattle and sheep in the land will produce generous quantities of milk and butter.
With fat of lambs (<i>chelev karim</i>) and rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats (<i>atudim</i>),	The term <i>chelev</i> is generally used to designate fatty, tasty meat; <i>karim</i> are fattened sheep and also healthy pastures, as in Bashan; <i>atudim</i> are strong goats that lead the flock (related to the word <i>atid</i> , meaning future, alluding to leadership).
With the fat of kidneys of wheat,	A full, doubled kernel of wheat) – in the land God will provide fine wheat.
And you drank wine of the pure blood of the grape.	And will provide red wine to drink.
But Yeshurun grew fat and kicked. You have grown fat; you have become thick; you are covered with fatness	Material abundance can have a corrupting influence. Growing fat is a metaphor for taking and overindulging.
Then he forsook God Who made him, and scorned the Rock of his salvation.	This is more than turning his back on God; it is active rejection, despising and scorning.
They provoked Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations they provoked Him to anger. They sacrificed to powerless spirits, to gods whom they did not know, to new gods that had recently arisen, whom your fathers did not fear.	The fear of evil spirits leads to foreign, lowly worship. The forefathers had dealt with the gods of Babylonia and Egypt, but had not feared evil spirits.

Of the Rock that begot you, you are unmindful, And have forgotten God Who formed you.	You have forgotten and abandoned God, the Father in heaven who begets and forms His children.
And when the Lord saw it, He abhorred them, due to the provocation of His sons and His daughters, and He said:	God distanced (Saadia) his sons and daughters out of anger towards them.
I will hide My face from them,	The hiding of God's face is the removal of special divine protection and the loss of salvation.
I will see what their end shall be.	When God hides His face, our fate is dependent on the usual, natural laws of history.
For they are a twisted generation,	In this situation, when God hides his face, "the twisting sword" (<i>Bereishit</i> 3:24) will befall them.
Children in whom there is no faith.	Children in whom there can be no faith cannot be relied upon.
They have moved Me to jealousy with a non-god,	They have provoked God to anger with powerless, nonsensical gods;
They have provoked Me to anger with their vanities;	In contrast to the curses, concerning which the Torah lists grave and pervasive sins.
And I will move them to jealousy with a non-people;	God will bring provocations upon His children through evil neighbors who are not even deserving of the title "nation"
I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.	Unlike the curses, which describe "a nation from afar, from the end of the earth" (i.e., a world power)
For a fire is kindled in My anger,	The fire of a terrible war that will engulf the land and its produce
And it shall burn to the nethermost parts of world And consume the earth and its produce	The nether world, the realm of the dead
And set on fire the foundations of the mountains.	To the furthest fields that are at the foundations (i.e., the feet) of the mountains.
I will heap troubles upon them; I will spend My arrows on them	I will add troubles of war (and of siege).
They shall be sucked empty by hunger (<i>mezei ra'av</i>) and devoured by burning heat	The word <i>mezei</i> appears only once in the entire <i>Tanakh</i> (Rashi); <i>mizez</i> = sucked out (as per the Arabic). They will be devoured by hunger heat

	and wounded by the burning arrows of war.
And with bitter destruction	Masses will die of plagues that break out particularly in wars involving siege.
I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, With the poison of things crawling in the dust.	Beasts and animals that crawl upon the earth – crocodiles, snakes and other beasts – are a well-known metaphor for enemy armies (Rambam, <i>Hilkhot Melakhim</i> 12:1)
The sword from without, and terror from within, Will slay both the young man and the virgin,	In siege warfare, the sword slays on the outside while terror reigns and slays on the inside,
The suckling also with the man of grey hairs.	Making no distinction between soldiers, women, babies and old people.
I said, I would scatter them into the corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men	I had thought to scatter them to the corners – the unclaimed, ownerless places, like the corner left in a field (Rashi); the ends of the earth (R. Hayyuj in Ibn Janah's <i>Sefer Ha-shorashim</i>). According to Rashi, this is just a thought; according to Ramban, this is what transpired in reality, in exile. However, memory persists, as in the next verse. Human existence is built on remembrance that is conveyed from generation to generation.
Were it not for the heaped-up wrath of the enemy	The same principle invoked by Moshe in his prayers on behalf of the nation following the Sins of the Golden Calf and the Spies (<i>Shemot</i> 32:12, <i>Bamidbar</i> 14:13-16).
Lest their adversaries should misinterpret: Lest they say, Our hand is high, And the Lord has not done all this.	The enemies might deny or misinterpret the reality of God's providence over Israel. Therefore, in order that they will not take pride in their victory, the continued existence of Israel is assured at all times, in any situation, because Israel is God's nation.
For they are a nation void of etzot; neither is there any understanding in them. O that they were wise, that they understood this;	The word <i>etza</i> (counsel) is used in <i>Tanakh</i> to mean a combination of wisdom and morality.
That they would consider their latter end! How should one man chase a thousand, and	The nation's latter end is its historical fate. Moral insight teaches us that defeat begins with inner disintegration and the hiding of God's face. It is not the quantitative

two put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them and the Lord had shut them up?	military advantage that establishes victory, but the flight of those defeated, after they have lost their inner strength – their faith and confidence in God. God leaves His people vulnerable because of their sins, for He is the source of truth and justice.
For their rock is not like our Rock	They believe that “their rock” will never act against them,
And our enemies [are] judges	Our enemies judge us, concluding that God has given us into their hands. A different interpretation reads the second part of the verse as paralleling the first: but our enemies are not judges (Ibn Ezra).
For their vine is of the vine of Sedom, and of the fields of Amora	Another explanation: our enemies are judged as criminals because they are as evil, cruel and proud as the people of Sedom and Amora.
Their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter.	Clusters of bitter grapes will bring an end to the enemy, like Sedom and Amora.
Their wine is crocodiles' fierceness and asps' cruel venom.	The cruelty of the enemies is like the fierceness of crocodiles and the poison of snakes, and that is the intoxication of their wine.
Is this not laid up in store with Me, sealed up among My treasures?	The accounting of blood will be made at the time that is a secret known only to God, as His treasure.
Mine is vengeance and recompense	God will repay the nations for their cruelty.
At the time when their foot slides;	At the appointed time, when their stability is undermined and they collapse
For the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.	The punishment that awaits them will come quickly.
For the Lord shall judge His people	At that time God will judge His people mercifully and wreak vengeance on the nations (Ibn Ezra)
And reconsider His servants.	God will bring the harsh judgment against Israel, His servants, to an end.
When He sees that their strength is gone	They can no longer stand their suffering.
And there is none shut up, nor left free.	They have no source of salvation or help; no jailer who could free them.

And he shall say, Where are their gods; their rock in whom they trusted?	According to Saadia, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Ramban, it is the enemy who asks: where is the Lord God of Israel? (Once again, the theme is that God saves Israel for the sake of His Name, lest the nations scorn and scoff.)
Those who ate of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offerings?	They will speak of God using pagan concepts that express scorn and disrespect for God, as though He eats sacrifices and drinks libations, but fails to deliver the people.
Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection.	According to Rashi, it is God Who says all of this concerning the pagan gods, who will offer no help or concealment, nor bring salvation to the nations.
See now that I – even I – am He	At the time of deliverance, as during the plagues in Egypt, everyone will recognize that God is the Lord (<i>Shemot</i> 7:11).
And there is no god with Me.	And there is none other but Him (<i>Devarim</i> 4:35)
I kill and I bring to life	This is perhaps an allusion to the plagues of Egypt:
I wound and I heal	It was only by God's command that the plagues appeared, and only at His command that the Egyptians were healed.
And there is none that can deliver out of My hand.	There was no other way that the Egyptians could ease or remove the plagues, and there could be no relief until they let the Israelites go.
For I lift up My hand to heaven	God lifts up His mighty arm to heaven, in the manner of someone taking an oath.
And say, I live forever.	God swears (By His eternal life) that He is committed to saving Israel.
I have sharpened My glittering sword, and My hand grasps judgment; I will render vengeance to My enemies and repay those who hate Me.	God's sword is ready, and His mighty arm grasps the judgment of repaying the evil of the enemies.
I will make My arrows drunk with blood	Arrows dispatched by God in the war of retribution and salvation, will be as if intoxicated.
And My sword shall devour flesh, with the blood of slain and captives, by the head of the enemy's wild bands.	The captives and leaders of the enemy will be led forth by a head count. (Rashi explains these words as a promise that the enemy will pay a price for the head, the inception, of their persecution of Israel.)
Rejoice, O nations, with His people	This is a call to the nations: Proclaim God's salvation of His people; praise Him! (Ibn Ezra)

For He will avenge the blood of His servants, and will render vengeance to His adversaries And will forgive His land, and His people.	God will atone for His land and His people (Saadia & Rashi); purify His people upon His land (Ibn Ezra); atone for the blood of His people spilled in His land (Rashbam). Some say: He will wipe away the tears of His people, cf. <i>Yeshayahu</i> 25:8 – “He will destroy death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and He shall remove the insult of His people from off all the earth, for the Lord has spoken it.”
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Translated by Kaeren Fish

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