

Parshat Haazinu
Torah as Poetry
Nomi Kaltmann - Class of 2023

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱסֹתֶינָה פְּנֵי מַהֶם אֲרָאָה מָה אַחֲרֵיכֶם כִּי דֹר תִּהְיֶהכֶת הַמָּה בְּנִים לֹא־אֱמֵן בָּם:

He said: I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them. (Deuteronomy 32:20)

Have you ever thought about why poetry is beautiful? If you Google “what makes a poem meaningful,” the answers say things like, “poems are interesting when they are strong, accurate, use interesting words, are well-placed, or make the reader feel the writer’s emotion and intentions.” Other answers focus on how poetry sharply focuses the reader on specific words, aimed at conveying a specific meaning through nuance.

This week’s parsha, Haazinu, provides an exceptional case study in poetry. Almost the entire parsha is taken up by Moshe’s recitation of a poem, which is reflected in the way the Torah displays the columns of text, differentiating the words of Moshe’s poem from the majority of the Torah text.

In the Torah there are other poems, such as *Shirat HaYam*, the poem recited by Moshe when the people of Israel go free from Egypt. In that case, which is also displayed in a distinctive format, it makes sense that the Torah would want to highlight the miraculous nature of the splitting of the sea. It is one of the most important moments in the history of the Jewish people, and at the moment the sea splits, when the poem is recited, the people of Israel have just witnessed a major miracle!

While *Shirat HaYam* incorporates a beautiful message of gratitude to G-d for the people of Israel’s salvation, Haazinu is decidedly less positive. If you read the verse at the beginning of this D’var Torah, where Moshe refers to the people of Israel as a “treacherous breed,” this poem is neither comforting nor reassuring.

So, what is the purpose of the poem in Haazinu? Why is this message delivered in poetry?

Ibn Ezra offers a form of explanation when he states that in the future, if bad things befall the people of Israel, they will be able to look at Haazinu, with its warnings, and understand the reasons for these misfortunes, because of the warnings inherent in Moshe’s poem.

In a fascinating shift, Gemara Nedarim 38a, suggests that not only is Haazinu a poem, but that in fact the whole Torah is a poem.

What does this mean? Why would the entire Torah be considered a poem?

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in the introduction to his book *Haamek Davar*, notes the following about poetry:

However, we still have to understand how the whole Torah could be called a poem! Surely it is not written in the language of poetry. Rather, the answer is that Torah has in it the nature and the richness of poetry.

And from this introduction, we are provided with a beautiful insight.

When one reads the Torah one can see that this understanding is applied throughout. The language of the Torah is not always straightforward. Each word is deliberate, Divine, and has a deeper meaning that requires extra thought and interpretation. When one studies Torah, to truly understand it, one must become deeply familiar with each word, study it intently and through this process, extract the deeper principles found within the text itself.

Additionally, the Torah contains all kinds of allusions and hints that must be teased out from the text. Each letter is important, and so to understand the deepest and most important messages of the Torah, one must examine it closely. This is the same principle to understanding poetry. The meaning of a poem can grow as you become more familiar with each letter and word. The more you study it, the more new meanings can spring to light.

Torah, like poetry, contains the beauty of the written word. It invites the reader to delve into the depths and examine what the language is telling us, and what it is seeking to convey. When we apply a close reading, we immerse ourselves in the words and become connected to their deeper meaning.

Just like the Torah, poetry has a deeper, more mysterious meaning that can only be unveiled the more we delve into the text. The possibilities for meaning go on and on and as we master each new facet, we become amazed at the richness of the meaning.

So, when Moshe calls Haazinu the “witness” of the Jewish people we understand it to mean a witness to the eternal pursuit of trying to conquer the text and understand its meaning. The poetry here need not be triumphant or celebratory; the fact that it is deep and symbolic, with a message for all time, justifies Moshe’s speech being presented as poetry.

Just like poetry, nothing in the Torah is simple or meets the eye and so too, we seek out meaning through our engagement and interaction with the text in order to exceed the basic meaning.



Nomi Kaltmann is from Melbourne, Australia. She has a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Politics and Jewish Civilizations from Monash University. In 2019, Nomi became the first Australian woman to enrol in the Yeshivat Maharat four-year Semikha program. She also holds a Masters degree in Legal Practice from the Australian National University. Previously Nomi has worked for the Shadow Attorney General of Australia and for the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Nomi also coordinated and accompanied a Parliamentary delegation to Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Nomi is one of the founding members of the Women’s Orthodox Tefillah Group in Victoria. She is also the founder and inaugural president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in Australia. Her work promoting gender equality for Australian women has been covered in major Australian newspapers including The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, ABC Australia and The Australian Jewish News. Nomi loves to write and is the Australian correspondent at Tablet Magazine. In addition to her regular pieces in Tablet Mag, Nomi’s bylines have been published in The Forward, Religion and Politics, Neos Kosmos, Plus61J and Religion Unplugged. Nomi has completed several fellowships, including at Hillel International’s Office of Innovation (OOI), Launchpad Australia, Va’Tichtov, Women Leading Locally, and the Orthodox Leadership Program for Women (OLP).