"*Ha'azinu*: Israel's sacred 'Song of the Blues'"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The sidrah *Ha'azinu* continues the theme of the Song that Moses was told by God to teach to Israel, and which was to serve as His 'testimony against the Israelites' for having strayed from the covenant in the past, and, prophetically, for doing so in the future (See Deut. 31:19-21).

While, at first thought, it may seem anachronistic for the Torah to have described the account of such rebelliousness as a 'Song,' however, if we consider the modern-day harmonic genre that goes by the name 'blues' we will appreciate the appropriateness of the term. The word connotes 'being sad, depressed or upset about an aspect of one's life or experience'; and blues music, by releasing such feelings within the hearts of artist and listener alike, enables many to wrestle mentally with the perceived or misguided causes of their problem, and attain thereby to a cathartic state of mind. Indeed, one of the claims for blues music is that, more than any other form of music, it possesses the capacity to communicate genuine personal emotion. I would describe *Ha'azinu*, therefore, as 'Israel's sacred song of the blues.'

Let me support this nuance with but one other example from the prophet Isaiah who describes a similar lament over Israel's wrong-doing as ***Shirat*** *dodi l'karmo* – '***a song*** of my lover about his vineyard' (Is. 5:1-7). In this parable, God is the farmer and Israel the vineyard. It is worth quoting in full:

Let me sing for my beloved
A song of my lover about his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a fruitful hill.
He broke the ground, cleared it of stones,
And planted it with choice vines.
He built a watchtower inside it,

He even hewed a wine press in it;
For he hoped it would yield grapes.
Instead, it yielded wild grapes.

"Now, then, you dwellers of Jerusalem
And men of Judah,
You be the judges between Me and My vineyard:
What more could have been done for My vineyard
That I failed to do in it?
Why when I hoped it would yield grapes
Did it yield wild grapes?

"Now I am going to tell you
What I will do to My vineyard:
I will remove its hedge,
That it may be ravaged;
I will break down its wall,
That it may be trampled.
And I will make it a desolation
That it shall not be pruned or hoed,
But it shall be overgrown with briers and thistles.
And I will command the clouds
To drop no rain on it."

Isaiah saw no paradox in referring to his sad parable as 'a song' – by which he meant 'a song of the blues', a song which was meant to be memorised, repeated, reflected on, and taken to heart; a song that was meant to effect change within the soul of every Jew, and to galvanise the nation to repentance. And hence, in the same way, when we 'sing' - loudly, confidently, and passionately - the *Ashamnu* and other 'songs' of confession of sin during our Selichot

and High Holyday services – their lyricism is not to entertain, but to stir and arouse us to repentance, inwardness, contemplation and firm resolve.

In Hasidism, the song - and especially the 'nigun', the song without words – was believed to constitute a powerful stimulus to enable the soul to achieve *devekut,* mystical communion with God. When one's whole body becomes involved in that exercise, through the collective synthesis of nigun and rekidah ('communal circle dancing'), a symbolic expression of the verse, '*'All my bones* declare, 'Lord, who is like unto You?' (Psalm 35:10) is generated. When performed by a Hasidic Rebbe it is believed that all barriers to *devekut* are removed, to the extent that the soul of the latter is enabled to embrace that of the Hasidim hearing him singing the nigun, and who accordingly experience a refinement and spiritual elevation. And hence the significance of sitting at the Rebbe's *tish* ('table'), sharing a morsel of his left-over bread (*shirayim*), hearing his Torah, absorbing his aura, observing his radiance - and listening to his 'sacred songs of the blues.'

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To return to *Ha'azinu*: It commences with Moses invoking heaven and earth to listen attentively to it; for, just as according to our Oral Law, no one may be indicted for a crime unless he or she had been forewarned of its consequences, so heaven and earth – that will exist forever - are to be the eternal and irrefutable witnesses to testify that the nation received its warning, and that punishment for its future defection from God's law will consequently be wholly justified.

The song conforms to the uniform meter of biblical Hebrew poetry wherein an idea is expressed in a hemistich (half-line of verse), and then paralleled by a corresponding idea in the succeeding hemistich. Hence:

האזינו השמים ואדברה	Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;
ותשמע הארץ אמרי פי	Let the earth hear the words I utter (Deut. 32:1).

יערף כמטר לקחי	May my discourse come down as the rain,
תזל כטל אמרתי	My speech distil as the dew (v. 2).

It is a device that we are familiar with from the very first quoted stanza of a biblical poem, describing Lamech, one of earth's earliest inhabitants, who boasted to his wives that he had killed a man in revenge for having wounded him:

עדה וצלה שמען קולי	Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
נשי למך האזנה אמרתי	O wives of Lemech, give ear to my speech.

כי איש הרגתי לפצעי	I have slain a man for wounding me,
וילד לחברתי	And a lad for bruising me (Gen. 4:23)

It will be noticed that Moses' formal invocation of heaven and earth to bear witness to his testimony is a stylistic borrowing from that very song of Lemech – the formulaic prototype – wherein he begins by formally calling on his wives to witness his testimony. The same device occurs in the account of Jacob's final blessing of his children:

הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב	Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob;
ושמעו אל ישראל אביכם	Listen to Israel your father (Gen. 49:2).

Such opening invocations suggest that their intention was to make a formal and binding statement or testimony, the consequences of which should be taken to heart or implemented with all the filial duty attendant upon a death-bed instruction.

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The vocabulary of the *Ha'azinu* soliloquy is rich and interspersed with uncommon poetic expressions. On occasions, however, it is difficult to be sure who is speaking - whether it is God, Moses (as God's mouthpiece), or some other interlocutor – or who is being spoken about!

Verses 1-18 are clearly the words of Moses acting as counsel for the prosecution and reading out the catalogue of summary denunciations of Israel's disloyalty and embrace of 'alien things and abominations' (v. 16), notwithstanding the loving care and indulgence that God dispensed toward her. There follows a transition to a first-person statement of God's verdict (vv. 19-25), namely, that He would hide His face from the nation and visit the direst of punishments upon it, employing a 'measure for measure' tactic (vv. 21). Significantly, the latter verse contains a rare example of biblical sarcasm: 'They incensed me with no-gods…and I shall incense them with a no-folk.'

God then abruptly interrupts the statement of His judicial verdict to reflect upon the danger attendant upon such a punishment of His people, namely the inference that her enemies might make regarding God's weakness and faithlessness should He destroy Israel (vv.26-27).

At this point another voice interjects which refers to God in the third person and speaks in defence of Israel. The references are unclear, however, and although the reader might assume that 'a folk void of sense and lacking in discernment' (v.28) refers to backsliding

Israel, some modern commentators view it as critiquing one of Israel's foreign enemies referred to previously. Its folly, then, would lie in its lack of comprehension that its overwhelming victory over Israel was not due to its strength but to the fact that the latter's '[Divine] Rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up' (v. 30). It goes without saying, however, that there is no reference in the Torah to any such crushing military defeat having been suffered by Israel in the previous forty years!

The song ends with a description, in, admittedly, rather blood-thirsty terms, of the vengeance God will wreak upon Israel's enemies (vv. 40-42), and it calls upon the latter to take the lesson to heart and to 'acclaim His people' (v.43). Granted, such violent terms might not appeal to our modern-day, politically-correct, sensibilities, but, there again, the proliferation of our nuclear weapons is also not too genteel!

Shabbat shalom v'Chag same'ach

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