

Two Songs, Two Singers

How does the poet get started on the process of writing a poem, or the songwriter as he sets about composing a song? Does he or she look at the environment, at what is going on in the world and seek inspiration from things external? Or does the creative artist look within, using introspection as a tool to uncover emotions out of which the poem or song can be fashioned? These questions can be asked about all creative processes, not just writing. They can be asked of the graphic artist, of the composer of music, of the sculptor.

My wife's grandfather was the renowned Hassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Taub, who composed hundreds of liturgical melodies. When he was asked about his creative process, he would say that he fashioned his music out of the feelings which "overflowed from his heart." As a Holocaust survivor, his heart overflowed with the full range of human emotions, from hope to dread and despair and back to hope again. And one can detect the full range of these feelings in his music.

On Shabbat Shuva, we read Parshat Ha'azinu. It consists almost entirely of a shira, a song, of words spoken by Moshe "into the ears of the entire congregation of Israel." (D'varim 31:30) What are the emotions which inspires those words?

To answer this question, it helps to remember that shortly before we read Ha'azinu, we had read another shira, and a very different one at that. I refer to the "Song of Chana" (Shmuel Alef 2:1-10), which is the haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashana.

Chana's emotions are apparent. She is joyous, exhilarated, exultant. Her desperate prayers have been answered and she has experienced God's wondrous powers. Her song is a triumphant one.

Let us contrast this with the song of Moshe. Like Chana, he is confident of God's omnipotence. She sings, "The Lord deals death and gives life." (Shmuel Alef 2:6) He sings, "There is no God beside me, I deal death and give life." (D'varim 32:39)

But the song that Moshe sings is of a very different nature. Moshe has a clear if pessimistic vision of what lies ahead for the Jewish people. He foresees the consequences of their disobedience and rebelliousness. He anticipates the wrath of God.

He places the blame for that wrath



on the people themselves, not upon God. God is justified in all that He does. "The Rock, His work is perfect... just and right is He. Is corruption His? No! His children's is the blemish..." (D'varim 32:4-5)

Moshe's emotions as he utters the song of Haazinu are complex indeed. For one thing, he feels a sense of dread of what lies ahead for these people whom he knows to be weak and sinful. He is certain that great suffering is in store for his people. That suffering pains him.

But he also finds it necessary to express a deeper emotion, one of confidence and trust in God in the face of suffering. He thus expresses, arguably for the first time in the Bible, the Jewish reaction of Tziduk HaDin, of proclaiming God's justice even in the depths of tragedy.

The poem of Haazinu calls to mind a mélange of graphic images: excessive sensuality, sin, faithlessness, and, in reaction to all this, "a fire kindled in God's nostrils which burns into the depths of the netherworld." These are powerful images which ring true to the experience of every Jew who is even minimally aware of our history. But Moshe sets the tone for all of us with his opening declaration: God is righteous, God is just, God is fair. Tziduk HaDin. This is the Jewish reaction to every manner of suffering.

How apt are the words of Rabbi

Soloveitchik, who would stress the centrality to our faith of the concept of Tziduk HaDin, justifying God. He saw in this concept our assertion of "dignity in defeat": "If man knows how to take defeat... as the halacha tries to teach us, then he may preserve his dignity even when he faces adversity and disaster."

At this time of year, during these days of judgment and introspection, we prepare ourselves for a future year of difficulties and challenges and worse. We ready ourselves for the dreaded possibility of the need to express Tziduk HaDin. But does this cause us to despair? No. For this solemnity is our best way to prepare for a different set of alternatives entirely.

Anxiety over Divine judgment, Eimat HaDin, propels us to repent, to commit to be better persons, better Jews.

This "fear of judgment" becomes the ground out of which sprouts optimism and hope; optimism that God will shine His countenance upon us, and hope that we will merit His favor and be blessed with a sweet and happy New Year.

We learn the lessons of the song of Haazinu so that we can merit the triumphs of the "Song of Chana". 📌

