



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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SHABBAT SHUVA - PARSHAT HA'AZINU

Two Songs, Two Singers

How does the poet get started on the process of writing a poem, or the songwriter as he sets about composing a song? Does he or she look at the environment, at what is going on in the world and seek inspiration from things external? Or does the creative artist look within, using introspection as a tool to uncover emotions out of which the poem or song can be fashioned? These questions can be asked about all creative processes, not just writing. They can be asked of the graphic artist, of the composer of music, of the sculptor.

My wife's grandfather was the renowned Hassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Taub, who composed hundreds of liturgical melodies. When he was asked about his creative process, he would say that he fashioned his music out of the feelings which "overflowed from his heart." As a Holocaust survivor, his heart overflowed with the full range of human emotions, from hope to dread and despair and back to hope again. And one can detect the full range of these feelings in his music.

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Ha'azinu*, is read on the Shabbat immediately following Rosh Hashanah. It consists almost entirely of a *shira*, a song, of words spoken by Moses "into the ears of the entire congregation of Israel."

(*Deuteronomy* 31:30) What are the emotions which inspire those words?

To answer this question, it helps to remember that shortly before we will read *Ha'azinu*, we will have read another *shira*, and a very different one at that. I refer to the "Song of Hannah" (*Samuel I*, 2:1-10), which is the *haftarah* for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

Hannah's emotions are apparent. She is joyous, exhilarated, exultant. Her desperate prayers have been answered and she has experienced God's wondrous powers. Her song is a triumphant one.

Let us contrast this with the song of Moses. Like Hannah, he is confident of God's omnipotence. She sings, "The Lord deals death and gives life." (*Samuel I*, 2:6) He sings, "There is no God beside me, I deal death and give life." (*Deuteronomy* 32:39)

But the song that Moses sings is of a very different nature. Moses has a clear if pessimistic vision of what lies ahead for the Jewish people. He foresees the consequences of their disobedience and rebelliousness. He anticipates the wrath of God.

He places the blame for that wrath on the people themselves, not upon God. God is justified in all that He does. "The Rock, His work is perfect...just and right is He. Is corruption His? No! His children's is the

blemish..." (Deuteronomy 32:4-5).

Moses' emotions as he utters the song of *Ha'azinu* are complex indeed. For one thing, he feels a sense of dread of what lies ahead for these people whom he knows to be weak and sinful. He is certain that great suffering is in store for his people. That suffering pains him.

But he also finds it necessary to express a deeper emotion, one of confidence and trust in God in the face of suffering. He thus expresses, arguably for the first time in the Bible, the Jewish reaction of *Tzidduk HaDin*, of proclaiming God's justice even in the depths of tragedy.

The poem of *Ha'azinu* calls to mind a mélange of graphic images: excessive sensuality, sin, faithlessness, and, in reaction to all this, "a fire kindled in God's nostrils which burns into the depths of the netherworld." These are powerful images which ring true to the experience of every Jew who is even minimally aware of our history. But Moses sets the tone for all of us with his opening declaration: God is righteous, God is just, God is fair. *Tzidduk HaDin*. This is the Jewish reaction to every manner of suffering.

How apt are the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik, who would stress the centrality to our faith of the concept of *Tzidduk HaDin*, justifying God. He saw in this concept our assertion of "dignity in defeat": "If man knows how to take defeat...as the *halachah* tries to teach us, then he may preserve his dignity even when he faces adversity and disaster."

At this time of year, during these days of judgment and introspection, we prepare ourselves for a future year of difficulties

and challenges and worse. We ready ourselves for the dreaded possibility of the need to express *Tzidduk HaDin*. But does this cause us to despair? No. For this solemnity is our best way to prepare for a different set of alternatives entirely.

Anxiety over Divine judgment, *Eimat HaDin*, propels us to repent, to commit to be better persons, better Jews.

This "fear of judgment" becomes the ground out of which sprouts optimism and hope; optimism that God will shine His countenance upon us, and hope that we will merit His favor and be blessed with a sweet and happy New Year.

We learn the lessons of the song of Ha'azinu so that we can merit the triumphs of the "Song of Hannah."

Shana Tova U'Metuka! ■



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