

Parshat Haazinu: Sometimes You Need a Good Poem Dr. Liz Shayne

Once upon a time I hated poetry. Not all poetry, of course: I thought Shel Silverstein was brilliant and I actually *memorized* the portentous poems from my favorite novels, but I just didn't "get" most poetry. It took me a long time to realize that poetry wasn't about "getting" anything, but about trying to convey, through language, exactly those sorts of things that cannot be conveyed through language. For example, ordinary speech fails to capture the experience of summer ending, but Keats' poem, "To Autumn," succeeds where prose fails. Poetry is what we turn to when familiar words are not enough and we need the strangeness of rhythm and metaphor to capture not just what is seen, but what is felt. So when faced with a parasha like Ha'azinu, a parasha that is a poem that extends across six of the seven aliyot, the question we ought to ask is "what is the Torah saying here that cannot be said in prose?"

Shirat Ha'azinu, the Song or Poem of Ha'azinu, is a familiar story. The poem begins with God's choice of the Jewish people, then goes on to talk about God's care for us, our rebellion, our punishment, and God's refusal to destroy us completely. It is a story about the future, but it is also reminiscent of a story whose climactic language appears in the selichot we say every weekday morning this time of year. The language of Ha'azinu sounds very similar to how Moshe talks about the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden Calf.

In Ki Tisa, God says that the Children of Israel turned from God's commandments and worshipped idols.

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'
 . . . Now, let Me be, that I may grow angry at them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation."
 (Shemot 32:8, 10)

וְרוּמְהָר מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם
 עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ
 וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי הָיִךְ
 יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵינוּךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם .
 . . וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וַיַּחֲרֹאֲפֵי בָהֶם
 וַאֲכַלְמֶם וַאֲעַשֶׂה אוֹתְךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל:
 (שמות לב:ח,י)

The language here focuses on how the Israelites turn away from God and towards idol worship. There is betrayal and loss, but the nation are the only ones taking action.

In contrast, our parasha uses similar figurative language to describe God's reaction to the Israelites' betrayal.

[God] said: I will hide My countenance from them, And see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them. They incensed Me with no-gods, vexed Me with their futilities; I'll incense them with a no-folk, vex them with a nation of fools. (Devarim 32:19-20)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱסָתִירָה פְּנֵי מַחֲמָה אֶרְאֶה מֶה
 אַחֲרֵיהֶם כִּי דוֹר תִּהְיֶהכֶת הַמָּה בָּנִים
 לֹא־אֱמַן בָּם: הֵם קִנְאוּנִי בְלֹא־אֵל כַּעֲסוּנִי
 בְּהַבְלִיָּהֶם וַאֲנִי אֶקְנִיאֵם בְּלֹא־עָם בְּגוֹי
 נָבֵל אֶכְעִיָּסֶם: (דברים כב:יט-כ)

Both parshiot talk about turning away as the people turn from God and God hides from the people. And both verses discuss the possibility of abandoning the Israelites out of anger. The events described in both sections are similar, but there are also key differences in how the situations are presented.

In the example from the sin of the golden calf, we are told very little about God's experience of the situation. God's anger is described as a choice, as if God is not angry unless Moshe steps out of the way. For all that the people have sinned, the account of the sin of the golden calf is about Moshe's feelings and experiences. Although God asks to grow angry at the people, it is Moshe who is actually angry, ויחר־אף משה in 32:19. In our parasha, however, it is God whose feelings we come to know. הִם "they incensed me, vexed me". There are other similarities between Ha'azinu and Ki Tisa, including God's recognition that he ought not punish the Jewish people lest the nations of the world judge God unfavorably, but the shift in perspective remains throughout. In Ki Tisa, Moshe tells God explicitly not to punish the Israelites, while in Ha'azinu, God comes to that conclusion alone. So although Moshe is the one speaking, he has shifted his emphasis from relaying God's words to describing God's emotions and experiences. To do so, he turns to poetry.

Ha'azinu is a poem because there is no other language one could possibly use to talk about God's own experiences. Our parasha uses an extraordinary number of metaphors, including comparing Israel to the pupil of the eye and God to the eyelid (32:10), to attempt to capture what the future will be like for God as God watches us sin and regret and repent and sin again. 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. Ha'azinu is not a comfortable parasha to read because God's experiences with us are not comfortable experiences. But, as we know full well from the Yamim Noraim, uncomfortable conversations can be necessary in order to move forward in relationships. So that is precisely the reason Moshe recites this poem for the Jewish people: if we cannot understand God's experiences, how can we be in relationship with God?

Poetry is how we build relationships. We write love poems, angry poems, liturgical poems for Yom Kippur, and laments for Tisha B'Av. We turn to poetry when our feelings explode beyond the boundaries of ordinary language. Ha'azinu is not, at first glance, a love poem, but it I think we can read the intent behind it as a poem that comes from love. God could remain cold, remote, and incomprehensible, but chooses not to. Instead, God reaches out to us using the only language we have that can bridge the gap between wildly different experiences. Through poetry.



Dr. Liz Shayne holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara where she did her doctoral research on how digital editions are changing the way we feel and experience books. She is a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar. Liz received her B.A. in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania and she has taught lectures and classes on topics ranging from the history of the Gemara to technology in science fiction. Liz and her family now live in Riverdale.