

# United We Stand

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Parshas Vayeilech / Yom Kippur

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## The Parsha's Path

*And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel, and place it in their mouths, so that this song will be for me a witness among the Children of Israel (31:19).*

The context of the above verse is an oft glossed over passage that is surprisingly dark. Amidst a Parsha that seems, overall, cheerful and optimistic - featuring the passing over of the mantle of leadership from Moshe to Yehoshua and promises about G-d leading the Jews in their conquest and settling of the Land of Israel - G-d speaks to Moshe for the first time in the book of Devarim. After telling him to take Yehoshua for a meeting in the Mishkan, G-d tells Moshe, "After you die, this nation is going to get up and stray after foreign gods." G-d tells Moshe how His anger will flare up against them on that day, and He will abandon them to terrible evils and sufferings. But so, they should not think that it's because their G-d is not in their midst, He wants Moshe to write this song as a witness.

The song being referred to is widely agreed to be the song of Ha'azinu which features in next week's Parsha. Indeed, the content of that song is all about the Jewish people's rebelling and G-d's assurance of retribution. The text in our Parsha seems to be saying that Moshe is to teach the people this song so that they understand the cause of their suffering when they inevitably rebel. Not a very cheerful task.

Besides the disturbing implications of G-d revealing our future waywardness and asking Moshe to teach a song to bear witness against us, the meaning of our verse is made more difficult by a textual problem. While G-d is addressing Moshe, and Moshe is indeed the only one who is recorded as writing the song (v. 22), G-d says *write for yourselves* in the plural. Who else is G-d referring to? According to Chazal (see Haamek Davar), this refers to the mitzvah incumbent upon every Jew to write a sefer Torah, as the whole Torah is also referred to as a song. This seems difficult to understand; if G-d is clearly referring to the song of Ha'azinu, why do Chazal see the additional, implicit command of the verse to be referring to every Jew writing the whole Torah? How does that address the state of suffering of the people that is the context of our verse?

Before we address these additional questions, the Malbim offers a remarkable explanation of exactly how Ha'azinu is supposed to function as witness for G-d. He offers the following parable:

A king once redeemed a slave from a prison and appointed him in charge of his storehouses. The king knew that the slave was imprisoned for stealing and that it is his nature to steal, and that he would inevitably steal from his storehouses and be deserving of death. Thus, the king wrote down a note for himself: This slave has a history of stealing and it is his nature to steal. People who read the note would be under the impression that it is to ensure the slave is doubly punished. However, the real reason the king wrote it is to remind himself that he appointed the slave over his storehouses knowing that it was the slave's nature to steal, and therefore he shouldn't punish him at all.

The Malbim explains that this is the real purpose of Ha'azinu: Whenever we find ourselves in distress and worthy of G-d's wrath, the song of Ha'azinu is for us to remind G-d that He too, for us his people, knowing full well our history of sin and that it is our nature to sin, and therefore, while our sins should objectively merit severe consequences, G-d should not punish us at all.

According to Malbim, the song of Ha'azinu is not about justifying our afflictions; on the contrary, it is the very antidote to them. By humbly acknowledging our undeservedness to be G-d's people and the harsh judgment our actions objectively deserve, we effectuate complete forgiveness.

This is undoubtedly a powerful message for the *teshuvah* season, demonstrating, as it does, the power of acknowledging G-d's sovereignty as the essence of repentance (as G-d's Majesty is the essence and purpose of strict judgment, and by acknowledging G-d's Majesty, the harsh judgment becomes unnecessary). However, we have yet to address our second question: Why do Chazal see the mitzvah to write a song that is incumbent upon every Jew to refer not to Ha'azinu, but to the whole Torah?

Perhaps the answer, in light of what we've seen, is that Chazal perceived a higher ideal, a more ambitious antidote to suffering, than the song of Ha'azinu. Yes, recognizing our lowly nature and undeservedness is powerful and imperative in drawing close to G-d, but we should aspire to more than that. Every single Jew must strive to *become deserving*. We do not want to settle for being like a servant who is given some slack because he's known to be a robber - we want to be like a servant who is faithful, who can be fully trusted and who is above suspicion. We want to eliminate the necessity of the testimony of Ha'azinu. We want to completely eliminate our bad tendencies and cling to G-d through thick and thin.

These aspirations are expressed through the imperative of the mitzvah for each Jew to write for himself the entirety of the Torah. Each of us must strive to take

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ownership of the Torah for ourselves. We must not settle for the Torah to be a national ideal that we personally cannot fully realize, forcing us to have recourse to Ha'azinu. We must take responsibility to teach ourselves and all those around us to master the Torah so that G-d will never have cause to get angry at us.

In practice, we do fall short; we do need recourse to Ha'azinu. But Chazal teach us that accepting G-d's sovereignty cannot stop with recognizing our unworthiness. The greatest expression of G-d's sovereignty is to strive to be worthy, to fulfill G-d's Will with the full yoke of all that the Torah demands. And no matter how far we may be from perfectly fulfilling that ideal, our striving for that will be that much more powerful in increasing G-d's Majesty and meriting forgiveness and redemption. May this be a year where we see the end to all of our afflictions with the safe return of all of the remaining captives and soldiers and the *bias goel tzedek, bimheira viyameinu*.

## Deeper Meanings

*Adapted from 5780.*

On Yom Kippur we read one of the most famous and epic stories of all time, the tale of Yona, the reluctant prophet. Commanded by G-d to travel to Ninveh to deliver a prophecy about their forthcoming destruction if they fail to repent, Yona fears the consequences of such a move. He knows that the people would take his words seriously and repent, and G-d would have mercy.

Yona boards a ship headed for Tarshish, far away from Ninveh, but G-d causes a storm to surround the ship - and only the ship, for the rest of the sea is calm - and the sailors aboard cast lots to see who is responsible. The lots repeatedly land on Yona, and they question him. He explains that he is a Jew who made G-d angry at him. They reluctantly throw Yona into the sea, at his urging, and the sea becomes calm once again. Yona is then swallowed by a giant fish. Rather comfortable, Yona silently waits in the fish for his salvation, only to be regurgitated into another fish (as Chazal derive from the verses) with far less comfortable accommodations. Yona, either because of his suffering or the Providence he suddenly realizes was prodding him, has a revelation about his experience and bursts out in prayer to G-d. The fish spits Yona out and he travels to Ninveh, ready to carry out his task. The people of Ninveh do indeed repent (upon the king's command), and meanwhile Yona waits to see Ninveh's destruction, sure that G-d would not allow them to survive simply because of their shallow repentance. The sun boils on Yona's back, and Yona, possessing highly sensitive skin, truly can't bear it. G-d grows a tall weed, a *kikayon*, to shade and protect Yona, only to have it fall and crumble thanks to one hungry worm. Yona cries for the plant

and yearns for death, and G-d teaches him that if he loved a plant so much that he never worked for, how could G-d not feel likewise for a people and animals He created?

The basic plot of *Yona* lends itself to the simple message that running away from G-d is impossible; G-d knows best, and we must recognize the need to submit to G-d's Will and repent from any resistance we may have shown in the past.

The details of the plot, however, reveal an entirely different theme, which complements and enriches the primary one. Yona ben Amittai, as his surname implies, is the man of absolute truth. He cannot tolerate any breach in truth, and therefore cannot relate to the attribute of mercy. When G-d commands him to bestow this mercy on the people of Ninveh, Yona cannot bear such a proposition and flees. While he is soon forced to submit to the wisdom of G-d despite it being beyond him, he ultimately experiences first-hand with the *kikayon*, and then is told by G-d, that mercy is a necessary value, just as much as truth.

Yona poignantly teaches us two ideas about Teshuva. While the first and most basic frame of mind we must have is a sense of helplessness and submission before G-d, we also learn that G-d is good, merciful, and forgiving, and we need not fear submitting to Him. The Day of Forgiveness and the entire Teshuva season is, first and foremost, a time of trepidation as we recognize the imperative to repent. At the same time, we are reassured by the infinitely loving relationship we share with G-d, and know that He only wants what's best for us, and embraces every attempt we make to come closer and do better.

## Goal of the week

Pick one area bein adam limakom, one area bein adam lichaveiro, and one area bein adam liatzmo to focus on this coming year in a concrete way.

*This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Yisroel Zev ben Menya Rachel, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers.*

*Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.*

***Have A Great Shabbos !!***

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