

HA'AZINU

SYMBIOTIC SONG OF SPLENDOR

Parashas Ha'azinu is written in poetic language and format. In a *sefer Torah*, therefore, the words appear in stanzas rather than as paragraphs. The Torah introduces the recitation of this lyrical passage with the following enigmatic verse from the preceding *parashah*:

ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפייהם למען תהיה
לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל.

And now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel, place it in their mouths, so that this song shall be for Me a witness for the Children of Israel.¹

According to Rashi, the *shirah* (song) mentioned in this verse refers to the song-like *parashah* that follows, which is *parashas Ha'azinu*.²

From both the placement and content of the above verse, the reader can discern the significance attributed to the song of *Ha'azinu*. It is a dramatic moment in the Torah. The Jewish nation

¹ *Devarim* 31:19.

² Rashi on *Devarim* 31:19.

is poised to enter the Land and their leader Moshe Rabbeinu is about to die. It is at this juncture that Moshe Rabbeinu commands the Jewish people: **כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת** (write down this song).

This verse sparks several questions. First, why is *parashas Ha'azinu* called *shirah*? In Torah context, a *shirah* has joyous connotations. The concept of *shirah* is associated with *Shiras HaYam*,³ *Shiras HaBe'er*,⁴ *Shiras Devorah*,⁵ or even *Shiras Dovid*.⁶ In all of these examples, song is an artistic expression of gratitude and a poetic recognition of Hashem's salvation. Although written in poetic stanzas like lyrics, the actual words of *Ha'azinu* hardly sound like an outburst of joyous song. Since a large percentage of *Ha'azinu* consists of rebuke to *Bnei Yisrael* for their immoral conduct, the term *shirah* seems to be a misnomer in this case.⁷

A second group of questions relates to the significance of *Ha'azinu*. Why are we instructed to give special attention to this song? Why would we need to be commanded to write down something in the Torah? Isn't it already written? Why does the verse include the seemingly superfluous word **לכם** (for you)? What meaning is implied by the phrase **תהיה לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל**? How is this song a witness for the Jewish People? What is it witnessing exactly?

Interestingly, our Sages derive from this verse the obligation to write a *sefer Torah*. According to *Sefer HaChinuch* and the Rambam, this commandment is the final *mitzvah* of the Torah.⁸ We

³ *Shemos* 15:1-19 (after the splitting of the *Yam Suf*).

⁴ *Bamidbar* 21:17-20 (in relation to the water Hashem supplied for the Jewish nation in the desert).

⁵ *Shoftim* 5:1-31.

⁶ *Shmuel II* 22:1-51.

⁷ Rabbi Moshe Reiss, *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 381.

⁸ *Sefer HaChinuch* 613; Rambam *Sefer HaMitzvos*, *Aseih* 18.

may inquire, however, how our Sages infer from this verse the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah*. If this *pasuk* alludes exclusively to *Ha'azinu*, then it would seem that the *mitzvah* should be to write down only that *parashah*. Why do our Sages extend the *mitzvah* to include the entire Torah? Furthermore, in the context of this derivation by our Sages, why is the whole Torah described as a song? What aspects of Torah are comparable to *shirah*?

Last, it is important to explore the ways in which this *parashah* is appropriate to the season of the year. We read *parashas Ha'azinu* in the month of Tishrei, during the introspective time of the High Holidays. What fundamental messages do we learn from this *parashah*? How are these messages relevant to our lives?

All for Our Good

In order to address our first question, a general analysis of *parashas Ha'azinu* is in order. Why is it called *shirah*? In terms of content, one may describe *parashas Ha'azinu* as a poetic time capsule. In lyrical verse, *Ha'azinu* presents a complete chronology of Jewish history: past, present and future. A typical *parashas hashavua* relates a detailed segment from a longer narrative. *Ha'azinu* is unique. It is an all-inclusive summary of Jewish destiny. Since it contains the most fundamental aspects of the Torah, *Ha'azinu* is referred to as ‘**The Song**’, a kind of spiritual national anthem. It was designed to evoke Jewish “patriotic” sentiment by extolling the comprehensive history and primary inherited tradition of the Jewish nation.

The spiritually significant content of *Ha'azinu* justifies referring to it in a manner distinct from other *parshiyos*. However, its uniqueness doesn't explain why it is specifically called *shirah* (as opposed to “the Jewish people's constitution”). Where is the joy in this song? If *Ha'azinu* vividly exposes our people's past full of error and rebuke, sin and punishment, then why is it called *shirah*?

Rabbi Moshe Reiss offers the following insights of the *Sefas Emes*. The Jewish mindset includes acceptance that Hashem's punishments are for one's ultimate benefit.⁹ The Jewish nation's story as presented in *Ha'azinu* is not a history lesson, but rather a detailed manifestation of Hashem's Divine providence and wisdom. While *Ha'azinu* includes honest and unsympathetic rebuke, it is nevertheless called *shirah*. Divine reprimand is ultimately for our greatest good.

Torah living includes using failings and difficult circumstances to our spiritual advantage. In this way, therefore, we perceive our challenges as part of a joyous song. Dovid HaMelech alluded to this philosophy in the verse: *חסד ומשפט אשירה* ([for both] kindness and judgment I will sing).¹⁰ He recognized that Hashem's judgment is also a reason to sing. Similarly, Yeshayahu HaNavi wrote: *אודה ה' כי אנפת בי* (I thank you, Hashem, for You were angry with me).¹¹ We can thank Hashem for His anger when we understand it in proper perspective.

Accepting negative experiences and responding with gratitude are sophisticated spiritual skills to develop. This world is a mixture of pain and pleasure. An individual with a secular mindset judges his experiences as either 'bad' or 'good' in proportion to the intensity of pain or pleasure he feels. However, this mentality is a one-dimensional perspective on human life. The Jewish outlook delves beneath the surface, evaluating experiences for their **authentic** good. The Torah definition of 'good' is not equivalent to 'pleasant', but rather 'that which brings me closer to Hashem.' This perspective is the result of achieving an exalted, yet attainable, spiritual level.

⁹ *MeiRosb Tz'urim*, p. 381.

¹⁰ *Tehillim* 101:1.

¹¹ *Yeshayahu* 12:1.

This concept of higher good helps us address one of our questions. Why does the verse write **כהבו לכם** including the extra term **לכם** (for you)? A similar question is commonly asked about the first of Avraham Avinu's ten trials when Hashem said, **לך לך** (lit. "go for you"). On this verse, Rashi states that "for you" implies "for your benefit and your own good."¹² Honestly, how **good** could Avraham Avinu have felt as he abandoned his family, his birthplace, and his roots to embark on a journey to an unknown destination?

Surely he must have been filled with anxiety and trepidation. While Avraham Avinu's test might not have been pleasurable, it was 'good' in a deeper sense. A truly 'good' experience is one that facilitates personal spiritual growth, even if it is difficult or painful. Perhaps *Ha'azinu* is called *shirah* because every trial is **לכם**, meaning "for your benefit". Every challenge is a hidden Divine gift. When we read the broad scope of Jewish history presented in the song of *Ha'azinu*, we can see the whole picture, our entire development, and believe that even the punishments were for our benefit.

Salvation without Stipulation

Parashas Ha'azinu is unique in that it describes our complete past, present and future, alluding to both this world and The World to Come.¹³ According to the Slonimer Rebbe, the depiction of our future in *Ha'azinu* provides additional insight into why it is called *shirah*. The final verse of the *shirah* reads as follows:

¹² Rashi on *Bereishis* 12:1.

¹³ See *Nesivos Shalom Devarim*, p. 212, quoting *Sifrei*.

הַרְנִינוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ כִּי דַם עֲבָדָיו יִקּוּם וְנִקְם יִשִׁיב לְצָרָיו וְכִפֵּר אֶדְמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ (Nations! Sing praises of His people, for He will avenge the blood of His servants. He will bring retribution upon His foes and He will appease His Land and His people).¹⁴ The Ramban interprets this verse as Hashem's unconditional promise of our ultimate redemption. He emphasizes that *Ha'azinu's* description of our deliverance from *galus* (exile) does not include any mandatory prerequisites. This verse does not state a conditional equation, in which our redemption is dependent on our repentance. Rather, *Ha'azinu* presents Hashem's unqualified pledge to bring the *genulah* (redemption).¹⁵

This explanation by the Ramban addresses some of our above questions. Why does the verse convey a necessity for the song of *Ha'azinu* to be written down? How is this song a witness for the Jewish People? According to the Ramban, *Ha'azinu* includes Hashem's unfettered promise to redeem us. *Ha'azinu* is therefore similar to a *shtar eidus* – a legal document that bears witness to Hashem's commitment to our better future. Even if we don't repent, Hashem will forgive us for His own sake. This promise needs to be written down as legal evidence, as a permanent testimony for all generations. *Ha'azinu* is authentic proof of Hashem's guarantee that, despite our failings, He will never forget us.

We still need to explore how this metaphor of *Ha'azinu* as a *shtar eidus* meshes with its identity as *shirah*. Although the Ramban compares it to a legal document, *Ha'azinu* is also a song of comfort for every Jew. The joy of this *shirah* is not artificial, but rather the kind of encouragement that only Hashem can provide. Although it isn't the joy of salvation itself, it is the **promise** of

¹⁴ *Devarim* 32:43.

¹⁵ Ramban on 32:40, as quoted by *Nesivos Shalom*, p. 212.

salvation. Hashem's pledge gives us the strength to endure; when we see the light at the end of the tunnel, we know the darkness of *galus* will end. It is this joyful expectation that is expressed in the song of *Ha'azinu*.

Parashas Ha'azinu is often read immediately after Yom Kippur, which is a time for personal introspection. While it is important to take an accounting of one's actions, analyzing past failures can be discouraging. One might realize how he did not reach his Yom Kippur goals and fall into despair. The greatest pain for a Jew is the feeling that Hashem is disappointed in him or does not care about him.¹⁶ The High Holidays are a time for a Jew to return to his Divine roots and spiritual source. It is the season to reawaken our awareness of our inseparable connection to our Creator, both communally and individually. We read *parashas Ha'azinu* during this season of *teshuvah* because Hashem tells us to write down this song, and to remember that He will never push us away.

Our longing for Hashem's goodwill is evident in many prayers, among them *birchas kobanim* (the priestly blessing): יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנק (may Hashem cause His face to shine toward you **and favor you**).¹⁷ This is a blessing for our greatest hope, which is to find favor in the eyes of Hashem. Rabbi Shimon Schwab states that the term חן implies a spiritual endowment. The word חן is etymologically related to the word חינם (free or unearned).¹⁸ So too, even if we don't deserve redemption, the song of *Ha'azinu* is proof that Hashem will show us unearned, unconditional love and bring the *geulah*.

¹⁶ *Nesivos Shalom*, p. 212.

¹⁷ *Bamidbar* 6:25.

¹⁸ *Rav Schwab on Prayer*, pp. 44, 81. For example, 'ונח מצא חן בעיני ה' – And Noah found favor in Hashem's eyes, though he could not rely on his own merits to be rescued from the flood.

Live and Learn

The beauty of the song of *Ha'azinu* is that it stands as testimony for Hashem's eternal relationship with the Jewish people. Our discussion above, however, leaves other questions unanswered. If the words **השירה הזאת** refer to *Ha'azinu* and the purpose of writing it is to stand as testimony, then the *mitzvah* to write it should seemingly include **only** *parashas Ha'azinu*. Why, then, do our Sages broaden the scope of this verse in *Vayeilech* and derive from here the *mitzvah* of writing an **entire** *sefer Torah*?

Before we address this question, it is important to first examine the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah*. Since the average individual is not a trained scribe, it is common practice to fulfill one's obligation by commissioning or contributing funds toward the writing of a *sefer Torah*. But what is the underlying reason for this *mitzvah*? It seems that the purpose of the *mitzvah* is explained by the *pasuk* itself: **כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל** – The act of writing a *sefer Torah* enables one to learn and teach Torah.

How does today's observance of the *mitzvah* achieve this aim, since we no longer study from actual Torah scrolls? According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, the spirit of this *mitzvah* is perpetuated through the writing and acquisition of *sefarim*. By filling our homes and synagogues with *sefarim*, we uphold the underlying principle of this *mitzvah*, which is the perpetuation of Torah learning. The propagation of Torah literature and having it readily accessible enables us to immerse ourselves in its study.¹⁹

However, the question remains: why did our Sages derive the *mitzvah* of writing an entire *sefer Torah* from the above verse that alludes to *parashas Ha'azinu* alone? Rav Pam offers one answer by

¹⁹ *Sefer HaChinuch*, *mitzvah* 613.

citing one of the Rambam's laws of writing a *sefer Torah*. It is prohibited to write the Torah piecemeal (“*parshiyos parshiyos*” lit. chapters, chapters). If we are commanded to write down *parashas Ha'azinu*, we can only write it down **within** the entirety of Torah. Therefore, our Sages infer from this verse that the *mitzvah* is to write an entire *sefer Torah* that **contains** this song.²⁰

Perhaps this technical explanation could be considered somewhat unsatisfactory. According to the Torah Temimah, the *mitzvah* to write *Ha'azinu* is considered a separate *mitzvah*, similar to that of writing the Torah passages for *tefillin* or *mezuzos*. In those cases, the restrictions regarding writing separate *parshiyos* do not apply.²¹ Furthermore, many commentators interpret the wording **השירה הזאת** to mean the whole Torah, without offering any technical explanation such as that of the Rambam. This opinion seems baffling, since only *Ha'azinu* is written in poetic form while the rest of the Torah (with few exceptions)²² is written as either a straight narrative or a list of laws. While the insights of *Sefer HaChinuch* and the Rambam clarify the purpose and source for the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah*, our fundamental question remains largely unanswered – why is the Torah called *shirah*?

Song: The Unspoken

To analyze the analogy of Torah to *shirah*, one needs to consider which qualities of *shirah* could possibly be applied to Torah. One approach to deciphering this metaphor focuses on the

²⁰ *A Vort From Rav Pam*, p. 235.

²¹ *Torah Temimah* on *Devarim* 31:19, note 26.

²² Exceptions occur when song lyrics are included as part of the narrative, such as *Shiras HaYam* and the like.

characteristics of song lyrics. Citing *Ha'amek Davar*, Rabbi Reiss notes the key distinction between a story and a poem. The writer of a story strives to articulate his ideas as clearly as possible. Although creative, the author chooses words that accurately illustrate specific concepts. By contrast, a poem is written more elusively. While a story writer aims for the concrete and optimally comprehensible, a lyricist aims more toward the abstract and symbolic. In poetry, much is left unstated, thereby leaving ample room for analysis and interpretation. This style of writing enables each reader to search for his own personal meaning and relevance.²³

Along these lines, the Torah as a whole can be compared to *shirah*. The reader is not meant to take the Torah at face value. Words of the Torah have layers of meaning. In fact, there are even four levels of scriptural exegesis: *p'shat* (literal meaning), *remez* (subtle hints or word plays), *drash* (philosophical or ethical expounding), and *sod* (mystical nuances or subliminal mega-themes). Words of Torah are like the words of a song, often enigmatic and vague, begging for interpretation and elucidation.

The Torah is called *shirah* because we must find personal relevance within it, thereby inscribing it on our own hearts, as we find in our verse: כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל. Write the song of Torah so that you may teach it and learn it. Learning Torah is not only an intellectual exercise but a fundamentally spiritual endeavor. The term *shirah* implies that words of Torah contain layers of meaning and myriads of life lessons waiting to be unveiled. This song metaphor is utilized intentionally in our verse, as Hashem charges us with this final *mitzvah*. We must understand from this premise that Torah study is a lifetime enterprise: not academic **research**, but rather, a deep and soulful **search**.

²³ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, page 385.

Anyone who has engaged in Torah study knows that each word and even each letter of the Torah is laden with levels of connotation. This is the beauty of the song of Torah study. For example, *parashas Vayzeitzei* begins with a seemingly straightforward statement: ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה (Yaakov Avinu departed from *Be'er Sheva* and went toward *Charan*).²⁴ However, our Sages teach us that the textual emphasis on Yaakov Avinu's exit implies that it was not just a physical leaving, but a metaphysical and spiritual one as well.

Names of people and places in the Torah have profound layers of meaning and implication. Therefore, the place called *Be'er Sheva* may be interpreted allegorically as “the source of seven” since *be'er* is a well (a water source) and *sheva* is seven. The name *Charan* has the same Hebrew letters as the word *charon* (anger). On a deeper level, therefore, this verse refers to leaving Shabbos (*Be'er Sheva* – the seventh day and the “wellspring” of blessing for the week) and entering the week (*Charan* – “the anger” of the mundane). We learn lessons on so many levels that are pertinent to our daily lives when we study the song of Torah. There is no limit to meaningful textual investigation in Torah learning.

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter explains that Torah study is far more profound than simple acquisition of knowledge or a one-dimensional accumulation of facts. Learning Torah is the revelation of Hashem's secrets. The deeper one delves, the more layers of perception one uncovers.²⁵ Rabbi Reiss offers the following analogy: learning Torah may be likened to entering a magnificent palace. This concept is alluded to by Shlomo HaMelech: “The King has brought me to His chambers.”²⁶ One who observes the outside of

²⁴ *Bereishis* 28:10.

²⁵ *Pirkei Torah*, p. 201.

²⁶ *Shir HaShirim* 1:4.

the palace is struck by its beauty. But as he enters, his amazement is intensely magnified. As he advances into each room, venturing further and further into the palace, he grows closer to the breathtakingly splendid throne room of the King himself. This journey through the myriad of doors within the palace is the spiritual exploration called Torah study. The more in-depth one studies, the greater the beauty and elegance he discovers as he comes closer and closer to his Creator.²⁷

Words of Torah are oftentimes elusively lyrical like the words of a song, and it is up to us to discover their splendor. While year after year, we read the same *parshiyos*, each year we strive to delve deeper, to learn different lessons, and to find different interpretations. Just as the words of a song touch different people in varying ways, so too do the words of Torah speak differently to individuals. Each of us has the potential to analyze *shirah* differently, through the lenses of our personal perspectives and experiences. Indeed, it is our obligation to Hashem to do exactly this.

Wholeness of Harmony

This analogy of Torah to *shirah* contains additional dimensions to consider. Lyrics are only one component of a song. A second essential component is obviously the music itself. The concept of harmony is a special characteristic of music. The wonder of *shirah* occurs when completely different tones are played simultaneously and, despite their dissimilarity, they blend into a euphonic whole.²⁸ An individual pitch sounds nice in isolation, but it cannot compare to the rich resonance of a harmonious, multi-tone chord. In this

²⁷ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 387.

²⁸ *ibid.*

way, music demonstrates what scientists call “the synergistic effect”. As Rabbi Akiva Tatz explains, the totality of a song is more magnificent than the sum of its parts.²⁹ Numerous notes in a chord can create a splendid harmony only when all constituents are played.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Reiss writes that *mitzvos* of the Torah are designed to bring one closer to Hashem, on condition that the person observes them **in totality**. Just as a singular note sounds weak compared to the whole harmonious chord, so too an isolated *mitzvah* is incapable of promoting the same spiritual growth as the observance of all 613 *mitzvos*.³⁰ The Torah is not a menu of options, from which one is free to choose a *mitzvah* from column A and another *mitzvah* from column B. The Torah is compared to a song because its beauty is in its wholeness and completion. This is another reason why this final *mitzvah* is derived from our verse. Only by writing down the entire Torah for yourself is its spiritual splendor revealed in completion.

To fulfill every single commandment in the Torah seems to be an unrealistic and intimidating expectation. At times, we may feel discouraged by seemingly unattainable spiritual goals. However, a growth-oriented mindset mandates dreaming big and aiming high. This need for glimpses of lofty spiritual goals explains why *parashas Ha'azinu* is fitting to read in the *teshuvah* season. After the atonement of Yom Kippur, we start with a clean slate. We spiritually prepare ourselves for the new year, we need to be fueled with ambition to observe the whole Torah. As the Rambam states, it is forbidden to write the Torah *parshiyos parshiyos*; in a deeper sense, this directive can teach us not to be content with partially living Torah.³¹

²⁹ *Living Inspired*, p. 158.

³⁰ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 387.

³¹ *A Vort From Rav Pam*, p. 236.

As noted above, this music analogy applies not only to Torah living but also to Torah study. Rabbi Avraham Pam underscores the need to maintain a vision of the whole Torah, even while one concentrates on a specific subject in Torah learning.³² Perhaps this is yet another interpretation of the Rambam's opinion regarding the prohibition of writing the Torah piecemeal. In the same way that a singular tone is less powerful than the full chord, a small portion of Torah study is essentially underpowered when it is extracted and isolated from the rest.

The risk of one's hyperfocus on small Torah pieces is that he misses a glimpse of the full breadth of Torah and loses the inspiration to acquire **all** of its wisdom. Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach was once shown a novel invention (at the time): *gemara* printed onto pages to put into a loose-leaf binder. He rejected this innovation, declaring incredulously, "Is this the Torah? A piece of paper?!" This page-by-page learning tool would deny a student the broad scope, the long-range vision that encourages aspirations of future learning encompassing the entire Torah.

Unfortunately, during these times of technological advancement, we are experiencing the challenge of shortsightedness in Torah learning. At an alarming rate, publishers are abandoning the traditional printing of books, and instead promoting digital learning tools. Their motivation might be well-intentioned: imagine limitless resource material at one's fingertips, with just a touch to the screen! This trend has penetrated the Jewish world as well, with digital *sefarim*.

While it may seem like a modern development, we should consider what we are losing by virtue of this shift. If a student learns from a single page on a computer monitor, where is the

³² *ibid.*

opportunity to envision how much more he has to learn? Without flipping pages of a thick volume of *gemara*, what vision will inspire him to progress? Perhaps a single page of Chumash on the screen of an electronic device is like learning *parshiyos parshiyos*. Returning to the song analogy: hearing isolated notes may sound pretty, but the synergistic beauty of the song in its entirety is surely lost.

A similar challenge also exists in teaching Torah. Often, well-meaning Chumash teachers focus excessively on particular *pesukim* or on a specific *perek*. While students might learn valuable lessons about these particular verses, their Torah knowledge is narrowed and somewhat constricted. Perhaps by isolating these verses, the totality of Torah remains unseen and largely unappreciated. As the saying goes, one who is too absorbed in details “can’t see the forest for the trees.” Each Torah verse fits into the context of a chapter, that chapter fits into the context of a *parasha*, and that *parasha* fits into the context of one of the five books of the Torah. The Ramban wrote frequently about the theme of a *sefer* of Chumash; this message aims to uncover the beauty of the whole. This holistic harmony of *shirah* is often lost in today’s classrooms.

Totality of Torah

As we’ve discussed, a sense of wholeness of Torah is essential in **living** the Torah. The verse in *Tehillim* states: תורת ה' תמימה משיבה נפש (Hashem’s Torah is wholesome/perfect, reviving the soul).³³ The Torah has limitless Divine qualities, yet this verse indicates that specifically the attribute of wholeness is what revives the soul. Only when the Torah is observed in completion does it bring one’s soul closer to its source; separate *mitzvos* or pieces of the Torah cannot accomplish the same.

³³ *Tehillim* 19:8.

Rabbi Reiss illustrates this notion of totality with the example of a wristwatch. A watch has myriads of different parts inside, each part with a different function. If one were to remove even a single, miniscule piece, the watch would stop working. In fact, no matter how beautiful the watch still is, no one would want it, as it no longer serves its purpose. Similarly, the wholeness of the Torah is necessary to fulfill its purpose of bringing closeness to Hashem. By missing even a single, solitary *mitzvah*, the Torah is not a complete *shirah*. It might look like a watch, but it doesn't tell the time.³⁴

The goal of human life is to strive for a sense of wholeness and completion. This mission can be challenging to maintain within our mundane daily routine. Our lives are comprised of countless details that are part of a regular schedule of human maintenance: eating, sleeping, showering, working, and much more. It seems so futile! As Rabbi Simon Jacobson explains, countless trivial activities tend to overwhelm the few meaningful encounters we experience.³⁵ Life then becomes a meaningless regimen of bits and pieces – *parshiyos parshiyos*. We are in constant danger of drowning in everyday minutiae.

This problem is compounded when we acknowledge that people find fragmentation very anxiety provoking. Given that God created us with many distinct physical needs, how can we avoid a frazzled existence? The answer lies in the concept of wholeness. Just as a watch is useless if it doesn't tell the time, our lives are meaningless without a central purpose. When we elevate the mundane facets of daily living, gearing them all toward a higher spiritual goal, we string the pieces together with a unifying thread. The individual notes are transformed into a song.

³⁴ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 387.

³⁵ *Toward a Meaningful Life*, p. 144.

Even when engaged in everyday routine, we must remember that Hashem has charged us with the mission of personal refinement; every endeavor should be fueled by that aspiration.

If the importance of unity is applicable to both mundane activities as well as Torah study, how much more relevant is the concept of wholeness to *mitzvos* observance. As mentioned above, Rabbi Reiss emphasizes the necessity of following the Torah *beshleimus* (in completion). *Mitzvos* effectively enhance a relationship with Hashem only when one whole-heartedly accepts the totality of *mitzvos*.³⁶ However, Rabbi Zeff Leff explains that even performing all 613 *mitzvos* is not equivalent to completely fulfilling Hashem's Will. All *mitzvos* in the Torah are united both in their purpose (to bring us closer to Hashem) and their Divine source. Each individual *mitzvah* is only a partial, and therefore incomplete, manifestation of Hashem's solitary will. In truth, *mitzvos* dictate more than our outer conduct; they require integration of the manner in which those *mitzvos* personally influence us.

Habitual Torah observance leaves one feeling fragmented and empty; no deeper association connects the pieces together. Yesha-yahu HaNavi wrote: **כי צו לצו, צו לצו, קו לקו, קו לקו, זעיר שם, זעיר שם** (for commandment by commandment, commandment by commandment, line by line, line by line, a bit here and bit there).³⁷ The prophet is reprimanding the people for performing individual *mitzvos* in isolation from one another, separate from any profound or unified purpose. Since human intellect cannot grasp the vastness of the Divine will, Hashem broke it down into 613 decipherable segments.³⁸ Nevertheless, we must remember that these details are part of a much bigger picture. Just as individual notes are

³⁶ *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 387.

³⁷ *Yeshayahu* 28:10.

³⁸ *Festivals of Life*, p. 264.

incomplete smaller components of a song, so too individual *mitzvos* are only separate elements of the Torah in its entirety.

This message is particularly important to keep in mind with the conclusion of the High Holidays, as we approach the holiday of Sukkos. It is a bustling time of year, when we are inundated with the many *mitzvos* of the season, many of which are either labor-intensive or detailed. Additionally, we tend to adopt extra *halachic* stringencies relating to the four species and building a *sukkah*. While these are productive actions, we should not lose sight of the unifying purpose of these *mitzvos*, which is developing a relationship with Hashem. Obsession with too many minutiae distracts us from our ultimate mission.

Our Sages state: Even the emptiest of them [the Jewish people] are filled with *mitzvos* like a pomegranate.³⁹ How can one be described as “empty” if he is “filled with *mitzvos*?” The answer lies in the pomegranate analogy. No matter how many seeds fill a pomegranate, each seed remains in its own separate sac of juice.⁴⁰ An individual may perform many *mitzvos* and learn much Torah, but still remain spiritually empty. A person is not “filled” by *mitzvos* that are disconnected like *צו לצו* or *parshiyos parshiyos*. It is critically important that our *mitzvos* be joined together by a common purpose and Divine will. The term *mitzvah* is formed from the root word *tzavta* (bond); *mitzvos* are bound together as one unit, one song, for the purpose of binding us to our Creator.

Where Words Fail, Music Speaks

Above we discussed two aspects of *shirah* and how they can be compared to Torah. One component is the lyrics, which leaves

³⁹ *Berachos* 57a.

⁴⁰ Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, *Building a Sanctuary in the Heart*, p. 21.

room for interpretation and depth of understanding. A second facet of *shirah* is harmony and its synergistic effect, in which the totality of the music is more than the sum of the individual notes. A third aspect of *shirah* is a unique mystical quality of music in general. Almost everyone can relate to the power of *niggun* (melody) that touches the heart in ways that words can not. Music conveys the realm of intangible because it is not constricted by the limits of language. Although the Torah is composed of written words, its mystic potency is similar to that of music. The abstract power of Torah is beyond words, and is therefore like the song of Hashem. Torah goes deeper than the intellect. Torah makes its way straight into the heart.

This extraordinary mystical capacity of Torah engenders an appreciation of the many *halachic* requirements and restrictions regarding writing a *sefer Torah*. A Torah scroll is more than simple inscription, and therefore even the thoughts of a scribe are dictated by Jewish law. According to our Sages, the white spaces between the black letters represent this complementary spiritual element, which is the holy inner spirit of the Torah.⁴¹ The *gemara* relates that when Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon was murdered, he was wrapped in a *sefer Torah* and fire was set to it.⁴² When his students cried out, "Master, what do you see?" he replied, "I see the parchment burning, but the letters of the Torah soar upward."⁴³ This imagery of the letters ascending symbolizes the mystical energy of the Torah which is similar to the power of song.

Rabbi Eliyahu Schlesinger distinguishes between the two commonly used terms for song – *zimrah* and *shirah*. *Zimrah* refers to

⁴¹ Rabbi Moshe Breslover, *L'Machar Atir*, p. 356.

⁴² He was one of the Ten Martyrs murdered by the Romans for ignoring the ban on teaching Torah.

⁴³ *Avodah Zarah* 17b.

the external component through which music is produced.⁴⁴ There is no music without the production of pitch, which is created through the vibration of physical matter. In *Tehillim*, we find the term *zimrah* almost exclusively alluding to musical instruments.⁴⁵ By contrast, the word *shirah* points to the internal feature of song, that which makes a profound impression on the soul. This mystical defining attribute of *shirah* justifies why our Sages state that the world of *shirah* is parallel to the world of repentance in 'The World to Come.'⁴⁶ Melody touches a person's soul and enables him to return to his spiritual source.

Music encourages us to return to Hashem, both in the personal and collective sense. This idea illustrates the connection between song and redemption. As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, we tend to associate the concept of *shirah* with *Shiras HaYam*⁴⁷ or other examples of verbally acknowledging Hashem's miracles. Since our liberation from Egypt was the paradigm for all redemptions, our prayers on Pesach, the holiday that commemorates redemption from Egypt, most vividly illuminate the correlation between *shirah* and redemption. We read from the *baggadah* as follows: וְנוֹדָה לְךָ שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ עַל גְּאוּלְתֵינוּ וְעַל פְּדוּת נַפְשֵינוּ. The words שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ (new song) demonstrate the soul's joyful renewal and return to Hashem.

A *zimrah* is more external, expressing only a momentary message or temporal emotion. The song of redemption, therefore, should not be called a *zimrah* since its quality is profound and eternal. On Pesach night, we sing a שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ, the soulful expression

⁴⁴ *Eileh HaDevarim*, p. 470.

⁴⁵ See for example *Tehillim* 33:2 הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה בְּכִנּוּר בְּנֶבֶל עֲשׂוּר זָמְרוּ לוֹ.

⁴⁶ *Eileh HaDevarim*, p. 470.

⁴⁷ *Shemos* 15:1-19.

of lasting gratitude to Hashem. Acknowledging Hashem's kindness and omnipotence is not a fleeting or time-bound experience.

Note that throughout the Torah, *Targum Onkeles* consistently translates the term *shirah* as the Aramaic word תושבחהא (praise). Consider the common English expression, "singing his praises." Why is praise normally associated with song? In truth, the whole Torah sings Hashem's praises. Learning Torah is not merely the intellectual pursuit of knowledge; Torah study actually sanctifies a person's soul, enabling him to appreciate Hashem's beneficence. The *shirah* of Torah is sung when Torah develops one's ability to love and fear Hashem, and to sing His praises.

This concept of the soulful expression called *shirah* reveals additional insight into the words כתבו לכם (for **yourselves**) in our verse. Engaging in Torah study should speak to your personal inner essence. The *gemara* quotes our verse as proof for the following *halachic* requirement: even if one receives a *sefer Torah* from his parents or grandparents as a gift, one is nevertheless obligated to write one **for himself**.⁴⁸

Rabbi Schlesinger suggests that the usage of the term לכם in our verse is different than every other instance in which it occurs in the text.⁴⁹ He argues that the Torah is compared to *shirah* because it expresses the deepest part of an individual's soul. Therefore, the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah* for ourselves implies that we need to write our own portion of the Torah and sing our unique part of the song. Lest the notion of writing our own part of the Torah be misinterpreted, this does not mean that we may take creative license with Hashem's perfect Torah. It is not appropriate to interpret the Torah merely according to our needs and desires.

⁴⁸ *Sanbedrin* 21.

⁴⁹ *Eileh HaDevarim*, p. 471. He cites the example of the Torah's mandate that one acquire his own *lulan* and *esrog*, with regard to which the word לכם is written.

The *mitzvah* of writing one's own Torah has to do with reinforcing a person's emotional and spiritual connection to Torah. The *Zohar* states as follows: The Holy One blessed be He, The Torah and Israel are One.⁵⁰ This sublime unity implies that just as the Torah is part of us, we are a part of the Torah. The reciprocal, three-part relationship enables us to relate to the Torah and to Hashem on a personal soul-level. The *Zohar* clearly states, therefore, that every person has a different perspective and understanding of the same Torah. This phenomenon validates the reason why inheriting a *sefer Torah* from one's forefathers does not absolve him of the *mitzvah* of writing his own Torah. He cannot simply inherit the Torah. Rather, it is incumbent on him personally to write it **himself** and sing the song of his unique soul.

Living Torah is not just about appreciating the 'black' letters, but also the white spaces in between. Living Torah is not just about noting and following the technical aspects to the letter. It also has to do with recognizing and being grateful for the spiritual and soulful aspects. We must sing the Song ourselves, and find the spark that ignites the fire in our soul. The Kesav Sofer analyzes two passages in the *gemara* that both refer to receiving the Torah.

Writing a *sefer Torah* is compared to receiving it from *Har Sinai*.⁵¹

Teaching one's son Torah is compared to his receiving it from *Har Sinai*.⁵²

How is writing a *sefer Torah* similar to teaching Torah to one's children? How are both *mitzvos* analogous to the sublime original experience of the receiving of the Torah?

The Kesav Sofer outlines the three levels of *avodas Hashem*, defining them by one's motivation to observe *mitzvos*. The first

⁵⁰ *Zohar* 3:73, see also above *parashas Re'eh*, p. 73 (and note 11).

⁵¹ *Menachos* 30a.

⁵² *Berachos* 21b.

category includes those people who keep *mitzvos* out of a passionate love for Hashem. The second category includes people who observe the Torah out of awe for Hashem and fear of being punished for negligence. The third category consists of those who perform *mitzvos* as part of their natural behavior. This third type of person is one who has become accustomed to certain behaviors simply by observing them in his childhood. He has been subject to passive conditioning and, as a result, he fulfills *mitzvos* by rote.

An individual who fulfills *mitzvos* out of reflexive habit is like one who inherits a *sefer Torah*. He is simply imitating the behavior of his forefathers, but he has not written the Torah himself. He has not sung the Song of Torah by putting his heart and soul into *mitzvos*. We can understand our verse above as follows: כתבו לכם, “one who writes a *sefer Torah*,” את השירה הזאת “the Torah touches his soul deeply like a song.” It is as if he is standing at *Har Sinai* and personally receiving the Torah anew.

How else can we associate the writing of a *sefer Torah* with teaching Torah to one's children? This **final** *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah* complements the **very first** *mitzvah* of פרו ורבו (be fruitful and multiply). According to the *Mishnas Avraham Avinu*, writing or donating a *sefer Torah* is a special *segulah* for having children.⁵³ The Torah's concluding and introductory *mitzvos* are bookends.

Heart and soul are essential components of teaching Torah to our children, as indicated by our verse: ולמדה את בני ישראל (and teach it to the Children of Israel). For parents to truly teach Torah to their children, they cannot just condition mechanical obedience or impart technical information. We must express our own

⁵³ The *Mishnas Avraham* interprets the verse of *Bereishis* 5:1 זה ספר תולדות האדם allegorically as “if you write this book, you will have offspring”; cited by Rabbi David Ashear in *Daily Emunah*, Email Lesson #723.

excitement for a Torah life and sing **השירה הזאת**. When we sing the Torah's Song and inscribe the white between the lines, then our children's souls are touched by the power of this sacred and powerful music. Children can only truly experience receiving the Torah personally if the messages transmitted to them are not only technical but spiritual as well.

It is not only important to transmit this passion for Torah to our children, but it is also critical for our own spiritual health. The Ponevezher Rav expounds this fundamental concept from a narrative in *sefer Yehoshua*.⁵⁴ In the fifth chapter, as the people prepared to conquer the Land of Israel, a man holding a sword appeared before Yehoshua bin Nun. What follows is an enigmatic exchange between them. Yehoshua bin Nun asked the following: **הלנו אתה אם לצרינו** (Are you with us or with our enemies)? The man then identified himself as an angel of Hashem and stated: **עתה באתי** (Now I have come).⁵⁵

The *gemara* explains that they were speaking in code.⁵⁶ When Yehoshua bin Nun asked, **הלנו אתה**, he alluded to **תורה צוה לנו משה**. Was the angel really coming to reprimand the people for their laxity in **לנו** – meaning, Torah learning? How could he expect the people to stay awake, learning late into the night? Wasn't it important that they rest before a battle? The angel's response **עתה באתי** references our verse, **ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת**.

The Ponevezher Rav explains that the angel argued that Yehoshua bin Nun's reason for temporary negligence in Torah study was incomplete and unsatisfactory. Resting before battle was a valid reason to be absolved from the obligation to learn Torah. However,

⁵⁴ *Rabbi Frand on the Parashah* 2, p. 350.

⁵⁵ *Yehoshua* 5:13-14.

⁵⁶ *Megillah* 3a.

if Torah is *shirah* – music to our ears – then we would never look for an excuse to stop singing. If the people had their heart and soul in Torah, **השירה הזאת**, they would have wanted to sing all night, even before a battle.

A Song for All to Hear

In summary, we have discussed three levels of the comparison of Torah to song. First, the words of Torah are similar to song lyrics, in that they have layers of meaning. Our mission is to delve into the depths of Torah learning to discover personal meaning. Second, Torah is harmonious like music; its beauty is in the totality of its observance. Learning and living Torah must have a sense of wholeness and centrality of underlying purpose in order to develop a relationship with Hashem. Lastly, the Song of Torah touches the soul at its essence. The white between the lines is the spirit of Torah that is beyond words, the passion for Torah that we must inscribe on our hearts and, in turn, pass on to our children.

In light of our analysis of the Torah as a song metaphor, let us now apply it to one of our original questions on the *pasuk* **הזאת השירה הזאת כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת** (write this song for yourselves). If these words in the first half of the *pasuk* allude to the entire Torah as **השירה**, then how can we interpret the remainder of the *pasuk*: **למען תהיה לי השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל** (so that this song shall be for Me a witness for the Children of Israel)?

Above, we analyzed this phrase as it refers to the song of *Ha'azinu*, as testimony that Hashem will redeem us. But how is the whole **Torah** a witness for the Jewish People? As discussed above, this verse is the source for the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah*, for which the underlying purpose is to perpetuate Torah study. Immersing ourselves in Torah becomes a testimony for the Jewish people. Our commitment to Torah learning is proof that we are

Hashem's children.⁵⁷ Torah study is called *shirah* because singing aloud is a public act; learning Torah both publicizes and attests to our devotion to Hashem.

When Torah is integrated into our essential being, it is a song that broadcasts our unique relationship with Hashem. The Torah then becomes public testimony to Hashem. As we transition from the pure oasis of Yom Kippur into the physically fragile *sukkah*, let us take this Song of Torah with us. When we leave the artificial security of our houses and live outside in temporary dwellings, we expose ourselves to the elements and openly trust in Hashem's protection. Our allegiance to Torah serves as the ultimate protection for us against all the negative forces in the world. May the Song of Torah always be on our lips and written on our hearts. May it stand as testimony for the Jewish people until Hashem fulfills His promise of uniting us all under one great *sukkah* of the final redemption.

⁵⁷ Rabbi Moshe Bik, *Chayei Moshe*, p. 373.