

Dvar Torah – Haazinu

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Situated at the end of Sefer Devarim between Moshe Rabbenu's final words of reproach (the *Tokhecha*) and blessing (*Ve-zot ha-Berakha*) is the "Shira of Haazinu," the Song of Haazinu. Though perhaps not accorded as much fame in our liturgy as its sister "Song of the Sea" (Shirat Ha-Yam, aka *Az Yashir*) of Sefer Shemot, it is the Shira of Haazinu that clearly earns the greater Scriptural recognition. Just prior to that latter song we are told, *Ve-ata kitvu lakhem et ha-shira ha-zot velamedah et Bnei Yisrael simah be-fihem*. "Take this song, write it down, teach it to Bnei Yisrael and place it in their mouths." Whether we adopt Rashi's interpretation that this imperative relates specifically to the Shirat Haazinu or Rambam's position that it refers to the more general obligation to write a Sefer Torah that contains within it the Shirat Haazinu, the Torah accords special status to Shirat Haazinu as something worthy of the permanent record and recollection.

Prominently positioned at the beginning of this Shirat Haazinu and, in turn, included in our daily liturgy as part of the introduction to the Amida-prayer of Mincha (and Mussaf), the following verse is rather familiar to the observant Jew:

Ki Shem Hashem Ekra Havu Godel Lelokenu

"For I will proclaim the name of the L-rd; ascribe ye greatness unto our G-d."

The classical Torah commentators mostly interpret this sentence in its relationship to the Shira of Haazinu: Some understand it as Moshe calling the message of The Song to the attention of Bnei Yisrael and inviting them to express their own sense of appreciation of the glory of G-d. Others say that it is the aforementioned heavens and earth (*haazinu ha-shamayim ... ve-tishma ha-aretz*) that are being summoned to join. A third opinion combines elements of the preceding ones with both the animate and inanimate as co-participants. According to all these options, however, the reference is still the more immediate context of this Shira, Moshe's final message to the Jewish people.

Chazal, on the other hand, saw in this verse a broader mandate, one that transcends the specific juncture at which the Shirat Haazinu was uttered. The Gemara in Berakhot cites this expression as the source for the obligation for three or more individuals eating together to be *mezamen*, to bench as a group with the appropriate preamble (*nevarekh she-akhalnu mi-shelo*). The Sifri quotes our verse as the basis for our responding *Barukh Hashem ha-Mevorakh le-Olam Vaed* when we hear *Barkhu* recited in shul, and similarly answering when Kaddish is said, although the exact format of the response during Kaddish varies somewhat from what is common practice. The Rosh, in his responsa, derives support from this verse for the popular custom to say *Barukh Hu u-Barukh Shemo* when one hears the mention of the name of G-d. More generally, the Gemara in Yoma posits as a blanket rule that *whenever* one invokes the name of G-d, all present should respond by proclaiming the greatness of G-d, with another implementation being the response of *Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto le-Olam Vaed* after hearing the Kohen

HaGadol say the *Shem Ha-Meyuchad*, the ineffable name of G-d. Though the application varies, a common theme emerges: when one calls out in the name of G-d (*Ki Shem Hashem Ekra*) all in attendance are expected to respond in kind (*Havu Godel Lelokenu*).

There is, however, yet another pair of statements by Chazal that doesn't fit this pattern. The Bavli in Masekhet Berakhot infers from this verse - *Ki Shem Hashem Ekra Havu Godel Lelokenu* - that one must say Birkat ha-Torah before the study of Torah, while the Yerushalmi - also in Berakhot - albeit in a different chapter - learns from the same pasuk that Birkat ha-Torah is required also *after* the study of Torah (by analogy to food which requires a blessing both before and after). While Talmud Torah is often enriched by learning in a public forum - the shiur in the Beit Ha-Midrash - there is certainly no requirement that Torah be studied *exclusively* in the framework of a *mezuman*, *minyán*, or other larger assembly of Jews. Indeed, we are taught in Pirkei Avos that G-d listens in the study of even a sole individual. How then does this verse whose original context was the public song of Moshe before Bnei Yisrael, and subsequently applied by Chazal to other situations of a leader motivating his constituents in interactive responsive prayer apply to Talmud Torah and dictate its attendant blessings?

Apparently, Talmud Torah even in its private form - the individual student sitting in front of his sefer - is part of a much larger picture. Though we often refer to the process of making room in our schedules for Torah-study as *keviut itim la-Torah* - fixing times for Torah - we are, in reality, establishing ourselves as part of a *timeless* transmission, an eternal program. By studying Torah today - wherever that may take place and with whatever traditional text - we are in essence responding in kind to that original invitation to Torah extended by Moshe at Sinai.

At Sinai - and for the forty years that followed - Moshe taught the Torah to the Jewish people. At the end of that period, he asked that it all be recorded for posterity. Moshe did his part of *Ki Shem Hashem Ekra* - of proclaiming the name of the L-rd. For the generations that follow, it is through the perpetuation of that Torah study and teaching - that we do our part of *Havu Godel Lelokenu* - ascribing greatness unto G-d.

Dedicated to the memory of my father Dr. Bernard Teitelman, Binyamin ben Shmuel z"l, on the occasion of his third Yahrzeit (10 Tishrei).