

## Parashat Haazinu

The bulk of Parashat Haazinu is an extended poem. Our focus this week is specifically on the last verse of the poem, Devarim 32:43. Let me note at the outset that our comprehension of Biblical poetry is extremely limited, and the degree of difficulty this verse presents is not unusual.

Harninu goyim amo  
Ki dam avadav yikom  
Venakam yashi letzarav  
Vekhiper admato amo

The structure of the verse seems clear. The two middle lines revolve around forms of *nekamah*, revenge/retribution, while the first and last are built off “amo”, his nation, juxtaposed with another noun. The middle lines are also reasonably clear – in broad terms they refer to a time in which Hashem avenges the suffering of his people and ceases to suffer the happiness of His enemies. The word “harninu” is understood by most to mean celebratory noisemaking, although by some say it refers here to panicked noisemaking. “Rinah” in Tanakh can mean either. The form “harninu” either urge someone(s) to be *meranein* themselves, or else it encourages those someones to cause others to be *meranein*.

The situation is further confused by *goyim amo*, literally “ethnicities his nation”, two nouns with nothing to mark their relationship. Perhaps both *goyim* and *amo* should celebrate, perhaps *goyim* should celebrate *amo*, perhaps *goyim* should be panicked by *amo*, perhaps *amo* should cause *goyim* to celebrate. (Seforno suggests that the arrows and sword of Hashem, the subjects of the previous verse, cause both *goyim* and *amo* to be *meranein*.” Some suggests translating “ethnicities, i.e. his nation”)

A similar situation exists with regard to the final phrase.

“*Vekhiper*” is understood by most as denoting atonement, although some translate it as denoting appeasement and others as ritual purification.

“*Admato amo*”, literally “his ground his people”, gives us no clue as to the relationship between the nouns. Perhaps both ground and people will undergo *kapparah*, perhaps the ground will be *mekhaper* for the people, perhaps vice versa. Perhaps He will be *mekhaper* for the ground of his people.

Whichever option is chosen has to explain the connection between *nekamah* and *kapparah*. It also has to convincingly explain how this verse serves as the ending of the entire poem. For example, does it serve to predict the triumphal ending of a long and convoluted history/relationship, or as the ominous ending to a song of reproof?

My own general position is that poetry this ambiguous grammatically is usually deliberately ambiguous, and that very likely the entire poem was written to mean many things simultaneously. This is perhaps indicated by the use of “avadav”, His servants, and “tzarav”, His enemies, in the middle phrases without ethnic reference. What the verse means, and what the entire song means, depends on whether Israel behaves as His servants or His enemies.

Shabbat Shalom!

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