



Parashat Ha'azinu
Rabbi David Silverberg

Among the more difficult phrases of the poem of *Ha'azinu* appears in the poem's fifth verse – "*Shicheit lo lo banav mumam*" – which has been interpreted in several different ways. Rashi, following *Targum Onkelos*, translates this phrase to mean, "They harm themselves, and not Him; the blemish is theirs." According to this reading, Moshe emphasizes that *Benei Yisrael* cause no harm to God Himself through their wrongdoing; it is only they, and not He, who suffer as a result of their sinfulness.

The Rashbam explains this verse in a slightly different vein, as he writes, "Israel harmed itself... It caused itself harm...and no one else... The children of the Almighty – they inflicted a blemish in themselves." According to the Rashbam, Moshe emphasizes that *Benei Yisrael* have no one to blame for their misfortune other than themselves. This reading is indeed consistent with the fundamental purpose of the poem of *Ha'azinu*, as God explains toward the end of Parashat Vayelekh (31:19-21): to "testify" to the fact that *Benei Yisrael* were forewarned of the disastrous consequences of betraying the Almighty. As part of the introduction to this poem, Moshe declares that when evil befalls *Benei Yisrael*, they must acknowledge their own responsibility, rather than seek to cast the blame on God or others.

Maimonides also adopts this reading, only he applies it more generally. In the third section of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 12), Maimonides classifies all evils that befall human beings into three categories: 1) natural evils, such as natural disasters and illnesses that could not be avoided; 2) evils caused by one man (or group of people) to another, such as crime and war; 3) evils that a person brings upon himself. Maimonides asserts that the vast majority of evils that a person endures fall into this third and final category; meaning, they are brought by the individual upon himself. Many of the misfortunes suffered by people occur because one did not exercise proper caution, exert the required effort to avoid the given mishap, or did not properly care for his health and well-being. In the context of this discussion, Maimonides cites the aforementioned verse from Parashat Haazinu:

The numerous evils to which individual persons are exposed are due to the defects existing in the persons themselves. We complain and seek relief from our own faults; we suffer from the evils which we, by our own free will, inflict on ourselves and ascribe them to God, who is far from being connected with them! Comp. "*Shicheit lo lo banav mumam dor ikeish u-ftaltol*."

Maimonides does not clarify how precisely he reads this verse, though it is clear that he adopted a generally similar approach to that proposed by the Rashbam. Moshe here declares that the harm suffered by people is a result of *mumav*, their own faults and defects. Had we taken greater precautions in caring for our body and possessions, we would have been spared many of the evils and misfortunes that befall us. Maimonides

elaborates later in this chapter on the human being's various vices that cause him harm, and cites a number of Biblical passages that bemoan man's peculiar tendency to bring about his own downfall.

As Maimonides mentioned, this tendency entails not only self-harm, but also casting the blame on God, complaining to Him when one suffers the effects of his own negligence. People, by nature, prefer absolving themselves of guilt and casting the blame elsewhere, rather than accepting responsibility for their mistakes. This verse should thus remind us to accustom ourselves to looking first and foremost at ourselves for answers when life does not proceed as we would want, and to see how we can correct the mistakes we made, rather than instinctively pointing to the mistakes made by others. As Maimonides teaches, we will, more often than not, find that the problems we face are our own doing, and not entirely the fault of somebody else – or, for that matter, of God.