DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ha'Azinu

The Power of Song

This week's portion, Ha'azinu, is the penultimate portion of the Torah. The first half contains Moses' final speech to the Jewish people—but unlike the speeches that make up the rest of Deuteronomy, this one is delivered in the form of a poem. After reciting the poem, which includes both praise of God and warnings about the punishments that will befall the Jewish people if they fail to follow His commandments, Moses instructs the people to remember these words and take them to heart:

דברים לב:מד-מו (מד) וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַשִּׁירָה־הַזֹּאת בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם הוּא וְהוֹשֵׁעַ בִּן־נוּן: (מה) וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה לְדַבֵּר אֶת־כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: (מו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם שִׂימוּ לְבַבְכֶם לְכָל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מֵעִיד בָּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר תְּצַוֻּם אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם לִשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:	**Deuteronomy 32:44-46** (44) Moses came, together with Hosea son of Nun, and recited all the words of this poem in the hearing of the people. (45) And when Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, (46) he said to them: Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children, that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching.

- **Why might the Torah emphasize both that Moses recited the poem "in the hearing of the people" and that he delivered it "to all Israel"? What might each phrase add?**
- **Can you think of an important lesson or piece of advice you received from a parent or parental figure? Why has it stayed with you?**

An obvious question raised by this portion is why Moses chose to deliver his final speech as a poem rather than in his usual prose. One possible answer is purely practical: the verses themselves emphasize that Moses wanted these words to be remembered, and poems and songs are often easier to memorize. The Talmud, the record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, highlights this quality in Tractate Megillah:

מגילה דף לב עמוד א וְאָמַר רַבִּי שְׁפַטְיָה אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: כָּל הַקּוֹרֵא בְּלֹא נְעִימָה וְשׁוֹנֶה בְּלֹא זְמִרָה, עָלָיו הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר: ”וְגַם אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים וּגוֹ׳”.	**Megillah 32a** And Rabbi Shefatya said that Rabbi Yochanan said: Concerning anyone who reads from the Torah without a melody or studies the Mishna without a song, the verse states: “So too I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live” (Ezekiel 20:25)... as the tune helps him remember what he has learned.

- **What do you think Rabbi Yochanan is suggesting about the value of learning with a tune when he applies this verse from Ezekiel to someone who learns without one?**
- **Can you remember a time when someone taught you something using a tune to help you memorize it? How much of it can you still remember today?**

Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne, a contemporary Torah scholar who also holds a doctorate in literature, offers a different explanation for Moses’ choice of form. She argues that poetry is uniquely suited to the purpose of Ha’azinu, which she understands as helping the Jewish people grasp God in a deeper way:

Sometimes You Need a Good Poem
Ha'azinu is a poem because there is no other language one could possibly use to talk about God’s own experiences… Moshe is getting ready to turn over his leadership to Yehoshua, the people are getting ready to enter the land of Israel, and their relationship with God is about to change dramatically. The previous two parshiot, Nitzavim and Vayelech, have been about reaffirming God’s covenant with Israel. To be in a covenantal relationship with another, even — or maybe even especially — when that other is God, requires a certain amount of mutual understanding. God understands God’s people. But do God’s people understand God? This is the gift that Moshe offers the Israelites, and us, in Ha'azinu. Because poetry allows one to express the ineffable, the language of Ha'azinu can speak about God’s experiences and feelings in ways that are inherently figurative, and therefore graspable by other humans…If we cannot understand God’s experiences, how can we be in relationship with God?

- **Rabbanit Dr. Shayne writes that being in a covenantal relationship “requires**

a certain amount of mutual understanding." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

- **Can you think of a poem that gave you access to a perspective you wouldn't otherwise have been able to understand?**

Though he was not speaking specifically about Ha'azinu, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov—one of the early masters of the Hasidic movement—also wrote about the unique spiritual power of song.

שיחות הר"ן ערג אָמַר: טוֹב לְהָאָדָם לְהַרְגִּיל אֶת עַצְמוֹ שֶׁיּוּכַל לְהַחֲיוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ עִם אֵיזֶה נִגּוּן. כִּי נִגּוּן הוּא דָּבָר גָּדוֹל וְגָבוֹהַּ מְאֹד מְאֹד, וְיֵשׁ לוֹ כֹּחַ גָּדוֹל לְעוֹרֵר וּלְהַמְשִׁיךְ אֶת לֵב הָאָדָם לְהַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ. וְאַפִלּוּ מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְנַגֵּן, אַף עַל פִּי כֵן בְּבֵיתוֹ וּבֵינוֹ לְבֵין עַצְמוֹ יוּכַל לְהַחֲיוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ בְּאֵיזֶה נִגּוּן כְּפִי שֶׁיּוּכַל לְזַמֵּר אוֹתוֹ, כִּי מַעֲלַת הַנִּגּוּן אֵין לְשַׁעֵר.	**Sichot HaRan 273** The Rebbe said, "It is good to make a habit of inspiring yourself with a melody. "Song is a great elevated concept. It can arouse your heart and draw it toward God. "Even if you cannot sing well, you can still inspire yourself with a melody sung to the best of your ability while alone or at home. The loftiness of melody is beyond all measure."

- **Based on this source and the qualities Rebbe Nachman attributes to song, why might Moses have chosen to deliver his final speech in verse?**
- **Can you think of a musical experience that felt transcendent in the way Rebbe Nachman describes? If that description does not resonate with you, how would you characterize your own relationship with music?**

Up to this point, we have explored reasons why Moses might have chosen to deliver this particular speech in verse. A comment by the 19th-century rabbi known as the Netziv, however, suggests a broader perspective. The Netziv, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, was a Lithuanian rabbi and one of the leading Torah scholars of his time. In the introduction to his commentary on the Torah, he reflects on an earlier rabbinic teaching that describes the entire Torah as a kind of song.

העמק דבר על בראשית, קדמת העמק ג הא מיהא יש להבין היאך נקרא כה"ת שירה. והרי לא נכתבה בלשון של שירה. אלא ע"כ יש בה טבע	**Haamek Davar on Genesis, Kidmat Ha'Emek 3** In any case, we must understand how the

וסגולת השירה.	entire Torah can be called "song" since it was not written in the language of poetry. Rather, it must be that it possesses the nature and the special quality of song.

- **Based on the other sources we have studied, how would you describe what the Netziv calls “the nature and special quality of song”?**
- **Using that definition, can you think of something that is neither a song nor a poem but still shares those qualities?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. After seeing the Netziv’s broader understanding of *shira*, how would you now answer the original question of why Moses chose to deliver his final speech as a poem?
2. In Hebrew, the same word, *shira*, can mean both song and poem. What might be gained by combining those ideas in a single word? What might be lost?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you, and what is one question you are still left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Ha’azinu, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Ha’azinu page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also see Sefaria’s Ha’azinu topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria’s topic pages on Poetry, Songs, Music, and Moses.

The excerpt from Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne came from a longer article, which provides a more in-depth analysis of Ha’azinu. The full piece can be found here.

The song that makes up the first half of Ha’azinu is one of a number of songs that can be found throughout the Torah. One of the most famous is the Song of the Sea, which Moses and the people of Israel sang after the Splitting of the Sea. If you would like to read the text of that song, and explore commentaries on it, you can find them here on Sefaria, with English translation.

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