Yeshivat Har Etzion

Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Introduction to Parashat HaShavua

Parashat Haazinu

Structure and Themes

By Michael Hattin

Introduction

At last ready to take his leave from the people for the final time, Moshe departs from the conventional approach that he has employed throughout the rest of Sefer Devarim. Containing neither a review of mitzvot, nor straightforward words of exhortation and warning as we have typically encountered in the remainder of this Book, the Parasha of Haazinu is instead composed in the form of a song. Eschewing readily comprehensible prose, the 'Shira' (song) rather relies upon poetic metaphor, meter, and sometimes-obscure imagery to drive home its timeless and profound message. This week we shall study some of the pertinent themes of this song, viewing them in particular through the enlightening prism of Ramban's (13th century, Spain) commentary.

Six Sections – Deconstructing the Song

Although it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact references of some of the Song's allusions, nevertheless a general structure of its subject matter can be outlined. It would be useful to first peruse the text of the Song, found in Chapter 32, verses 1- 43 of Sefer Devarim, while bearing in mind that there is much discussion among the primary sources and the commentaries concerning the exact meaning and import of specific phrases. Consider also that the commentaries have made various plausible attempts to break down the Song into its component sections, and the following approach should therefore not be viewed as definitive, but rather as a constructive tool for organizing the Song's themes.

The first section, verses one through six (1 – 6), serve as an introduction. In these verses, Moshe invokes the names of heaven and earth as his 'witnesses,' and proceeds to proclaim God's greatness, as well as His justice. His children, the people of Israel, are at fault, for the generation that God sustained and nurtured has repaid His kindness with ingratitude.

In section two, verses seven through twelve (7 – 12), Moshe exhorts the people to remember the days of old, to ponder the events of earlier times. He describes how God chose the people of Israel from among the other nations as His own, and assigned them a unique mission. Turning to the experience of the Wilderness, Moshe recalls God's providential care of the people, how He shielded them in His protective embrace from a barren environment that was hostile and hazardous.

Thus far, Moshe's has described events in the past, both distant as well as recent. The remaining sections, in which he employs the medium of prophecy, relate to events after Moshe's lifetime, as he sees them unfold in his mind's eye. However, since for the Prophet, past, present and future are perceived as progressing along the same continuum, the grammatical tenses in the Song remain constant throughout.

Thus, in section three, verses thirteen through eighteen (13 – 18), Moshe sees the people enter the land. God causes them to conquer and to settle its 'high places,' and to then partake of and enjoy its choice products: honey, oil, milk, meat, wheat and wine. The people wax fat from all of the goodness that the land graciously bestows, but rather than turning to God in gratitude, they abandon Him and instead worship the alien gods of Canaan as their patrons. Adopting the abominable rituals of those pagan cults, their conduct angers God, as they forget the loving concern of the One Who had fashioned them into a nation.

Section four, verses nineteen through twenty-six (19 – 26), spells out the frightening consequences of the conduct of the people of Israel. God will 'hide His face' from them and they will fall prey to the surrounding nations. Stricken by famine, fever, and plague, the people will be attacked by 'wild beasts' as the iron grip of the besieging enemy closes around their cities. They will be exiled from their land and almost forever lost as a people.

But, a remnant will survive. Section five, verses twenty-seven through thirty-three (27 – 33), describes God's 'reluctant' preservation of His people. The taunts of the enemy, who might otherwise ascribe their victory over Israel to their own strength and to the power of their gods, will paradoxically be the cause of Israel's deliverance. Lacking merits on their own, it will be for the sake of His name that is inextricably bound up with His people, that God will intervene to save. The nations, in turn, will not escape punishment but will drink from the very 'wine of Sodom' that they themselves have poured, for their motivations in attacking Israel were self-interested and self-serving.

Section six, verses thirty-four through forty-three (34 – 43) speaks of God's rescue. When all hope appears to be lost and the very existence of the people of Israel hangs in the balance, when the nations will question God's ability or desire to save and will gloat over their imminent demise, God will show Himself. The One Who alone can kill and bring back to life, the One who crushes and brings healing, will exact vengeance from His foes, for they desired to destroy Israel for their own conceited purposes. On that dreadful Day of Reckoning, God will obliterate the enemies of Israel and they will once more dwell securely in their land.

Reassembling the Sections

Considering the structural outline of the Song, we can appreciate that in fact it is very much telling a coherent tale, namely the history of the Jewish people. It begins with the story of our ancestors, who were selected by God and were first charged with the responsibility of introducing His name and moral laws to the world. That mission was to be achieved by their descendants, who were given the framework of a fertile land in order to realize that goal.

Seduced by the bounty of that land and by the immoral rites and ethical equivocation of its gods, the people of Israel strayed from their exalted but difficult task, and were therefore exiled. Condemned to wandering among the nations, their initial association with the idea of an Absolute God of stern morality and indulgent lovingkindness could not be cast off, for wherever they went in the lands of their dispersion they carried the idea with them.

Although the nations subjected Israel to constant attack, they could not be destroyed, for their demise would have spelled the end of God's interaction with the world. Thus, a remnant always survived, patiently waiting for the day when God would again cause His favor to shine upon them. That day, Moshe assures a people no doubt taken aback by the harshness of his hymn, will one day dawn. The people of Israel will be reconciled with their God and restored to their land, much to the chagrin of their enemies who will perceive in those portentous events their own downfall.

The Ramban – A Biographical Sketch

Moses ben Nachman (1195 – 1270) was born in Gerona, in the province of Aragon. The period during which he lived was pivotal for Spanish Jewry, for at the dawn of the 12th century, much of Northern Spain fell under the sway of the Christian kings who had reconquered it from its Moslem overlords. Additionally, the conquest of Andalusia by the fanatical Moslem Berbers of North Africa in 1148 put many Jews to flight northwards, and as result of these two developments, the centers of Jewish life in Spain changed from Moslem to Christian hands.

While still a youth, Ramban acquired fame as a Talmudic scholar. Combining his Talmudic acumen with philosophical and scientific training, he soon became recognized as the spiritual leader of Spanish Jewry. A prodigious writer, he authored important commentaries on the Talmud and the Chumash, as well as critical comments on the works of the Rif and the Rambam.

In 1263, James the King of Aragon called upon the Ramban to publicly represent the Jews in a debate with a Jewish apostate by the name of Pablo Christiani, whose patron was the head of the Dominican Order of Friars. In the presence of the dignitaries of the Church, Ramban stated his arguments forcefully and convincingly, defending the tenets of the Torah and undermining the leading dogmas of Catholicism. The Dominicans were sufficiently unhappy with the results of the debate to appeal to the Pope for an order of banishment, and James reluctantly sent the Ramban into exile.

Taking the opportunity to fulfill a lifelong dream, the Ramban set his sights for the barren shores of the Land of Israel, and arrived in Jerusalem on the ninth of Elul of the year 1266. Greeted by a landscape of desolation and ruin, he found only two Jews residing permanently within the city's environs. Nevertheless, he made Jerusalem his home and soon a small community of Jews coalesced around his leadership. During the final three years of his life, he completed his commentary on the Chumash. It is useful to keep the above brief biography in mind as we consider the Ramban's words concerning the Shira of Haazinu.

The Commentary of the Ramban on the Shira

"This Song constitutes for us a true and faithful witness, for it explicitly spells out all that will befall us. It begins by describing the act of compassion that God performed by taking us to Him as His portion, and recalls His care of us in the wilderness. He caused us to possess the land of great and powerful nations and we enjoyed goodness, wealth and honor in that place. Becoming complacent and demonstrating ingratitude, we rebelled against God and served idolatry. God responded in anger, and we were stricken with pestilence, famine, wild beasts and the sword, until we were exiled and scattered to every corner of the globe. These historical facts are well known.

"The Song proclaims that in the end, God will exact vengeance from our enemies, for all of their oppressive cruelty had as its underlying motivation a hatred for God, rather than simply an antipathy towards us…

"It is obvious that the final vindication of which the Song speaks refers to the Future Redemption, for its words were not fulfilled at the time of the Return from Babylonian captivity. In fact, political weakness and subservience to foreign kings characterized the beginning of the Second Temple period, and God did not 'atone' for the land of His people at that time.

"Behold, this Song contains no exhortations to return to God and to serve Him. Rather it is a testimonial document attesting to our abandonment of God and His angry response, which will, however, not result in our complete disappearance. God will again have compassion upon us and will severely punish our foes…Thus, the Song constitutes a categorical promise of future redemption, negating the arguments of the heretics who anticipate otherwise (commentary to verse 40).

Conclusion

For the Ramban, the significance of the Song lies in its constituting an unassailable monument to our past, present and future. The Song does not enjoin upon us what we must do, or command us concerning how we should serve God. It contains no mitzvot, and makes no provisos on us to observe the Torah. It states no warnings, and lays down no rewards for observance or punishments for abrogation. It is not even a prayer, for Moshe composes the Song neither in the form of supplication, nor as inspired words of exhortation, but rather as a prophetic statement of the destiny and the eternity of the Jewish people. As such, the Song becomes a text sui generis, for it describes not what ought to be, nor what must be, but rather what will be.

With an inevitability that in no way undermines our freedom to choose otherwise, Moshe proclaims the story of the Jewish people. God has given us a mission in the world, a unique responsibility that sets us apart from all other peoples, but throughout our history we will often oppose that remarkable fact to adopt the worldview and way of life of the other nations. Our attempts to surrender our heritage will never entirely succeed, for though we may stray far from our spiritual moorings, our identity and our destiny will always remain bound up with the name of the God of Israel. Conversely, though mighty nations may rise up with intent to destroy us, they too will not succeed, for with our demise, God's faintly perceived role in the history of humanity would perish as well.

In the end, God will return to His people and return them to His land, if not on account of their merits then for the sake of 'His great Name.' The Jewish people, the only living remnant to have survived from antiquity, is offered the promise of eventual redemption; through their redemption the return of God's presence to the world will also inevitably transpire, and the purpose of Creation will finally be realized.

Shabbat Shalom