



Reading Parashat Haazinu Every Day By Rabbi David Silverberg

In the Hilkhot Tefila section of his *Mishneh Torah* (7:13), Maimonides records different customs that existed concerning the structure of the daily morning prayer service. One custom, he writes, was to recite the *shirat ha-yam* – the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds (Shemot 15) – after *Yishtabach*, the blessing that follows *Pesukei De-zimra*, the daily recitation of Psalms. Nowadays, of course, virtually all observant Jews have embraced a modified version of this custom, and recite *shirat ha-yam* before *Yishtabach*, at the end of the *Pesukei De-zimra* section.

Maimonides then records a second custom, to recite at this point *shirat haazinu* – the poem dictated to Moshe by God as recorded in Parashat Haazinu. This poem foresees the time when *Benei Yisrael* will forsake the Almighty and violate their covenant with Him, in response to which He will send them into exile, and rescue them only to defend His honor which is desecrated by His nation's persecution. It appears that some communities in Maimonides' time had the practice of reciting this poem each day, after *Yishtabach*. Maimonides adds that others recited both *shirat ha-yam* and *shirat haazinu* at this point in the prayer service.

The only other Medieval source for such a custom – of reciting the poem of Haazinu each day – is the work *Orchot Chayim* by Rabbi Aharon of Lunel. The *Orchot Chayim* makes mention of this practice in the context of the *seder ma'amadot*, a service that was instituted to commemorate the *ma'amadot*, the rotation of Jews which, during the times of the Temple, would conduct special prayers and Torah readings to accompany the sacrificial offerings in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. (Maimonides describes the procedure of the *ma'amadot* in the sixth chapter of Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash.) After the Temple's destruction, some communities would recite each day, after the morning prayer service, the portions from the Torah that were read by the *ma'amadot*. Amidst this discussion, the *Orchot Chayim* adds that some communities would also recite the poem of Haazinu as part of the *seder ma'amadot*, and this reading of Haazinu followed the schedule known as "*haziv lakh*." This term, which appears in the Talmud, in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (31a), refers to the division of Haazinu into six sections, which the Levites would sing on successive Shabbatot during the Shabbat *musaf* offering. They would sing one section each Shabbat, according to the division of "*haziv lakh*." According to the custom recorded by the *Orchot Chayim*, communities would commemorate the Levites' reading of Haazinu by reciting one section of the "*haziv lakh*" arrangement each day.

This custom, of course, is far different from the custom recorded by Maimonides. Whereas the *Orchot Chayim* speaks of reciting a small section of Haazinu each day of the week, Maimonides recorded a custom to recite the entire poem as part of the daily prayer service. Furthermore, the *Orchot Chayim* described this recitation as part of the commemoration of the Torah readings that accompanied the sacrificial offerings in the

Mikdash. Maimonides, by contrast, mentioned a custom to recite Haazinu in its own right, and not as part of a commemoration of the *ma'amadot* readings. (See also Professor Yaakov Spiegel's discussion at <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/haazinu/spi.html>.)

The reason for this practice likely involves the intended purpose of the Haazinu poem. As we read toward the end of Parashat Vayelekh (31:14-30), this poem was written to serve as an eternal testimony of God's warning to *Benei Yisrael*, so that they realize that the calamities that befall them are the result of their breach of the covenant. God says to Moshe:

And now, write for yourselves this poem...so that this poem shall serve for Me as a witness against the Israelites. For I will bring them to the land that I promised to their patriarchs, a land flowing with milk and honey, and they shall eat, be satiated and grow fat, and turn to other gods and serve them, and anger Me, and breach My covenant. And thus, when many evils and calamities befall them, this poem shall answer before them as a witness...

The poem of Haazinu is the eternal reminder that the Jewish people's exile did not signify God's breach of the covenant, but to the contrary, is the result of the nation's breach of the covenant. It demonstrates that God had warned our nation even before we ever entered *Eretz Yisrael* that our existence as a sovereign nation in our ancient homeland depends upon our commitment to His laws. We therefore cannot attribute our exile to God's arbitrary or sudden decision to abrogate His agreement with us; we must rather acknowledge that it was we, who, as God foresaw centuries before the exile, breached the covenant, prompting Him to drive us from our ancestral homeland.

The custom to read Haazinu every day might therefore have developed in an attempt to keep a proper perspective on the ongoing troubles and sufferings the Jewish people have endured in exile. Those who instituted this custom may have found it necessary to remind us that our relationship with the Almighty has not been permanently broken, and that we can still restore our national existence with God's presence in our midst through the process of repentance. Once we recommit ourselves to our obligations to God, then He will, in turn, fulfill His obligations, as it were, and restore *Am Yisrael* to its previous position of peace, prosperity and glory.