



September 21, 2023



Parshas Ha'azinu

6th of Tishrei 5784

Mozart, Radio Telescopes and the Song of Life

One of the greatest sages of the last thousand years, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), once requested that his closest disciples gather around him for a special meeting. In a dimly lit room, the Vilna Gaon looked at his talmidim and said, "I've called you all in today in honor of a special occasion. Today marks the day that I have completed learning all the wisdom in the entire world. I would therefore like to make a celebration." (See the introduction to Pas HaShulchan.)

He explained that after studying for decades the entirety of the Torah and gaining mastery over all of it, he decided to learn the wisdom of the world. Astronomy, geometry, chemistry, zoology, physiology, psychology, biology, and geology, to name just a few. He learned it all. In one of the greatest intellectual feats in human history, he quite literally mastered everything there is to know.

After absorbing all the knowledge his brain could consume, the last subject that remained was the wisdom of music. Although its world is immense and its secrets are inaccessible to all but a few, he managed to plumb its incredibly vast depths. So much so that legend has it that the Vilna Gaon, upon his mastery of the wisdom of music, approached Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and played him the eighth note on a musical scale, a scale that Mozart thought previously contained only seven. This gave Mozart such a stir he reeled back and fainted on the spot.

And so, upon completing his learning of all the wisdom in the world, he called his disciples into a room and made a siyum.

Did He Not Have Anything Better to Do?

Let's ask the obvious question. Did the Jewish people's greatest sage not have better things to do with his time than explore the world of music and then show his findings to one of the greatest composers of all time? Why would the Vilna Gaon take out precious time from his life to explore such seemingly irrelevant and trivial things?

The answer is found in Parshas Ha'azinu.

The parshah is a song. It's a song about our past and a song about our future. It's a beautiful musical moment right before Moshe's death.

But if all it is, is a song, then why does the Torah tell us to sing it constantly? What is it about this song that propels the Torah to write (Devarim 31:21) that whenever evil befalls us, we should sing this song and it will confront our enemies? Isn't it just a song?

The answer is no. It's not just a song.

It's a declaration of our musical DNA. It's a declaration that there are two ways to live life; there are those who live it and there are those who sing it. There are those who despite the hardships and the pain, despite the distraction and the noise, hear the sweet sound of Hashem's music floating in the air. People who live life engulfed in song. People who allow their souls to burst forth and sing the song of Hashem.

The Torah is referred to as a "song" because song is the most transcendent way of living. The Torah is not an intellectual subject that we learn and teach. The Torah is a song that we hum and sing.

The parshah lets us in on the secret of music. Music is a force on earth that is powerful. Spiritual music is a force on earth that is incalculably powerful. As Rav Shlomo Alkabetz (1505-1584, great Kabbalist and composer of Lecha Dodi) would say, "Music allows the soul to transcend this world and connect itself to the singing angels in Heaven."

The Vilna Gaon did not delve into music to discover the latest trends. He was searching for the secrets of music to help his soul soar. To enable his heart to beat with the rhythm of the Torah's song.

Humming Down the River Of Life

The Jewish religion places great emphasis on music. We have special tunes we use on Shabbos and special tunes we use on Yom Tov. We have songs we sing during birkas kohanim and songs we sing on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We have niggunim we play when a holy sage walks into a room and melodies we use when we recite kel malei rachamim at the foot of a grave. We don't *learn* Gemara, we *sing* it. We don't *read* the Torah, we *chant* it. Each and every word has its unique *trop*. We don't *walk* down the road of life, we *dance* it.

The music that permeates our religion isn't there merely to ensure that our religious duties don't become monotonous and stale. The music we inject into our religion is the song of the Torah itself. The Torah is life's song and it saturates everything we do. Like the animals who sing Hashem's praises, we also sing to Hashem, using the Torah as our musical notes.

It's no coincidence that Parshas Ha'azinu contains 613 words, for it reminds us that the Torah is our song. It is our anthem. It is what we have been singing to the rest of the world on our journey through time. Precisely as we were about to enter the land, to begin our lives anew, did Moshe give us the message that the Torah is a song, for that's when we needed that message the most. Precisely when it begins to get difficult does the Torah's musical essence become most pronounced. Precisely when the world loses sight of its sanctity does our job as the singers of the Torah's song become all the more important. Precisely when we leave the desert's cocoon of holiness and our training wheels come off do we need to clutch close to the song that keeps us going.

Each creature in this world — every bug, every fish, every blade of grass — sings the song of God. None of them forgets. The only creature that sometimes forgets to show up to the choir of life is man. In the choir of the universe only man can be found not singing. Jews are the human representation in the world's chorus.

The Torah is infinitely more than a mere book containing wisdom; it is the very song of humanity. It is the heartbeat of the world and the composition of life itself. We are its trusted singers, and we will forever keep on singing.

Owls

Ever wonder how owls see perfectly in the dark? How do owls see in the absolute pitch darkness in a forest or a desert where the closest light is 400 miles away? What does it mean that they have eyes with night vision? If there is no light, then there is no light. What do their superior eyes do? The answer is that even in the most intense darkness, there is, in fact, light, and one with the proper eyes can see it.

The Jews, for the duration of our history, have been living in a world that's gone dark. But with the Torah as our night-vision goggles, we see the light in the darkness. We hear the harmony amidst the cacophony. We connect ourselves to the purity amidst the barrage of desecration.

This parshah, from the moment we marched out of the Clouds of Glory, has been our reminder to keep on singing no matter how many times we get expelled and are forced to move our precious nation elsewhere.

When we were expelled from Carthage in the year 250, we remained singing this song. When we were expelled from Alexandria in 415, we had this song on our lips. When we were expelled from Clement in 554 and from Visigoth in 612, we had the song of Torah beating in our hearts. Whether it was Toledo in 653 or Italy in 855. From Sens in 876 to Mayence in 1012, France in 1181 to England in 1290. Switzerland in 1348 to Germany in 1349. Strasbourg in 1388 to Austria in 1422. Zurich in 1424 to Cologne in 1426. Savory in 1432 to Wurzburg in 1454. Genoa in 1550 to Kiev in 1619. Hamburg in 1649 to Lithuania in 1656. Russia in 1727 to Warsaw in 1775. Romania in 1866 to Bavaria in 1919. It made no difference where; it made no difference when. The Jew limped along singing his song, for the Jew knows that his song is the song of life itself and the world would cease to exist without the Jew singing it.

The Yamim Noraim (High Holidays) is a time when we relearn our song. It's a time when we realign ourselves and focus on yet again singing the melodies of God. Once a year, we take time out of our lives to reaffirm that the tune of Hashem's Torah is the most powerful force in the universe, and we are the lucky members of His choir.

Bell Labs

In the year 1960, Bell Labs, a large telecommunications company, built the largest radio transmitter in the world, and installed it in the city of Holmdel, New Jersey. It was a satellite transmission system that they called "Echo." Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, the two directors of the project, realized the massive newfound power this invention had in its potential use as a radio telescope, hearing sounds from distances no other machine could hear in the history of the world.

With worldwide excitement and anticipation, they turned on the machine for the very first time.

What they heard confused them. For some reason there was a background hum that they couldn't seem to get rid of. First they thought the machine was broken, so they reexamined every inch of it. They turned it back on but the hum was still there. Then they thought that birds that lived in the general vicinity of the machine were interfering with the machine's transmitters. So, they cleared the area of birds. But the hum remained.

Utterly confused and at a loss, they began listening more carefully to the sound. What they realized shocked the world.

There was nothing wrong with the machine; there were no birds interfering. The sound that they heard was the very sound of the Creation of the world thousands of years ago. It was the penetrating blast of the world coming into existence, and that sound still reverberated and echoed deep into the galaxy. This machine was the first that could pick it up for man to hear.

Jews have been hearing this sound from the day we were born. This is the sound of our life. It's the song we forever sing. It's the drumbeat of our nation. The sound of creation is the song that propels us to do all that we do. Some might need technologically advanced radio telescopes to hear it; we feel it in every breath we take.

The Three Levels of Song

Rebbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) would often say that there are three levels of song. There are songs that have both words and a tune. A higher level of song is one that has a tune without words. But the highest level of song, the level where song is most acutely pronounced and the level at which our soul can best join along and sing with its angelic brothers in Heaven, is the song of sheer unadulterated silence. For then and only then can one hear the song of the universe itself — the song of Torah. The song of life. The song of us.

Every challenge we overcome, every blessing we make, every ounce of repentance we do is another note making up this holy song, a song that is the undercurrent of humanity.

Where Was the Music at Achashverosh's Party?

Ever wonder why at the great party Achashverosh threw there is no mention of any music whatsoever? The Megillah mentions virtually every form of luxury and yet omits any mention of music. Did the great Achashverosh, one of the greatest party throwers in the history of party throwers, really throw a party without music?

Reb Shlomo Alkebetz explains that music was banned at this historic party, for Achashverosh was petrified of it. Being that the party was largely a celebration of the Jew's low state of spirituality, Achashverosh feared that allowing music at the party would strike a chord in the souls of the Jews present and inspire them to grow spiritually.

He was afraid that music would remind their souls of the song of the Torah that their souls should have been singing. He was petrified of the Jews being reminded of the song of creation that we're all tasked with humming.

It's no coincidence that Ha'azinu is often Shabbos Shuva, for it's the perfect reminder of who we are and the musical responsibilities we have in singing Hashem's song in the world. In our busy lives, that is easy to forget. Ha'azinu is there as a reminder; we are the musical notes of the world's song.

Living Songs in London

London, England is home to some of the most famous poetry theaters in the world. A poetry theater is where poets compete to read aloud classical poetry in the most authentic and dramatic way, and the crowd judges them. One such event took place one cold winter night. With the theater filled to capacity, the contestants were handed the poem that would be in that evening's competition. It was chapter 98 in Tehillim, a psalm that spoke about singing a new song to God.

Each contestant had a turn, until one young man walked on stage and left the crowd in a thunderous applause. He was energetic. He had a great voice. He was a handsome man who had the perfect facial expressions when he sang each verse. He was selected unanimously as the winner of the competition.

Right as the curtains were about to close and the stage was about to clear, an old man from the back of the theater stood up and called out, "Wait!" He walked slowly with his cane up to the front of the stage and asked the winner of the competition if he can come up. The winner said, "Sure," and the crowd fell into a curious silence. The old man took the microphone, cleared his throat and said:

"If I may, just for a moment, sing a rendition of that poem in its original language." He began the slow melodious singing of "*Shiru Lashem Shir Chodosh.*" He closed his eyes and looked up and kept singing. The audience, frozen in shock, just stared at him. They never saw something like that. The man, almost in a trance, kept singing.

"*Zamru Lashem b'chinor,*" he sang while he softly tapped his right foot. There wasn't a dry eye in the theater.

"*Yiram hayam u'miloyo,*" the man continued until the very end. And with a river of tears, the crowd erupted in a thunderous standing ovation. The man opened his eyes, smiled a small smile, and with a twinkle in his eye he walked off the stage.

The crowd filed out of their seats as the old man took his cane and walked outside into the cold London Street.

The young winner of the competition ran outside and looked for the old man. He spotted him walking slowly alone and he caught up to him.

"Sir, sir," the young man called out.

"I feel as though *you* should be the one who gets the award, not me. You were fantastic up there."

The old man stopped and looked at the man. "Oh no, young man, you were great. You did a great job, please keep the trophy."

The young man insisted. "No, you were better. I don't deserve it."

The old man looked at him and said, "No, I refuse. You did a great job."

"Okay," said the boy, "but please tell me this. Why was it that when I was up on the stage the crowd smiled and clapped but when you were up there, they cried?"

The old man stopped walking. He looked the young man in the eyes. After a moment of silence, he removed his arm from his coat and rolled up his sleeve.

"See these numbers?" the man asked, pointing to the numbers tattooed on his arm.

“You learned poetry in college. I learned poetry in Auschwitz. King David to you is a composer. King David to me is my grandfather.”

He rolled down his sleeve, put his coat back on, and looked once again into the eyes of the young man and said:

“You may have gotten up on that stage and sang that song. I. Am. That. Song.”

And with that, the old man took his cane and walked off into the night.