



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

The Sefer Malachi from which our haftarah is taken, is one shrouded in mystery—both regarding the navi himself as well as his message to the people. This enigma makes it especially challenging for us to properly appreciate the prophetic words of the prophet. In order to understand this week's haftarah, and through that to better understand its connection to Parashat HaShavua, I believe that we need to learn about the historical background, the events of the time and the challenges facing the community.

Despite the disagreement among our sages regarding who Malachi was (as the text gives us no information about his family, his city or his tribe), what his real name was (see Megilla 15a) and even when he lived (also information not found in the text), most scholars agree that Malachi functioned during the time of Bayit Sheni, a generation or two after the earlier prophets of Chaggai and Zecharya. As a result, he

is seen by most as the very last prophet to bring Hashem's word to the masses.

G-d still loves them and wishes to build a closer relationship with them

Given the optimistic promises of complete redemption, a redemption that would include both material and spiritual success for the returning nation, it was only understandable that this later generation, that lived in poverty as a small vassal state subservient to the mighty Persian Empire, would assume that G-d had abandoned them and had withdrawn the promise of a glorious future that was described by Chaggai and Zecharya.

Furthermore, as Rabbi Hayyim Angel writes, they no longer had a scion of the Davidic dynasty leading them (as Zerubavel had in the earlier generation), which extinguished their hope of renewing the monarchy. And that reality led them to believe that their relationship with Hashem had been terminated with the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash and with its subsequent exile.

We can now better understand the very opening words of this prophet's book and our haftarah: "Ahavti etchem amar

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Hashem”, “I DO love you, says Hashem”. Malachi understands the nation’s pain and preaches a most important lesson to them: that redemption is not close at hand but that is not a sign of Hashem’s rejection of His people. Geula is a gradual process, he explains, but the very survival of the nation is, in itself, proof of G-d’s love. When we realize that this was to be the end of prophecy before the long years in the Diaspora, we better understand the importance of Malachi’s words, words that would be read for thousands of years and, through them, build hope and faith in the heart of the Jew.

But how does that connect us to the parasha of Toldot?

Much like the opening of the parasha itself, the first section of the haftarah contrasts Israel (Jacob) with Edom (Eisav). Proving that Hashem had NOT turned away from Israel, Malachi describes how G-d had rejected of Edom by utterly destroying their land and making it desolate. Even if Edom were to attempt to rebuild their land - Hashem will tear down whatever they build. Malachi hopes to impress upon the nation that this contrast, i.e., the very fact that Israel had returned to their land and are rebuilding it while Edom is not and cannot, is proof enough that they are not rejected by G-d, as they may believe.

This first section of Sefer Malachi becomes a springboard for the navi’s later condem-

nation of Israel – and especially the kohanim – for their sins. The prophet now can explain that these condemnations, this disappointment Hashem may have over their sins, do not mean that G-d had rejected or abandoned Israel. The prophet can now express Hashem’s frustration with His people with the hope that they will realize that G-d still loves them and wishes to build a closer relationship with them.

The ongoing story of Ya’akov Avinu that begins in this parasha, his exile from his father’s house, the hatred of his brother, the challenges he faces in the house of Lavan and the eventual loss of his beloved wife were not signs of G-d’s abandonment. Hashem promised to be with Ya’akov throughout his life’s journey – and He was! The eventual reuniting of the family and the years of rest from his troubles would take time. But it would happen.

The story of Ya’akov is the story of Malachi’s generation.

And, when we think about, the story of all our generations.

Perhaps ours above all! ■

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