



The Poetry of Torah, Part 2

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Last week, I discussed the significance of the poem that God tells Moshe to write down in Parashat VaYelekh:

דברים לא:ט

וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּדָה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְרָהּ בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת
לְעֵד בְּבִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deuteronomy 31:19

Now, write for yourselves **this poem** and teach it to the Children of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that it be **a witness** for me with the Children of Israel.

I noted that the definite article stands out: *hashirah hazot*—not just any poem, but “**this** poem”—prompting us to ask: What poem was this?¹ Most of the classic Medieval commentators (Rashi, Ramban, Rabbeinu Behaye, Abarbanel, and others) understand “this” to be a reference to the poem that makes up most of this week’s *parashah*, Ha’azinu. This

¹ We haven’t seen a poem mentioned explicitly since the middle of the Book of Numbers 21:17, when the Children of Israel composed a “*shirah*” to a well. The only other poem named in the Torah is the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:1.



reading is borne out by the final line in Parashat VaYelekh, which describes Moshe beginning to speak “the words of this poem **into the ears** (בְּאָזְנֵי) of the whole congregation of Israel,” perfectly teeing up our *parashah*’s lead word, *ha’azinu* (הֶאָזִינוּ): “**Give ear!**”

Yet the Talmud (in Nedarim 38a) considers another possible meaning of the phrase “this poem.” In search of proof that the Torah was given to all of Israel, the verse above is cited, indicating that “this poem” refers to the **entire Torah**. An objection is raised, and then refuted:

תלמוד בבלי נדרים לח.

“וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת”

הַשִּׁירָה לְחֻדָּה.

לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Talmud Bavli Nedarim 38a

“Now write for yourselves **this poem**” [meaning, the Torah].

That is just the [*Ha’azinu*] poem!

But it also says “so that this poem will be **a witness** for Me with the Children of Israel.”

God said not only to write this poem down, but that this poem was to serve as a “witness.” This seems to settle the matter: this “poem” must be the Torah itself, which acts as God’s eternal witness, testifying to the divine revelation and to God’s will. The Talmud is likely picking up on the fact that the Torah is also called a witness, just a few verses further on in the same chapter:

דברים לא:כו

לָקַח אֶת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה וּשְׁמַתָּם אֹתוֹ מִצַּד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְהָיָה שָׁם בְּךָ לְעֵד.

Deuteronomy 31:26

[Moshe] took this **Book of the Torah** and placed it alongside the Ark of the Covenant of the Eternal your God, and it remained there as **a witness**.

The Book of the Torah is a witness. And the poem was to be a witness. So, the Talmud presumes that that whole book of the Torah is sometimes called a poem.

R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (also known as “the Netziv”), the last head of the Volozhin yeshivah and one of the great Torah commentators of the 19th century, in the introduction to his masterful commentary, *Ha’amek Davar*, cites this passage from the Talmud, and then asks the obvious next question:

קדמת העמק ג

הא מיהא יש להבין היאך נקרא כה"ת שירה. והרי לא נכתבה בלשון של שירה.

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We still have to understand, however: How could the whole Torah be called a poem?! For surely it is not all written in the language of poetry!

Of course, there are certain sections of the Torah that are explicitly written in verse—like Parashat Ha’azinu or the Song of the Sea—and even laid out in their poetic form by scribal tradition. We might detect rhythmic structures in other passages—parallelism, alliteration, even rhyming—and so presume they are also intended as poetry.² But there are some parts of

² The JPS Tanakh indents and divides up any verse it presumes to have poetic structure. The first example of this is Genesis 2:23: “Then the man said, ‘This one at last / Is bone of my bones / And flesh of my flesh. / This one shall be called Woman, / For from Man was she taken.’”

Some have even suggested that the entire Hebrew Bible was written as poetry. Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (p. 4), describes one of the most tragic attempts to prove this theory: “At one end of the spectrum, an Orientalist in the 1930s, Paul Krauss, set out to show that the entire Hebrew Bible, once properly accented, could be demonstrated to have been written in verse... When he discovered two-thirds of the way through his analysis that the texts no longer bore out his thesis, he took his own life.”



the Torah—extended narrative sections, the details of ritual law, genealogical tables—that are clearly written in prose. So how could the Talmud suggest that we might refer to **all** of the Torah as a poem?

The Netziv answers with a theory of scriptural interpretation that has deeply shaped my own study of Torah ever since I came across it in one of Nehama Leibowitz's *gilyonot*.³

He begins by naming two qualities that Torah has in common with poetry:

אלא ע"כ יש בה טבע וסגולת השירה. שהוא דבור בלשון מליצה. דידוע לכל מבין עם תלמוד דמשונה המליצה מספור פרזי בשני ענינים בטבע ובסגולה.

Rather, the answer is that Torah has in it the Nature (*teva*) and the Richness (*segulah*) of poetry. For the Torah speaks in *melitzah*—a figurative language. And it is well-known to anyone who has studied it that this kind of figurative language is very different from the language of prose, in these two qualities: its Nature, and its Richness.

The Netziv proceeds to consider these features one at a time. First, the idea that all of the Torah shares some essential “nature - טבע” with poetry:

דבשיר אין הענין מבואר יפה כמו בספור פרזי. וצריך לעשות הערות מן הצד. דזה החרוז כוון לזה הספור. וזה החרוז כוון לזה. ולא מיקרי דרוש. אלא כך הוא טבע השיר אפי' של הדיוט. כך הוא טבע כל התורה שאין הספור שבה מבואר יפה. אלא יש לעשות הערות ופירושים לדקדוקי הלשון. ולא נקרא דרוש. אלא כך הוא פשט המקרא.

³ Studies in Devarim, Ha'azinu 5, “No empty words!” Leibovitz only cites the first section, on the “nature” of Torah, and then comments, “The Netziv points here to the essential quality of poetry as its condensation and compressed nature and its allusiveness. This 19th century Talmudist, steeped in Rabbinic law, expresses, in his own language, the distinctions between prose and verse that have been defined for us, today, in technical terminology by modern literary critics and students of semantics.”



For in a poem, the idea is not fully explained the way it is in prose. And so, one has to make explanatory glosses,⁴ saying that this stanza refers to this story, but that stanza refers to something else. And that is not what is called creative interpretation (*drush*). That is simply the nature of poetry, even the most common poetry.

This is the **nature** of the whole Torah as well, whose stories are not fully explained. Rather, one has to make insights and explanations based on the intricacies of the language. And this method is not called *drush*. On the contrary, this is just the most straightforward way (*pshat*) to understand the verses.

The nature of poetry—as opposed to prose—is that it is a condensed way of using language. Words are chosen carefully, not only for their literal meaning, but also for their sounds, forms, and associations, and then arranged into a precise structural form. This style of writing requires the reader to engage in both close analysis of the text and a kind of meditative contemplation, as one searches out the meaning that the poem alludes to but does not “fully explain.”

The Netziv then suggests that though the Torah may not all be written like a poem, we are meant to treat all of the Torah with the same linguistic sensitivity that we bring to a poem: presuming every word, every grammatical form, and every placement to be significant. When we read the Torah, we are invited to interpret not just the plain meaning of the text, but the “intricacies of the language,” in order to unearth deeper layers of meaning. The Netziv emphasizes that this is not a matter of taking creative license; this is the way the Torah is meant to be interpreted, and so this kind of literary analysis, of form as well as content, is in fact the *pshat*—the most straightforward approach to understanding the Torah.

⁴ Here I think the Netziv is engaging in some poetics of his own. The phrase he uses, הערות מן הצד, most likely refers to making notes in the margins, but the language literally means “observations **from the side**,” and suggests that in poetry we have to look at things “sideways.”



The Netziv's observations have so far been methodological. An appreciation of the shared "nature" between Torah and poetry can help us with the question of how we read and interpret the Torah. But the second quality that he says the Torah has in common with poetry (its "richness") is related instead to the experience of reading Torah. The word for "richness" here, *segulah* (סגולה), we might also translate as "treasure," for it indicates something of great value. The Netziv is suggesting, then, that there is something poetry can teach us about the encounter with Torah. He says:

דבשיר יש סגולה לפארה **ברמזים** מה שאינו מענין השיר. כמו שנהוג לעשות ראשי החרוזים בדרך א"ב או שם המחבר. וסגולה זו מיוחדת במליצה ולא בספור פרזי. וידוע דסגולה זו מכרחת הרבה פעמים להמחבר לעקם את הלשון כמעט. רק כדי שיחלו ראשי החרוזים באות **הנדרש לו**.
ודבר זה ממש היא בכה"ת כולה. שמלבד הענין המדובר **בפשט** המקרא. עוד יש בכל דבר הרבה **סודות** וענינים נעלמים אשר מחמת זה בא כ"פ המקרא בלשון שאינו מדויק כ"כ. וכ"ז אינו רק בתורה הקדושה אלא בכל מקראי קדש.

In poetry, there is also a richness that comes from it having been adorned with all kinds of hints (*remazim*) at things that are not part of the main idea of the poem. Like the custom of using the first letter in each line to spell out the alphabet, or to write out the poet's name. There is a richness that is special to this indirect language, and not to prose. It is well-known that in order to achieve this richness, the composer will often have to almost "bend the language," so that the beginning of each line will be the precise letter the poet is seeking (*hanidrash lo*).

So it is exactly with the whole of the Torah, all of it. Aside from the most basic, straightforward reading (*pshat*), there are many secrets (*sodot*) and hidden ideas in every word. Because of this, there are many instances when the language of the Torah is not to be read exactly as it appears. And all this is not true for the Holy Torah alone, but with all of sacred scripture.⁵

⁵ It seems no coincidence that, in his discussion of this "richness," the Netziv uses words that allude to all four of the celebrated modes of Torah interpretation that became known in the medieval period by their acronym,



To compare the “richness” of the Torah’s use of language to the artistry of a poet’s craft is to remind us that the Torah is, among other things, a sublime work of art. We read Torah, then, not only in search of meaning and information in its content, but also to admire the beauty of its artistic form.

This appreciation for the beauty of the Torah has a theological implication as well. Those “adornments” that come in the forms of “hints,” patterns, “stanza-bending”—all the hidden treasures that catch our attention—are like signals to alert us to the presence and intentionality of the hidden Composer. An experience of the poetic richness of the Torah, the Netziv suggests, is thus a form of divine encounter.

As we prepare for another form of divine encounter, the immanence of God during the Days of Awe, we are reminded by Parashat Ha’azinu that the end of the year is also the end of another cycle through the Torah. As we survey the relationships in our lives during this season of reflection, let us also consider our relationship with Torah this year. Did we move through the Torah carefully, slowly, meditatively, noticing each twist and turn of phrase? Did we savor the words of Torah like a poem from our Beloved? Did we let them wash over us, envelop us, vibrate within us when we heard them chanted? Did we hear the poetry of the Torah this year?

If the answer is “not yet,” well, the year is not quite over. Read the opening lines of Parashat Ha’azinu this week with extra care. And I will be back with you one more time during Sukkot for Parashat VeZot HaBerakhah. Until then, I wish you all a Shanah Tovah.

PaRDeS: *pshat* (straightforward), *remez* (hint), *drash* (seeking), and *sod* (secret). The Netziv is suggesting that one begins investigating the *pshat* through linguistic analysis, and then one layer of understanding leads to the next, as he goes on to say: “טבע דבר ה' הוא הפשט... אבל סודות התורה שהיא סגולתה” - The ‘nature’ of the word of God is the *pshat*... but the *sodot* (secrets) of the Torah are its ‘richness.’”

