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בס"ד

Parashat Ha'azinu Part II On Various Topics of the Shira

1. "In accordance with the number of the children of Israel" (לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) [Deut. 32:8]

After requesting the Israelites to reflect on the days of old, to gain insight into the [happenings of] generations [past], to ask their fathers and elders who will inform them about the subject at hand (Deut. 32:7), in the following verse the *shira* provides an allegory concerning "ancient history." Its purpose is to highlight the antiquity and depth of G-d's favorable disposition toward the nation of Israel. Verse 8 reads: בְּהִנָּחַל עָלֵינוּ גוֹיִם ("When the Most High bequeathed nations their patrimony"), בְּהִפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם ("when He separated human beings"), יָצַב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים ("He set the boundaries of peoples") לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ("in accordance with the number of the children of Israel"). What does it mean that G-d established the boundaries of the nations in accordance with the number of the children of Israel? We will survey some of the major classical opinions.

Rashi:

When the Holy One Blessed Be He gave those who angered Him (the generation of the flood) their "portion," He drowned them. When He scattered the generation of the dispersal (builders of the Tower of Babel), He could have eliminated them from the world but did not do so. Instead, He "established the boundaries of peoples," keeping them alive, because of the numbers of Israel who were destined to emerge from the children of Shem [son of Noah]. That is, He established the boundaries of the seventy languages (nations) in accordance with the seventy souls of Israelites who descended to Egypt.

Although the verse's allegory refers to an abstruse, nontemporal matter and requires a recondite interpretation, these comments, based on midrashim, do not appear to be its straightforward interpretation.

Targum Jonathan:

When the Most High apportioned the world to the nations that stemmed from the sons of Noah, when He distributed scripts and languages to human beings in the generation of the dispersal, at that time He cast lots with the seventy angels, the ministers of the nations ... and established the territories of the nations equal to the number of the seventy souls of Israel who descended to Egypt.

Ibn Ezra:

Commentaries explained that this refers to the generation of the dispersal, for G-d then decreed that the land of the seven nations will be for Israel, adequate for their numbers ... The correct explanation in my opinion is that this is as stated [regarding the heavenly bodies Israel is cautioned not to be tempted to worship, "lest you lift your eyes ... and see the sun, the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, and be lured to bow to them and worship them"] "which Hashem your G-d has apportioned to the nations of the earth" (Deut. 4:19), because for each portion below there is a portion above. The explanation of "in accordance with the numbers of the children of Israel" is as our sages said, that the image of Jacob is engraved on the throne of glory – an esoteric matter. The proof [for this explanation] is "For G-d's portion is His nation" (v. 9), something He did not do for any other nation.

Ramban: After citing and praising Ibn Ezra's interpretation, he refers to verse 12 that states that G-d alone leads Israel "and no alien god is with Him" and adds in explanation "for no minister or ruler from all the *bene elohim* leads Israel or assists in leading it, for G-d does so alone."

Zohar:

Rabbi Isaac opened [the discussion]: Praiseworthy is Israel's portion ... for the other nations were

assigned ministers to rule over them whereas in regard to holy Israel ... the Holy One Blessed Be He ... holds them Himself as His portion.

Or HaHayim: In a reversal of sorts, he interpreted the phrase *עֲלִיוֹן גּוֹיִם* as “When the Most High apportioned the nations to the heavenly ministers.” However, this runs counter to the apparent parallelism between the two parts of the first half of verse 8 and does not smoothly lead into the continuation.

The notion of G-d having provided individual heavenly ministers for all the nations is found in the book of Daniel (10:13, 20, 21; 12:1), although that later work contains a modification from what seems to be implied in our passage. There, Israel also has a minister, Michael. The concept of heavenly ministers is well attested in ancient Jewish postbiblical sources (including Ben Sira and *Jubilees*, 2nd century B.C.E.). It is not definitely articulated in our verse 8 as it stands, but, as Ibn Ezra pointed out, it is strongly indicated in the following verse, “For Hashem’s portion is His nation,” and, as the Ramban noted, is alluded to in verse 12. Clearly, the notion fits the context, although the absence of any explicit mention of the heavenly ministers in verse 8 is difficult to explain.

Another problem concerning verse 8 is the linkage of the nations’ most ancient boundaries with the numbers of Israelites, as can be seen from the strained interpretations proffered.

A text of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the most ancient Hebrew Bible texts extant (ca. 200–150 B.C.E.), reads *לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים* (“in accordance with the number of *bene elohim*”) in place of *לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל*. Similarly, this reading (or perhaps a slight variant, *לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי אֵל*) is also reflected in the Septuagint (the Greek Bible translation, stemming from ca. 225 B.C.E.). This reading makes G-d’s assignments of nations to His heavenly ministers explicit. (*Targum Jonathan*, in a complex translation/elaboration of the biblical text, incorporates both readings as can be seen in our translation above.)

Of course the word *bene* in such contexts does not mean “sons” literally but “members of the circle,” just as is the case with *bene hanebiim*, (literally, “sons of the prophets”). The latter is a term often attested in the

book of Kings, such as in 2 Kings 2:7: “Fifty men of the *bene hanebiim* went...”

In pre-Torah times, the word *אֱלֹהִים* (*elohim*), clearly a plural construction conceived in polytheistic notions, denoted “gods.” In the Torah’s monotheistic revolution the word was appropriated to refer to the one G-d, aptly substituting Him for all the gods, thus decisively making the point that there is only one G-d. The term continued to be used to some degree in connotations other than for the one G-d. There was generally no fear that the term would be misunderstood since when it referred to G-d it was used in the singular. The word was also employed for G-d’s angel (Jud. 13:22), since an angel is essentially a manifestation of G-d revealing Himself in a particular manner in a particular setting. The expression *bene elohim* appears in a number of allegorical and poetic passages of Scripture.

In the book of Job, the members of G-d’s angelic assembly who periodically gather together to stand before Him are termed *bene ha’elohim* (Job 1:6; 2:1), with the prefix of the definite article. In the same book (38:7) but without the definite article prefix, the plural construction *bene elohim* (*בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים*) are juxtaposed with the morning stars (*בְּרָן יַחַד כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר*), depicted as joyously singing in the heavenly sphere. In a “prehistoric” context, written specifically to denote that context, the universal corruption before the flood was illustrated by the sexual interaction of the *bene ha’elohim* with human women (Gen. 6:2,4).

The terms *אֱלִים* and *בְּנֵי אֱלִים* also appear in poetic texts referring to supposed celestial beings: “Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem?” (Exod. 15:11); “Ascribe to Hashem, O *bene elim* ... glory and strength” (Ps. 29:1); “For who ... can compare to Hashem among the *bene elim*?” (Ps. 89:7). The basic idea in these verses was to establish the one G-d’s incomparability and supremacy over all beings, real and supposed. The singular term *אֵל* may also refer to a supposed demigod such as in Moses’ statement praising G-d: “for what *el* is there in the heavens or on earth who can do like Your works and like Your mighty deeds?” (Deut. 3:24).

With the text suggested by the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint our Deuteronomy 32 passage would be an instance of employing a metaphoric concept of heavenly ministers to pay tribute to the unique

relationship between G-d and Israel. At the same time it was an assertion of G-d's absolute dominion over all such beings, assigning them their responsibilities. That He is here termed עָלְיוֹן ("Most High"), in a context referring to His heavenly retinue, is surely most fitting.*

Some have wondered if this Septuagint reading might be another example of the tradition cited in the Talmud (*b. Meg.* 9a) that in a number of instances the seventy-two elders who were selected to translate the Bible into Greek intentionally altered certain words or phrases of the received text. They took into consideration the mindset of the Greek-speaking audience.

Alternatively, and probably more to the point, one may wonder if the word in our present Masoretic Text is a case of a סופרים, a "scribal emendation" made by the sages of antiquity. It clearly is the case that such emendations were generally intended to address an aspect of G-d's honor that at the time may have appeared to be compromised in the original text. In early days, when people thought in terms of nations having guardian angels or heavenly representatives, a statement that the one G-d assigned those beings their spheres of responsibility was helpful to combat possible idolatrous associations; the *bene elohim* phrase in our context was then eminently suitable and consistent with His honor. Subsequently, with the advance of the understanding of monotheism, many people may have considered such a heavenly body of ministers a diminishing of the scope of G-d's omnipotence. At a minimum, it may have been considered an unnecessary opening to a potential major problem.

It should be noted that in the Rambam's conjectures regarding the development of idolatry in ancient times, he considered the honor accorded to the celestial bodies – the heavenly ministers – as a step that eventually led to full-blown idolatry (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry* 1:1-2).

That our case was not included in the standard lists of scribal emendations, such as that in *Midrash Tanhuma Beshallah* 16, may be because at that time it was thought best not to even bring up the original word of our verse.

Ibn Ezra's linkage of our verse with Deuteronomy 4:19 appears to conceive of the heavenly ministers that were apportioned to the other nations as corresponding to the sun, moon and stars.** This concept may be reflected in Job 38:7 where בָּרְנַן יָחַד בָּקְרָהּ כּוֹכְבֵי בֹקֶר ("When the morning stars sang together") is juxtaposed with וַיִּרְעוּ כָּל בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים ("And all the *bene elohim* shouted for joy").

Perhaps the literary structure of the strophe that verse 8 is part of, which contains a significant degree of rhyme and meter, may be helpful in resolving the text. In verse 7, the final two colons rhyme or could rhyme, depending on how the endings are pronounced. In verse 8, with the word *elohim* the final two colons would rhyme. In verse 9, the two colons rhyme.

2. "He found him in a wilderness land" (יִמְצָאֵהוּ בְּאַרְצֵי מִדְבָּר [v. 10])

In describing G-d's benefactions to Israel the *shira* states: "He found him in a wilderness land (יִמְצָאֵהוּ בְּאַרְצֵי מִדְבָּר), in a waste, a howling desert. He encircled him, regarded him, watched over him as the pupil of His eye" (vv. 10-11). Commentators have asked: How can the Torah state that G-d found Israel in a wilderness, contrary to the depictions of the nation's origin in the books of Genesis and Exodus? What about the patriarchs, G-d's promises to them and the nation's sojourn in Egypt?

Some of the explanations proffered include alternate translations for the word יִמְצָאֵהוּ, providing it an unwritten object or referring it to a different context than the standard translation. We will survey some of the classical commentators:

Onqelos: "He provided their needs in the desert," taking *yimsa'ehu* as *yamsi'ehu* (in accordance with Numbers 11:22, where וַיִּמְצָא לָהֶם has the meaning of "will it suffice for them?").

Rashi: "He found Israel faithful to Him in the desert," for they accepted the Torah, which other nations refused to do [a case of an ellipsis].

Ibn Ezra: His presence was with them in the desert, on their own they would have been lost.

Ralbag: Israel found G-d in the desert.

Abarbanel: אָבָרְבָנֵל refers to the lawgiving

Or HaHayim: *Eres midbar* does not refer to a literal wilderness or desert but to the land of Egypt (a desert land in the moral sphere).

S. D. Luzatto: G-d found His portion (that is referred to in the previous verse) to be in the condition of (comparable to) a wilderness land.

Taking the passage's context into account as well as the straightforward meaning of "He found him in a wilderness," the difficulty with each of these interpretations is evident. We will return to this shortly.

Commentators have also asked, how is it that the enumeration of the Deity's benefactions to Israel does not make reference to the Exodus, and why is the lawgiving not mentioned?

Nehama Leibowitz answered: "The Exodus from Egypt was merely a means to achieve the most sublime of ends which was the choice of Israel through the giving of the Torah. This was stated to Moses at the burning bush 'When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve G-d upon this mountain' (Exod. 3:12). That the Song of Moses [*Ha'azinu*] deals with the choice of Israel and the giving of the Torah is abundantly evident from the context. Verse 11 ... is a poetic and figurative elaboration of the imagery employed prior to the giving of the law in Exodus 19:4" (*Studies in Devarim*, Eng. edition, p. 344).

However, as the Exodus is explicitly cited at the beginning of the Decalogue and often definitively referred to in Scripture in conjunction with G-d's benefactions to Israel and deployed as a great motivating principle, such an answer is unconvincing. And her construal of an allusion to the lawgiving is quite ambiguous.

It appears likely that the imagery of G-d finding an abandoned, lost and helpless people (or an individual) in a perilous wilderness and nurturing it with loving, tender care is symbolic of the entire enterprise of His taking Israel unto Himself. In such poetic expression it is unnecessary to be literally historical; specific details, no matter how important in other contexts, such as His intervening for Israel in Egypt, are

subsumed into the larger metaphoric picture. In its poetic fashion the analogy says it all.

For the same reason there was no specific mention of the lawgiving either. It is unnecessary to insist on seeing the eagle imagery of verse 11 as a reference to the lawgiving although it may possibly be intended. It is also unnecessary to strain the word *yebone'nehu* to mean "He made him understand" in order to hint at the lawgiving, as some commentators have posited. The straightforward meaning of *yebone'nehu* appears to be "to understand him," with the implication of being attentive to his needs. Thus the four verbs of the verse – found, encircled, understood and watched over – describe a natural progression.

Similarly, there is no need to harmonize this allegory with that of the previous strophe, the depiction of G-d's interest in Israel from prehistoric times. That also is at odds with other Torah narratives that concern the origin of the nation. Once we leave the world of historical reality messages may be transmitted without concern that the figurative details of one allegory are not in harmony with the figurative details of another allegory.

Symbolic imagery similar to that of our passage is found in the book of Ezekiel, which includes the following statement of G-d to Israel:

By origin and birth you are from the land of the Canaanites – your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. As for your birth, when you were born your navel cord was not cut ... No one pitied you ... on the day you were born you were left lying, rejected, in the open "Live in spite of your blood" ... I let you grow like the plants of the field ... You were still naked and bare when I passed by you [again] and saw that your time for love had arrived. So I spread my robe over you and covered your nakedness and I entered into a covenant with you by oath ... I decked you out in finery ... and a splendid crown on your head ... Your food was choice ... Your beauty won you fame.

Ezek. 16:3-14, NJPS

Here also, G-d's words are not in harmony with the chronology and historical detail of the Torah's narratives. However, the audience was sophisticated and realized that this prophecy was communicating a message in a figurative mode. The abandoned child

motif was popular in pre-Torah literature and buttressed a message with enormous emotional impact.

3. Concerning G-d's Considerations

G-d explained His decision to refrain from annihilating an iniquitous Israel as the result of His concern that the enemies would misinterpret events. They might attribute their extraordinary success to their own prowess (and their beliefs) and deny His providence and intervention in Israel's destiny (v. 27). The natural question is why would He not choose to punish and annihilate Israel in a different manner if that really was His preference? Some have answered that as the specific menace being foretold in the unfolding of future events is the existence of an enemy and war, that is the primary fear of the Israelites at the time being focused on, so the enemy's thinking is of concern. It is adequate to foretell the resolution of that crisis by whatever means it was resolved.

Perhaps G-d's explanation as to why he would not eradicate Israel should be understood in accordance with a broad usage of the interpretative principle cited by the sages, "The Torah speaks in the language of man." When one is angry with a loved one but is committed not to do something overly injurious to the object of his anger, he may conceal the true reason for his restraint and provide a superficial explanation. He may not be willing to state his deeper reason in order not to give undeserved comfort to the object of his vexation before he is fully humbled; doing so might impede the hoped-for improvement. Knowing parties may understand that the reason given is only a superficial explanation, intimating that there is really much more to the matter. Between the lines, Hashem's reason appears to be a deep commitment to Israel; His explanation demonstrates that He does not want to destroy the nation altogether, although that may be what it deserves.

This perspective appears to be supported by the passage in 2 Kings that explains why G-d saved Israel by Jeroboam son of Joash when the nation was on the verge of being annihilated, granting him great victories and success. He was a king described as an evildoer in G-d's eyes, who followed the sinful behavior of Jeroboam son of Nebat, causing Israel to sin. From the contemporary prophets Amos and Hosea

we learn about the widespread corruption, the exploitation of the poor and the debauchery that were prevalent during Jeroboam son of Joash's reign. However, G-d saw "the affliction of Israel, that it was extremely bitter, וְאֶפְסָ עֲצוּר וְאֶפְסָ עֲזוּב, and there were none to help Israel; and Hashem had not declared to blot out Israel's name from under heaven" (2 Kings 14:26-27). The shared concept and word usage with our *Ha'azinu* verses is apparent (see our Part I study on this *parasha*).

Subsequently, the *shira* posits a broader principle of divine providence regarding Israel: "For Hashem will vindicate His people and have a change of heart concerning His servants when He sees that their might is gone and neither *asur ve-azub* remain" (v. 36). This indicates that eventually, before all is totally lost, He will have compassion on Israel and endeavor to bring the nation back to Him.

Endnotes

* Ronald Benun pointed out that Psalm 82 – which employs many *Ha'azinu* roots throughout its eight verses – seems to use our verse 8 as a point of reference. In its concluding verse, after beseeching, "Rise O G-d, judge the earth," it closes with כִּי אֶתָּה כִּי אֶתָּה בְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם ("for You shall take possession of all the nations"). This appears related to our verse 8's וְכִי אֶתָּה בְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם ("When the Most High bequeathed nations their patrimony"). It projects the vision that ultimately all the nations are G-d's possession, and if justice is not being dispensed, as per the theme that runs through the psalm, He should act and take them back into His keeping.

** In Deuteronomy 4:19, Israel is warned not to serve the heavenly bodies, which were "apportioned" to the other nations. This latter clause is part of the allegory we are discussing and reflects the state of the world at the time, that polytheism was virtually universally practiced. As with all allegories, it cannot be interpreted independently of its context and surely is not to be taken as a "legal" statement indicating that G-d consigned the other nations to such worship. This would be contradictory to G-d's hope – widely attested throughout Scripture – that all humanity move toward monotheism: וַיְהִי ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא ("And Hashem shall be king over all the earth; in that day Hashem shall be one and His name one" [Zech. 14:9]).