

## MOSES AS POET: *HA'AZINU* AS POEM

DAN VOGEL

Translators are fond of casting numerous passages of the Torah into poetic form, but the Torah itself calls only three passages *shir* or *shira* [*a song, a poem*]: the Song of the Sea, of course (Ex. 15:1-19:21), sung by Moses and the Israelites; a Song at the Spring of Water (Num. 21:17) sung by the Israelites alone; and *Ha'azinu* (Deut 32:1-43), recited by Moses himself.

Actually, the origin of Moses' individual effort is in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy. There the Lord prophesies the future of the children of Israel: how they will rebel against His ordinances and worship strange gods, how He will hide His face from them and punish them severely, and yet how He will ultimately be reconciled to them. The Israelites, for their sins, have heard these *tokhahot* [chastisements] several times before, quite recently and horrifically, in fact, in Deuteronomy 28. This time, however, this recital of predicted punishments was to form the theme of a poem Moses is instructed to *write down. . . and teach to the people of Israel, put it into their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness for Me against the people of Israel* (Deut. 31:19). If, at this climactic moment, when the Israelites are gathered on the bank of the Jordan ready to cross over to the Promised Land, it was necessary to intone a litany of punishments again, why in the form of a poem? Don Isaac Abravanel tells us why:

Poems are preferable to prose [he says] . . . because most people forget the ordinary prose even if they repeat [the words] day and night. But if they are set to music, sung or played [or recited, since poems have their own rhythm], they will always be remembered by means of their melodies . . . [Poetry] employs hyperbole and metaphor, to alter inner thoughts, [and] figurative language not to be taken literally as it is in real life . . . This is the essence of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

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And so, aiming "to alter inner thoughts": *Then Moses recited the words of this poem, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel to the very end.* (Deut. 31:30).

Although the thought and inspiration behind biblical poetry is God's, the artistry is the poet/prophet's, Abravanel explains; therefore, Moses can be credited with the composition of *Ha'azinu*.<sup>2</sup> His technique is thoroughly modern. It is a masterful display of using objective mechanics of verse and subjective choice of images to communicate underlying themes and embedded meanings. We shall be able to fathom the major aspects of his technique – the music and the imagery – by analyzing it in several verses.

#### DEUTERONOMY 32:1

To begin with, Moses, the great shepherd of his people, goes beyond God's instructions, and begins with words of sweetness:

*Ha'azinu hashamayim v'adaberah*  
/            /            /  
*v'tishmah ha'aretz imrei-fee*

*Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak,  
And let the earth hear the words of my mouth.*

Poetry is meant to be read aloud. A reading of the first verset (the first line) aloud in a natural way, without bombast or portentousness because this is holy biblical verse, will naturally place the accented syllables into a regular pattern:

/            /            /  
*Ha'azinu hashamayim v'adaberah*

The number of syllables in each of the three words in this verset is 4/4/5, the accent falling on the penultimate syllable in each of them, thus forming a climax to both the rhythm and the statement: the very heavens are to serve the intentions of the earthly poet when he speaks.

In the second line, Moses repeats the prosody – the elements of the music of the first verset with only slight variation:

/            /            /  
*v'tishmah ha'aretz imrei-fee*

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Only three syllables in each word, but the accent in the last (run-together) word is on the last syllable, forming a climax, as in Line 1. This time it is the earth that is called upon to bear witness.

Robert Frost once said that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down . . . and ends in a clarification of life . . . in a momentary stay against confusion."<sup>3</sup> The regularity of beat in the first line of Moses' poem is at once a source of delight as it enters the pulse-beat of the listener, and is a promise that the poet is in total control of both the music and the statement. No matter now what shall follow, the listener feels he has a refuge against the confusion, the imponderabilities of life in the very poetry of the poem. A rapport of sensibility, understanding, even of trust is created between listener and poet, an absolutely essential condition if Moses is to convey the intentions of God successfully through a poem.

The first verse is printed above with an unusual feature. Arrows point to corresponding words in the next line. This is called parallelism. Producing paired parallels:

*Give ear      \*\* let . . . hear  
heavens      \*\* the earth  
I will speak    \*\* words of my mouth*

Parallelism is effective rhetoric. It is almost always symmetrical, and symmetry sounds impressive. But, as Harold Fisch emphasizes throughout his book *Poetry with a Purpose*,<sup>4</sup> biblical poetry is not an art for art's sake. The aesthetics of biblical poetizing has a moral and spiritual dimension redolent of its Divine source. Parallelism signifies control and certainty, anticipation and dependability, regarding not only the poet but also the Inspiration behind him.

Moreover, parallelism in *Ha'azinu* marries music to image. The technique is a gesture of the theme. It is another psychological encouragement to the poet/ prophet's listeners to listen, heed, and be persuaded. No wonder that the prophetic style of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the so-called Minor Prophets, and even Solomon in his Proverbs, will in time to come adopt this device of expression.

*Ha'azinu*, to begin with, does not assume an eavesdropper (so to speak) on a private meditation of the poet, nor is it addressed to the listener (Moses does not turn to his listeners until verse 3). The opening verse calls upon the "heavens" to listen. This is hyperbole, as Abravanel calls this aspect of poetic

technique. The image conjured up in the minds of the listeners pictures the blue vault of the heavens personified in a mode of total stillness of motion to hear the poet's words. Why did Moses choose this image in the first place? Why does a poet choose any image for his poem?

First, in most cases, a poet chooses an image familiar to the experience of his listeners. He depends upon familiarity with the object (or mentally-visible action) and appropriateness of analogy to the concept he is dealing with. He hopes for a unanimity of response, so that the embedded implications of the picture will be forthcoming. In general literature, for example, the rose became a symbol of love because of its beauty, delicacy, and pleasing smell – and because it, like the experience of love, has thorns. Similarly, in verse 4 of *Ha'azinu*, Moses uses the common image of a rock, *hatzur tamim poalo* [*the Rock, His work is perfect*], to symbolize the Lord, knowing full well that his Israelites will fill out the implied meanings of "rock" – not only its obvious and familiar solidity, permanence, and steadfastness, but also its silent inherent inscrutability.

Thus the heavens are at once a part of everyone's daily experience as the source of weather, but also the anthropomorphic abode of Almighty God. Heaven automatically represents present time and eternity. It is the symbol of God's omnipotence above space and time. The same is true of the image of the everlasting earth. One can almost imagine the trees and mountains, as well as the howling wilderness, pausing to listen to Moses' words.

But there is one more reason why a poet may chose an image: it has a particular place in the mythos of his listeners, that is, in "The pattern of basic values and historical experiences of a people," their traditional, inherited body of knowledge and truths that are ingrained in their memories.<sup>5</sup> When Moses intoned *hashamayim* and *ha'aretz*, he could be assured that, in addition to all other meanings, echoes from the intellectual experience of the Israelites will almost automatically leap out of the memory of the children of Israel: *When God began to create heaven and earth* – the very words that Moses taught them at the very beginning of his teaching of Torah. How powerful the words of Moses must be if these original creations out of chaos can be commanded to listen to what he is about to say! The image becomes Moses-the-poet's way of suggesting expanded implications that his listeners will infer: that God devoted His Creation to the people He had particularly chosen, that all Creation waited for this incandescent moment when the child-

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ren of Israel will be poised to fulfill their destiny in Canaan. He is not only the God of all Creation, but also the God of History. The certainty implied in the rhythm and parallelism of Moses' lines is strengthened by the implied image of the circle – the children of Israel have ended their journey by going back to the beginning of Time.

Moses is a clever poet, too. He has a distasteful job to do, predicting the backsliding of his people, but it must be done. In the very next verse, he slides into the theme of the poem that God had instructed him to express, quietly obliquely, but eventually disturbingly:

### DEUTERONOMY 32:2

*My doctrine shall drop as the rain,*  
↓      ↓      ↓      ↓  
*My speech shall distill as the dew*  
*As the small rain on the tender grass*  
↓      ↓  
*And as showers upon the herb*

The murmuring parallelism in Deuteronomy 32:2 (see the arrows) certainly fits the pictures conjured in this verse and the previous one. Out of heaven comes light rain [*matar*]. At this point, it emphasizes the soothing and fruitful aspects of rain. But it is a dualistic image. Memory irrepressibly raises its head through allusion to other remembered texts of the Torah, where *matar* is featured negatively. Not too long before, in Deuteronomy 11 (the second paragraph of the daily Shema), Moses preached to the children of Israel their responsibilities once they have entered the land of Canaan. In that peroration, he conveyed God's promise that if they will follow the dictates of the Lord, rain will fall to fructify the earth (Deut. 11:14). But if the Israelites will stray, *lo yih'yeh matar* [*there will be no rain*] (Deut. 11:16 ff.). One can imagine the chilly insidious invasion of remembrance in the minds of the listeners to Moses' *Ha'azinu*.

The image of *matar* may recall even less happy allusions than that.<sup>6</sup> Memory provides the link to *matar* in the Sodom and Gomorrah story: *v'Hashem himtir al Sodom v'al Amora gofrat va'esh me'et Hashem min hashamayim* [*And the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the Lord out of heaven*] (Gen. 19:24) – the same heaven that was so benign in verse 1 of *Ha'azinu*! And, if the Israelites needed a reminder, Moses provides

it later in *Ha'azinu*, in verse 32, where he alludes suddenly and seemingly gratuitously to Sodom and Gomorrah, and enumerates some of the *tokhahot* [punishments] they will suffer if they rebel against the Lord. Thus the Lord repays the evildoer, then and in the future.

The terrors of dualistic imagery are now inescapable: *se'irim* in this same verse 32:2, for example. The word is used uniquely here to mean "fruitful rain." However, everywhere else in the Torah *se'ir* has less favorable meanings: the term names the land God gave to Esau (Gen. 36 and Deut. 2); it is a goat sacrificed as a *sin-offering* in Numbers 7; two *se'irim* are offered to the high priest, one of which he was to select to be sent off into the desert alive and the other to be sacrificed as a *sin-offering* (Lev. 16); Leviticus 17:7 enjoins the children of Israel: *they may offer their sacrifices no more to the se'irim [he-goats] after whom they stray.* The conflicting, frightening implications of the image *se'irim* in *Ha'azinu* are searing.<sup>7</sup>

#### DEUTERONOMY 31:11

Since verse 3, Moses has been uttering a panegyric of the Lord that reaches its height when he describes how God stayed and taught His people:

*As an eagle that stirreth up her nest  
Hovereth over her young  
Spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them,  
beareth them on her pinions* (Deut. 31:11).

I think that there is no way for Moses' Israeli audience not to recall the striking identity of imagery in Exodus 19:4: *You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to me* (Ex. 19:4).

This is use of mythos par excellence, for the eagle is a major image in Israeli memory, being the image spoken by God of Himself as rescuer and protector of His children on the way to Sinai. But the eagle, too, is a dualistic image – it is called an *abomination*, in the "kashrut passage" (Lev. 11:13) because it is a raptor bird.<sup>8</sup> In *Ha'azinu*, the eagle-image serves not only as an encomium to the Lord-as-Father, but also as a transition to a litany (starting in verse 15) of sins committed by the children of Israel and chastisements by the Lord-as-Father that He had foretold to Moses in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy.

#### DEUTERONOMY 31:39

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For about 20 verses this *tokhaha* hammers at the Israelites. Then comes a transition contained in a beautiful parallelism. Moses quotes God:

*I kill, and I make alive;*  
↓                    ↓  
*I have wounded, and I heal*

At last, a ray of hope, life, and healing breaks through the imprecations. Yes, inevitable punishment will come by the instrumentalities of nations that are, ironically, basically enemies of God. However, these nations will be punished in turn for their avidity. Now we know why the previous chapter, Deuteronomy 31, concludes with a strange phrase: *Then Moses recited the words of this poem, in the hearing of the whole congregation of Israel to the very end.* (v. 30). *To the very end?* Was there a possibility that Moses would end his poem *before* he finished it? Certainly not. Was there a fear that his listeners would walk out on him, or shut their ears before the end? This, possibly. How much gory detail could the children of Israel take of the anger of the Lord? One can imagine their desperate wonderment. The conclusion of the poem is vital, for in it lies the prediction of a reconciled future in the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, a prediction as certain and powerful as the prediction of sinning and punishment:

*O nations, acclaim His people!*  
*For He'll avenge the blood of His servants*  
*Wreak vengeance                      on His foes*  
↓                    ↓  
*And cleanse                      His people's land.<sup>9</sup>*

Here is the final parallelism; a parallelism of opposites, of negation to positiveness: *vengeance* become a *cleans[ing]* of the land; *His foes* will be exchanged for *His people* whose land it is.

This is the final prophecy. Now the poem has truly reached *ad tumam*, the very end..

Indeed, *Ha'azinu* can be accepted as the prototype in certain ways of Hebrew poetry throughout the ages, for, alas, the children of Israel have often sinned against the Lord. Its strategy and cadences are echoed in the orations of the biblical prophets<sup>10</sup> and in the *selichot*, the penitential prayers by medieval Jewish poets. They may skip Moses' sweetness at the beginning of the poem and plunge immediately into accusation or confession of sins. But at the

end of the poem, *ad tumam*, there is always a clarification of life, as Robert Frost said. There is always God's promise of reconciliation. It is that, that sustained the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan; it is that, that sustains the children of Israel to this very day.

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#### NOTES

1. Translated by Adele Berlin, *Biblical Poetry through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 123.
2. Berlin, 127-8.
3. "The Figure a Poem Makes," in James Scully, ed. *Modern Poetics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965) p. 56.
4. Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988). For a more detailed explanation of biblical parallelism see: Benjamin Hrushkovski, "Prosody, Hebrew," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol 12 (on Torah prosody, col. 1202; note that Hrushkovski has a superfluous ' in עַלְעַל); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), also relates biblical parallelism to other Near Eastern literatures. However, most attention in these and other works on this subject is devoted to post-Torahic poetry.
5. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1969). The term "mythos" has nothing to do with untruth of fact or history. For application to biblical study, see Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985) pp. 102-5.
6. No doubt the image of rain recalls Noah's flood, but Genesis uses the word גֶּשֶׁם [geshem], not מָתָר [matar] in Genesis 7.12 and 8.2; therefore, I do not cite it.
7. For the basic statement on the theory of memory in poetry, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge's chapter on the Fancy and Imagination in his *Biographia Literaria*. See also my "The Fancy and Imagination in the Teaching of Literature," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 15 (January 1981) pp. 5-17.
8. For a fuller discussion of this image, see my "Ambiguities of the Eagle," in *JBQ* XXVI:2 (April-June, 1998) pp. 85-92.
9. The 1986 JPS translation actually has *And cleanse the land of His people*. I amended the translation to avoid the inherent ambiguity in the JPS phraseology.
10. See for example, Ronald T. Hyman, "Amos 5:24: Prophetic, Chastising, Surprising, Poetic," *JBQ* XXX:4 (Oct-Dec 2002) pp. 227-234.

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