

HAFTORAH INSIGHTS
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Before the Rebuke

Some of the hardest conversations we have are with the people we love most. We see what needs to change, and we want to help. We choose our words carefully, hoping they will be received in the spirit we intend. But even well-meaning guidance can be difficult to hear.

The opening of this week's haftorah offers a beautiful starting point. אָהַבְתִּי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר ה', *I have loved you, says Hashem.* (Malachi 1:2) Malachi has difficult things to say. He will challenge the kohanim for bringing blemished offerings and treating the avodah without the care it deserves. He will confront a troubling distance between the honor due to Hashem and the way His service is being performed. But before any of that, Hashem declares His love.

The Malbim draws our attention to the word *eschem* - you. Hashem is expressing His love for the people themselves, beyond His longstanding love for their ancestors. When they ask, "בַּמָּה אֲהַבְתָּנוּ" - "How have You loved us?" - the Malbim understands their question as: How do we know that this love is truly directed toward us, rather than inherited from those who came before us?

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Hashem answers by pointing to Yaakov and Esav, the brothers whose story unfolds in Parshas Toldos. Both were children of Yitzchak and Rivkah; both were grandchildren of Avraham and Sarah. Yet Hashem loved Yaakov. Their shared ancestry alone cannot explain that love. As the Malbim puts it, "אהבתי אתכם בעצמכם" - I have loved you yourselves.

This understanding gives the opening declaration a particular tenderness. The people being addressed need to know that they are personally loved. Their relationship with Hashem has meaning in its own right. And it is to these very people that Malachi will deliver his rebuke. The declaration of love and the demand for change appear within the same conversation. The love is already present as their failings are brought into view.

We might carry that thought into our own relationships. We can become so focused on someone's potential, responsibilities, or need to improve that we forget to express what we already cherish about them. We notice the unfinished task, the unwise choice, the habit that needs attention. Our concern is real, but it may become the part of our love that is heard most often.

A child may hear how much we expect without hearing how much we enjoy them. A spouse may hear what needs to be done

without hearing how much their efforts mean to us. Someone we work with may know that we rely on them, yet rarely hear what we appreciate about their particular gifts.

The Malbim's emphasis on "you yourselves" invites us to make our affection personal and specific: to notice someone's sensitivity, acknowledge their ongoing efforts, or tell them how their presence enriches our lives. These expressions deserve a place in the ordinary rhythm of a relationship, giving our love a voice long before a difficult conversation arises.

Then, when guidance is needed, there is a relationship of expressed affection within which it can be offered. "Ahavti eschem." Before we ask someone to hear our guidance, let's make sure they have heard our love. ■





