

There are times when prose is not eloquent enough to convey the message. Poetry, with its underlying rhythms and evocative turns of phrase, has the power to reach us viscerally, and its ambiguousness provides a gentler approach to complex, sometimes deeply disturbing truths than does the straightforwardness of prose. The terrifyingly graphic curses and warnings of Parashah Bechukotai and reiterated three weeks ago in Parashah Ki Tavo may have actually backfired, leaving some of the Israelites so demoralized that they turn away and seek their fortune elsewhere. Throughout the entire Book of Deuteronomy Moses has retraced, reiterated, cajoled, and warned. For 40 years he has done his utmost to govern the people equitably, instructing and guiding two generations through thick and thin, never giving up on them, even to the extent of pleading with HaShem in their defense following their most egregious missteps. Now, prose cannot begin to express what he wishes to tell the Israelites. But unlike his first poem, the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15), this is no paean of victory and praise. In impassioned verse, he again reviews their history, from HaShem's miraculous redemption and their ensuing thanklessness and disobedience, through punishments past and future, and finally, to eventual reconciliation and vindication. His words are alternately sharp, critical, poignant, and resigned, but couched in metaphors that soften the harsh blows he must deliver. "My lesson will drip like rain; my word will flow like dew; like storm winds on vegetation and like raindrops on grass." (32:2) Like the Song at the Sea, this poem is full of rhythmic parallels skillfully crafted to reinforce the message, but optically it is vastly different. In the Torah scroll, the Song at the Sea looks like a solid wall with interlocking bricks separated by spaces; one line has two long "bricks" of text on the two sides, and the next line has two shorter "half-bricks" on the sides with a longer "brick" in the middle. This structure symbolizes the strong foundation of our covenant with HaShem. Our evening service liturgy leading up to *mi chamocho* reminds us that "His sovereignty they willingly accepted upon themselves." This commitment, made in the euphoria of their miraculous escape from Egypt, has been notoriously difficult for us to uphold. The structure of Ha'azinu is a stark reminder of this. Its two columns, separated and lacking a central support, are easily toppled. No wonder Moses opens this poem with the unusual word *ha'azinu* instead of the more common *shim'u*. The first derives from the root שׁוֹמֵר, which forms words such as ear, to weigh, to listen. The root שׁוֹמֵר means to hear with understanding, to let the voice be heard, i.e., hearing that engages the intellect and implies the will to obey. Hearing is simply receiving sound, whereas listening is an active process that requires concentration and practice. Listening may not even involve the ear directly; we listen to our inner voices, and our thoughts become unspoken words. *Shema* is where it begins, but this commits us to truly listen with all of our senses to the words of our Torah so that we may apply its lessons to life in our own complicated, dangerous, and uncertain world. Listening with our full attention is not easy. We are constantly bombarded by a myriad of sounds, as well as the chatter in our own minds. We have to make a conscious effort to tune out all this noise and concentrate deeply. The heightened demands of poetry's unique rhythms and opaque metaphors can be a powerful focusing tool. And if we add the visual aspect and observe how the poem is laid out on the page, we gain even more insight. Ha'azinu's parallel columns that resemble two vulnerable towers, are in themselves a warning. Talmud Tractate Megilla 16b lists two other songs in the TaNaKh that are written in columns (omitting mention of Ha'azinu): The list of Haman's sons, and the song listing the kings of Canaan who were defeated by Joshua. "What is the reason that these two songs are written in this anomalous fashion? So that they should never rise from their downfall. Just as a wall that is built in this manner will not stand, so too, these individuals should have no resurgence." From our vantage point, Ha'azinu then, is a poem not only of rebuke, but of dire warning. In the millennia since these events the world has seen the rise and fall of many civilizations, and we Jews have also risen to great heights and suffered immeasurable downfall. But unlike the others, we have prevailed, because despite our human shortcomings, we have always managed to preserve our covenant with HaShem, which rests upon our willingness and our ability to pass our Torah from generation to generation. Although many of us grew up with rather tenuous connections, others have always been able to transmit stronger bonds. In some way, even if it is only a Pesach Seder or lighting Chanukah candles, we all participate through remembering, as our scripture and our liturgy constantly remind us to do. What better way then, for Moses to end his teaching than with a song, a poem full of strong rhythms and eloquent metaphors that have the power to burn themselves into our memory. And if we see his words written as they are in a Torah scroll, we may be able to visualize HaShem filling the space between those columns, which then represent parents standing on one side and children on the other, constantly communicating with and about HaShem. And in so doing, they become links in the long chain of Jews who participate in upholding our covenant, which after all, is built on a solid foundation.

Shabbat shalom!