



DEVARIM

Haazinu

The Last Song

September 22, 2018

THE LAST SONG

ABSTRACT

If you knew that today was the last day of your life what would be your final words? What tone would you use?

That question is answered for us in this week's Torah portion: As we approach the end of the Torah, we find that the last message from Moses, delivered to the people of Israel on the last day of his earthly life, is ... a song.

Why? Why, after so many chapters and verses, is this one a song? What is the hidden relevance here?

It's an unbelievable scene: The greatest man that ever lived, the only one that ever spoke to God face to face, is about to return his soul to his Maker. He is speaking his last words to his beloved people. What does he say? He breaks out in ... song!

Clearly Moses felt that delivering his last instructions in a song was absolutely critical for getting his message across. But why, of all things, would a song be Moses' final goodbye?

This sermon explains how a song – the song of *Haazinu* – captures the essence and heart of the entire Torah. How a song can dissolve doubt ... how it can get a message across in ways no words can ... how it can give wings to our souls.

How fitting is it that we read the song in these days when we move from the Days of Awe to the celebration and song of Sukkot.

1. From Awe to Joy

Gut Shabbos. This period in time – between Yom Kippur and Sukkot – is very special.

One of the reasons Sukkot comes after the Days of Awe of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is because on Sukkot we celebrate that which we have experienced with awe during the High Holidays.

The Jewish calendar is fascinating in its mirroring the cycles of life's journey. In our instance – the journey from awe to joy.

When you stand before the King – the King of all Kings – even though you are happy inside, you don't dance and sing. You stand with respect and awe, honored by the gift of standing be-

fore you Creator, who has given – and continues to give and bless – you and your family life, health, livelihood and all the good things we need and desire

But then comes Sukkot. As we leave the King’s palace, we burst out in a joyous celebration over the fact that we have met the King and have been blessed with a sweet and healthy year.

How fitting is it then that the Torah chapter we read today – as we move from the days of awe into Sukkot – is actually a song!

So let us speak about this special song – the song of *Haazinu*, which Moses sang as part of his last words to his beloved Jewish people.

2. Swan Song (Optional Opening)

Have you ever heard of the expression “swan song”?

It is a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance given just before death or retirement. The phrase refers to a myth that the swan is completely silent during its lifetime until the moment just before death, when it sings one beautiful song. This myth originated in ancient Greece and was reiterated many times in later Western poetry and art.

The 16th century poet, Orlando Gibbons, captures the legend in his *The Silver Swan*:

The silver swan, who living had no note,
when death approached, unlocked her silent throat.
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:
“Farewell, all joys! O death, come close mine eyes!”
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.

As well, Lord Alfred Tennyson’s poem *The Dying Swan* is a poetic evocation of the beauty of the supposed song and so full of detail as to imply that he had actually heard it:

The wild swan’s death-hymn took the soul
Of that waste place with joy
Hidden in sorrow: at first to the ear
The warble was low, and full and clear ...
But anon her awful jubilant voice,

With a music strange and manifold,
Flow'd forth on a carol free and bold;
As when a mighty people rejoice
With shawms, and with cymbals, and harps of gold...

Samuel Taylor Coleridge made comic use of this legend when he quipped ironically:

“Swans sing before they die – ‘t were no bad thing
Should certain persons die before they sing.

3. Troublemakers (Humor)

The two schlimazels in town, Yankel and Shmerel, end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. They witness a bank robbery and get themselves captured by ruthless gangsters, who drag them back to their lair and then line them up before their firing squad.

“Do you have any last request before you die?” asks the ringleader.

Yankel immediately responds that he would like to sing a song, and he proceeds to serenade, with all the gangsters laughing on.

Shmerel yells at him: “What are you doing?!”

Yankel replies, “Whenever I’m nervous I sing.”

With a terrified look in his eyes, Shmerel blurts out: “Stop singing right now before you get us into trouble...”

It seems there is a time to sing and a time not to sing.

Moses chose his final moments to be a time to sing.

4. Parshat Haazinu

If *you* knew that today was the last day of your life what would be your final words? What tone would you use?

That question is answered for us in this week's Torah portion.

As we approach the end of the Torah, it seems surprising that the last message from Moses, delivered to the people of Israel on the last day of his earthly life, is ... a song.¹

What is its significance, and why – after so many chapters and verses – is this one a song?

Why did Moses, on the last day of life, decide to sing?

Indeed, Don Issac Abarabanel, the great Spanish biblical commentator, writes that Moses sang this song three times – first to those around him², second to the elders³, and third to the entire nation.⁴

Clearly, it has special meaning, particularly considering that right before he began to sing, he commanded us to write down the words and memorize them.⁵

So what is this all about? Why of all things would a song be Moses' final goodbye?

What is the hidden relevance here?

5. Torah's Relevance

Of course, all of Torah is relevant. The word "Torah" means "instruction" – so the Torah is an instruction manual for life.

But its relevance takes on acute proportions when we hear that the great Moses – the only man who ever spoke to God face to face⁶ – is delivering his last statement to the Jewish people on the last day of his life.

Imagine anyone giving his final instructions to his loved ones, knowing that this is the last time

1 As emphasized a number of times in these verses, that this last statement (*Haazinu*) is to be delivered as a song – Deuteronomy 31:19, 21-22, 30 and 32:42. This would be followed, in *Parshat V'zos Ha'Berocho*, by the blessings Moses would bestow on each of the tribes. But *Haazinu* constitutes Moses' final Torah declaration to the entire nation.

2 Deuteronomy 31:22.

3 Deuteronomy 31:28.

4 Deuteronomy 31:30

5 Deuteronomy 31:19. Indeed, we derive from this verse ("write for yourselves this song") the mitzvah of writing the entire Torah. See Sanhedrin 21b; Rambam's Laws of Sefer Torah 7:1.

6 Deuteronomy 34:10.

that he will ever speak to them!

And it's an unbelievable scene: Moses is about to leave his people, and he breaks out in ... song.

Clearly Moses knew that delivering his last instructions as a song was absolutely critical for getting his message across.

6. Pay Attention

Being the last message Moses would speak to the people, on the last day of his life, this song must contain a very vital and all encompassing directive – one that captures the purpose of the entire Torah and everything that Moses stood for.

To better appreciate this song's profound significance, let us examine the closing words of this week's Torah reading, which follow the song:

When Moses finished proclaiming all these words to all Israel he said to them “Pay close attention to all the words to which I bear witness this day, so that you will be able to instruct your children to keep all the words of this Torah carefully. It is not an empty teaching for you. It is *your life*, and with it you will long endure on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.”⁷

What could he mean by the words “it is not an empty teaching”? Who would think so?

As Moses' last formal statement, the song of *Haazinu* is addressing the greatest challenges that would face the people then and for ages – including feeling God's absence⁸, and complacency and indulgence in the face of prosperity⁹. And promising that all our trials and tribulations throughout history are leading to the final grand redemption.¹⁰

In his final moments, Moses was speaking to the people about all the difficulties we would face in our life journeys. And because of this essential message, it was absolutely necessary that it

⁷ Deuteronomy 32:45-47.

⁸ “I will hide My face from them,” Deuteronomy 32:20.

⁹ “Jeshurun thus became fat and rebelled. You grew fat, thick and gross,” Deuteronomy 32:15.

¹⁰ See Ramban and Tzror Ha'Mor at the end of Haazinu.

be delivered in the form of a *song*. As the Torah emphasizes:

“On that day I will utterly hide My face ... Now write for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites. Make them memorize it, so that this song will be a witness for the Israelites.”¹¹

What is the connection between God’s hidden face and “now write for yourselves this song”? It is nothing less than the antidote to the concealment of God’s face.

And what better way to get the people’s attention than to sing a song? What better way to show personal relevance than to touch all hearts with a melody? What more powerful way to give strength to the people?

For there is nothing more empowering – when it comes to engaging the heart – than a song.

7. Collar or Song (Chassidic Story)

In the early years of his leadership, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, would expound his teachings in the form of short homiletic sayings. One of these early short discourses was based on the Talmudic passage, “All bearers of collars go out with a collar and are drawn by a collar.”¹²

The Talmud is discussing here the laws of Shabbat, and how farmers are allowed to take their animals in by the collars (or harnesses) and bring them in the same way. But the Hebrew word the Talmud uses for “collar,” *shir*, can also mean “song.” Thus Rabbi Schneur Zalman interpreted the Talmud’s words as:

The masters of song – the souls and the angels – go out in song and are drawn by song. Their going out in yearning for God, and their drawing back into their own existence, in order to fulfill the purpose of their creation, are by means of song and melody.

This was in the early years of the Chassidic Movement, when the opposition to Chassidism by many mainstream rabbis and scholars was still quite strong. And the opponents, not surprisingly, ridiculed Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s interpretation.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 31:18-19.

¹² Shabbat 51b.

At about this time, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was passing through Shklov, which was a bastion of opposition, and while there he was invited to speak, since even his most vehement critics acknowledged his genius and greatness in Torah.

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman ascended the podium at the central study hall of Shklov, the large room was filled to overflowing. Virtually all the town's scholars were there. Some had come to hear the Rebbe speak, but most hoped to humiliate the Chassidic leader by asking him questions they were sure he could not answer.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman began to speak: "The masters of song, the souls and the angels, all go out in song and are drawn by song ..." And then he began to sing.

The room fell utterly silent. All were caught in the thrall of the melody, a melody of yearning and resolve, of ascent and retreat. As the Rebbe sang, every man in the room felt himself transported from the crowded hall to the innermost recesses of his own mind, where a man is alone with the confusion of his thoughts, alone with his questions and doubts. Only the confusion was gradually being dispelled, the doubts resolved. By the time the Rebbe finished singing, all the questions in the room had been answered.

Among those present in the Shklov study hall that day was one of the town's foremost prodigies, Rabbi Yosef Kolbo. Many years later, Rabbi Yosef related: "I came to the study hall that day with four extremely difficult questions – questions I had put forth to the leading scholars of Vilna and Slutsk, to no avail. When the Rebbe began to sing, the knots in my mind began to unravel, the concepts began to crystallize and fall into place. One by one, my questions fell away. When the Rebbe finished singing, everything was clear. I felt like a newly-born child beholding the world for the very first time. And that was also the day I became a Chassid."¹³

8. The Power of Music (Kabbalistic Insight)

What gives music its power? How does it have the ability to resolve doubts ... lift broken spirits ... transport us to another time and place? Why does a song have the capacity to reach the depths of our hearts?

13 Adapted from a translation by Rabbi Yanki Tauber; originally related by the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn.

The mystics explain it this way: A song gives wings to the soul.

Bodies move about on legs or in vehicles. But a soul doesn't have legs and cannot be contained in an automobile or other vehicle. The only way a soul can move about is through a song. Without song, the soul remains stuck in one place.

The reason song has the ability to transport the soul is because its true nature and the source of its power is its divine language – in short, song is a dialect from another plane. If the conventional word is the language of man, music is the language of the Divine.

Being the wings of the soul, songs have the power to lift our spirits to unprecedented heights. They allow us to fly ... to soar away to far-away places – places that are beyond pedestrian life and mundane monotony.

Thus song is spiritual transportation. As the Chassidic masters put it: “The spoken and written word is the quill of the mind. Music is the quill of the heart.” If a soul looks like a flame, it sounds like a song.

9. Words vs. Songs

Imagine if as children we were taught in songs instead of words ... if all the instructions, discipline and guidance we received would be set to a melody instead of being delivered as raspy orders and commands ... what a different impact they would have?

Words can be rich but they also can be empty. Song is always resplendent with vitality and passion.

And song also instills confidence.

Some armies of old had a custom to march out to war singing a victory song. They hadn't yet fought their first battle, yet they were already singing a victory march! The song of victory infused them with courage and confidence that they surely will win any battle they wage.

As his last statement to the Jewish people, on the last day of his life, Moses deliberately (and dramatically) broke out into a victory song to send a message to the people alive then and those who would come after them through the generations – and it was a message that they would never forget.

Haazinu is a song that testifies and bears witness for all generations to come about the relevance and indispensability of Torah and Mitzvos – “it is your life” – under all circumstances. In other words, this song imbues the entire Torah with vitality and life.¹⁴

Moses sang: “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak! And let the earth hear the words of my mouth.” And thus he demonstrated that all of Torah is truly a song – a lively and dynamic symphony of life.

10. Talented Parrots (Joke)

And speaking of symphonies:

A guy walks into a pet store wanting to buy a parrot. The store clerk shows him two beautiful ones out on the floor. “This one’s \$5,000 and the other is \$10,000,” the clerk says.

“Wow! What does the \$5,000 one do?”

“This parrot can sing every aria Mozart ever wrote.”

“And the other?” said the customer.

“This one can sing Wagner’s entire Ring cycle.”

Do you have any others?

There’s another one in the back room for \$30,000.”

“Holy moly! What does that one do?”

“Nothing that I can tell, but the other two parrots call him ‘Maestro’.”

¹⁴ It’s also interesting to note that the entire song of *Haazinu* (this week’s entire Torah portion) consists of only one chapter – chapter 32, the numerical equivalent for the Hebrew word “lev” (lamed beit), heart. This hints to the fact that this song is the heart – the music that lifts the heart – of the entire Torah, which itself is compared to a heart, as it begins with a beit (Beresishit) and ends with a lamed (Yisroel). See *Otiyot D’Rabbi Akiva* ois beit at the end.

11. Antidote

[But] *Haazinu* is even more than a symphony. “This song will be a witness:” *Haazinu* is no less than an antidote to the concealment of God’s face.

It is the solution to the existential loneliness and all the challenges life brings us, to all the despair and fear we feel – all the injustices and pain we inflict on each other – all resulting from God’s hidden face.

No matter what challenges you will face, no matter how difficult and harsh life may be – even when God’s face may be completely concealed to you – always know that your life is a song. All the steps of your life’s journey – even the sadder and painful legs, the “evils and troubles”¹⁵ – are measures and stanzas of a greater melody leading to redemption!¹⁶

By singing these verses Moses was infusing all the people of Israel then and for all time with the strength and confidence that no matter what we endure, our journey is a victory march to freedom. Never despair, because “this song” – the Torah – will always be etched within you and your memory. It will always be a witness – together with heaven and earth – bearing testimony for eternity.

Song and melody is the only appropriate response to harshness and difficulties. By singing these verses Moses was demonstrating that the Torah is essential a song – not mere words. A melody – not a speech. The soul’s music – not merely mechanical laws.

12. Some Sing to Remember

Some sing to remember. Some sing to forget.

Moses was not shying away from the difficulties of life by escaping into song. Quite to the contrary, the song he sang is filled with some harsh terms, reflecting the difficulties that life and history would bring to the Jewish people. But the tone and spirit of his message is musical: all of life, even the setbacks, are part of the symphony.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 31:21.

¹⁶ See Tzror HaMor at end of *Vayeilech*: “Moses then proclaimed the words of this song to the entire assembly of Israel until it was completed” demonstrate that this song “encompasses the entire Torah, and it includes within it the words of all the prophets, and everything that will transpire to the Jewish people in the future in their exiles and their redemption.”

Indeed, often the more painful moments bring out the most beautiful song. For example, King David wrote some of his most beautiful psalms after heartache.

Every setback is not meant to bring us down, but an opportunity to evoke in us a deeper melody.

We are like a tea bag: You don't know how strong someone is until you put him into hot water.

And what better time of the year to hear this message than after we have cleansed and sanctified our lives on Yom Kippur and are preparing for the celebration of Sukkot?

Empowered by the song of *Haazinu* we enter the "time of our rejoicing" on Sukkot with an exuberant song and dance.

So let us sing to our children and to our selves. Let us make sure that the timeless instructions of the Torah do not fall as empty words on deaf ears. Let us make sure that they are like music to our ears ... like a song ... saturated with life and energy, entering and transforming our hearts and souls.

For as heaven and earth are our witness, we have been singing this song now for 3291 years since the day Moses first sang it. Let us make sure that our children and their children, for generations to come, continue singing the song, as we march into the redemption speedily in our day. Amen.

Shabbat shalom and a Happy Sukkot!

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