

פרשת האזינו

OVERVIEW

The "Song of the Sea" (שירת הים) marks the beginning of the second phase of Moshe's leadership role: the march through the desert. It ends with the song that may be described as the "Song of the Jordan". Both songs represent a panoramic vision of the future, of Israel's, journey through history. The main phases of Israel's development pass in quick succession before Moshe's eyes, He sketches the portrait of a proud, impetuous, indomitable people, beset by contradictions and challenges. Moshe's stirring words of warning and promise form the final messages to his people by "G-d's servant".

COMMENTARY

The Universe as Witness

Heaven and earth are summoned to serve as witnesses for the Divine truth. Our sages provide numerous explanations for his unique calling. One of the most striking is the following thought: Israel's adherence to the Torah law is one of the fundamental conditions for the cosmic regularity of the universe. When Israel leaves the path of its covenant with G-d, the effect is literally world-shaking. We cannot begin to gauge the consequences of our actions that go far beyond our immediate ranges of experience. The universe is a mighty chain of inter-acting energies motivated by physical as well as moral forces. They are part of a major force from which they emanate: the timeless power of Divine truth. The preservation of the natural order of heaven and earth is forever subject to Israel's unflinching loyalty to G-d and His eternal Torah.

G-d's Faithfulness - Israel's loyalty

"The Rock, His work is perfect" (32:4). For a nation that was privileged to witness the Revelation at Sinai, the metaphor "rock" is the allegorical description of G-d's unalterable, everlasting support of Israel's existence. It is reflected in the granite boulders of the Sinai range repeatedly referred to in this song. (Isaiah 26:4 phrases the same thought, כי ב'י ד' צור עולמים "for G-d is the Rock, the absolute power, creator and molder of all the worlds".)

The verse in the שירת האזינו continues: "... for all His ways are justice, a G-d of trust and no violence, righteous and upright is He". The stress on divine justice is a fundamental ingredient of Jewish thinking. Yet many aspects of the justice as they unfold before our eyes will remain incomprehensible to our limited human understanding.

The Lesson of History

"Remember the days of old.... " (32:7). Several commentators interpret these words as a positive command, a Mitzvah: to study history, to draw from its timeless values as the true source of our faith. Israel interprets history not as a chaotic conglomeration of blind forces and a succession of accidental events, but as a carefully designed construction reflected in nature's immutable laws. To view history as a supremely meaningful process is essentially a Jewish discovery from which the world's diverse schools of thought drew inspiration.

For the Jewish people, history is a mighty song that guides its path through the bewildering thicket of civilizations and spiritual movements. The Jewish epos has left deep traces in the hearts of mankind, for the history of Israel is the sole living proof for the reality of divine Providence. Far from being a message out of a distant path, Moshe's ringing words teach us the meaning of history and provide us with the precise and unequivocal direction our people has to take in its determination to live up to the precepts of the divine Will. Thus the "Mitzvah" of studying history will serve as a source of inner strength and will counteract any doubts as to the noble purpose of our mission in life.

Transgression and Punishment

The expression "stiff-necked" in reference to a character trait of the Jewish people may be interpreted as a lamentable tendency towards haughtiness and arrogance or as a stubborn adherence to the Torah law in defiance of adversity and ridicule. Alas, the history of the people of Israel has shown its susceptibility to the lures of wealth and prosperity which threaten to undermine its moral fibre - "... then Yeshurun became fat and rebelled... and it forsook G-d Who had created it and regarded as worthless the Rock of its salvation " (32:15).

Yet G-d is not willing to inflict upon the erring nation the full extent of the punishment it deserves. While He allows the nations of the world to give vent to their antagonism and hatred of the Jewish people, He sets limits to the suffering and privations inflicted by them on the people

of G-d. He will call the nations to account for dealing inhumanly and cruelly with His people. They are being reminded that a day of judgment and retribution will come to them also. "Know it, nations, that Israel is never without its protector - do not misuse the temporary power you were given as the tools of Divine justice".

The Law of Torah - Israel's Life

Moshe has ended the song that will live on forever in the hearts of his people and reverberate through the millennia of its history. Its central theme, noble and timeless: total adherence to the law of the Torah. It is the only road to true happiness, to true fulfillment, to a life filled with joy, well-being and sanctity.

Israel has lived through numerous painful experiences, the promise of a glorious future lies before it and Moshe pronounces the one great Wish, "it is your very life, and with it you will prolong your days upon the soil of which you will now take possession" (32:47). This wish for long life resounds in the "Sh'ma" tied to one singular condition: to live in accordance with the G-d--given Torah law in a world born by the spirit of its teachings, a world ruled by righteousness, justice and loving kindness.

© 1945 Marc Breuer. First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée". Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. New Publication in English by Elie Winsbacher. To receive electronically or to sponsor an issue, Please email: e.w@att.net. Proceeds from sponsorships will be pooled with the intention to publish in book form at the end of the yearly cycle.

Downloadable at the website of the Central Organization for Jewish Outreach at <http://www.cojo.net>.