



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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“Shiviti Hashem L'negdi Tamid”

This week's parasha begins with the birth of the twin brothers, Eisav and Ya'akov, and their development, including their contrasting personalities and behaviors. Together with that, we are told of the strong emotions of both love and hate that accompany the relationships of parent to son and brother to brother. Yitzchak, we read, preferred the older brother, Eisav, while Rivka was fond of Ya'akov. The divergent views of the parents and of the brothers led to a rift in the family and, eventually, that split also led to Eisav's plan to murder his younger sibling. This tragic division would impact the lives of both brothers for many years.

Our Chazal used this theme of brotherly friction as the focus of our haftarah, a reading taken from the opening prakim of Malachi. The navi reviews the enmity that Edom, Eisav's descendants, had shown to Israel over many years but reassures the nation that, despite the punishments they had suffered in the hands of the Edomite enemy, and despite their ensuing doubts regarding G-d's relationship with them, Hashem still retains His love for them: “Ahavi etchem amar Hashem”, “I have loved you, says Hashem”. Further assuring the people of G-d's care for Israel over Edom, the prophet adds: “V'et Eisav saneiti”, “but I have despised Eisav”.

Mal'achi, the last of the prophets, lived some one hundred years after the destruction of the first Temple and remembered the perfidious behavior of Israel's “brother” nation, Edom, descendants of Eisav. It was they who, as mentioned in Tehillim, encouraged the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem: “Z'chor Hashem lv'nei Edom et yom Yerushalayim ha'omrim ‘ ‘aru, ‘aru ad hayesod bah’ ”- “Remember (the behavior) of Edom on the day (of the destruction) of Yerushalayim, when they said: ‘Destroy it! Destroy it down to its foundations!’ ” For this reason, the navi describes G-d's feelings toward the nation of Eisav as those of hatred and enmity, much as the feelings Eisav had toward Ya'akov in our parasha. In doing so, Hashem repays Eisav's hatred of Ya'akov with His own disgust toward Edom, responding to Edom's plea to destroy Jerusalem by ruining the land of Edom itself.

Nonetheless, although first reassuring the nation of G-d's love for Israel, Malachi chastises Israel's for their unbecoming attitude toward their Creator, the One to Whom they owe their very existence. The censure for such negative behavior was directed to the religious leaders who conducted the ritual service in the Mikdash, i.e., the Kohanim.

He reminds these leaders of how they offer

animals that were unsuitable as sacrifices and those unfit to be placed upon the mizbe'ach, the holy altar. Such dismissive attitude toward their service of G-d clearly reflected their contemptuous regard of Hashem Himself. Perhaps the most powerful condemnation of the Kohanim is reflected in G-d's refusal to accept such offering and their accompanying prayers, as Malachi challenges them: "Hayissa mikem panim?" - "Will He (now) show you favor?" Indeed, the navi further condemns their behavior by contrasting the respectful behavior of the pagan nations to their gods to the disdainful attitude of the Kohanim to Melech Mal'chei HaM'lachim. It is this theme that is emphasized in verses 11-12. And a most painful criticism - that we should well consider.

Sadly, we no longer have a Bet HaMikdash

in which to serve Hashem, nor Kohanim to direct the ritual service. How, then, do we serve G-d today? How can we take care to avoid any possible "disdainful" behavior toward Hashem?

I suggest that our "divine service" today is the observance of mitzvot and our communion with the Divine One through tefillah. Given that truth, we must be careful to avoid any careless performance of either of these fulfillments- to be fully aware of, and intent on, the fact that we are serving Hashem with these acts and, certainly at these times, to remember the words of Tehillim (16;8) "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid" - "I set Hashem before me always." ■

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