

**SHIVAT TZION:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION  
By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #27: Malakhi's Opening Chapter**

**Malakhi: An Introduction**

As an epilogue to our study of the period of *Shivat Tzion*, we now turn to the book of *Malakhi*. As Ibn Ezra (1:1) and Radak (ibid.) argue, although the *gemara* does suggest in one place (*Megilla* 15a) that Malakhi is Ezra, there is good reason to believe that Malakhi prophesied shortly after the period in which Ezra and Nechemia were active. Accordingly, Malakhi represents the final recorded *nevu'a* in *Tanakh*, concluding the era of *Shivat Tzion* in particular and prophecy in general. As we will see, there are numerous overlaps between the *sefer* and the themes we have developed throughout the course of our series.

Beyond the chronology, there are a number of points worth noting at the outset. In contrast to *Chagai*, *Zekharia*, and the majority of *Nevi'im*, no dates are mentioned at any point in the work. This unusual feature supports Abravanel's cogent position that the entirety of *Malakhi* constitutes a single prophecy. Also noteworthy is the absence of any visions in Malakhi's recorded prophecies. In this respect, Malakhi resembles Chagai and is unlike Zekharia.

Perhaps most intriguing is the book's literary arrangement. Malakhi structures his *nevu'a* as an ongoing series of dialogues between God and the Jewish People. These conversations appear a total of seven times, forming the *sefer's* backbone and, as we will argue later, representing its central motif.

The name Malakhi is also laden with significance. As in the case of Chagai, the commentaries dispute whether Malakhi was the *navi's* given name or a later appellation. The Talmudic view that identifies Malakhi with Ezra likely maintains that Malakhi was not the prophet's birth name. Others, including positions cited in the Talmud (ibid.), Ibn Ezra (ibid.) and Radak (ibid.), maintain that Malakhi was the prophet's birth name. Be that as it may, the term *malakh* takes on an outsized role as the book develops. In chapter 2, we will learn that the priest, who teaches Torah, must resemble a "*malakh Hashem tzevakot*," "an angel of the Lord of hosts" (2:6). The third chapter opens with God's declaration that He will send "[His] messenger" to exact vengeance upon sinners. In a sense, the prophet becomes a character in his own prophetic work, acting as one of the messengers that God sends to carry out His will. As we will see, Malakhi consistently sees the world through the lenses of the intimate relationship

between God and the Jewish People. In this sense, he is fittingly named “my messenger,” emphasizing the immediacy of the connection between God and His people.

### **The Opening Section (1:1-5)**

Turning to the beginning of the *sefer*, the first verse introduces Malakhi’s *nevua* as having been delivered “*be-yad Malakhi*,” “in Malakhi’s hand.” This is the second parallel with Chagai we have observed, whose prophecy is described in similar terms.

The *navi* goes on to decry the hypocrisy of the people. They ask, “In what manner have You loved us?” (1:2). God responds by reminding them that Yaakov and Esav were brothers, yet God will destroy only Edom, which will be known as “the border of wickedness, and the nation forever despised by God” (1:4). The emphasis on familial relations is particularly interesting. As we will see throughout the *sefer*, Malakhi places great emphasis on the centrality of family relations to our responsibilities not only toward God, but also our fellow Jews and humanity.

### **Defiling the Relationship (1:6-11)**

In the chapter’s next section, beginning in verse 6, Malakhi offers two plausible metaphors for our relationship with God: father or master. Either way we have fallen short: “Now if I am a father, where is the honor due me? And if I am a master, where is the reverence due me?” (1:6). He especially levels these charges against the priests, who scorn God by offering deficient animals upon the altar while denying wrongdoing. Looking at the world through Malakhi’s lenses, the people’s hypocrisy is not just a sin; it undermines the fabric of the intimate relationship between God and His beloved.

The term honor, *kavod*, represents yet another overlap with Chagai, who emphasizes that the honor of the Second Temple will eventually exceed that of the First. This particular parallel offers insight into the significance of the multiple connections we have noted between *Chagai* and *Malakhi*. God seems to say: Although the Second Temple has not yet attained the honor described in Chagai’s prophecy, that is no excuse for relating dishonorably to the sacrificial service.

As if to confirm this reading of Malakhi’s rebuke, the very next verse reads, “You say the table of the Lord can be treated with scorn.” Given the Temple’s relatively sorry state, the priests likely saw no reason to act reverentially toward the service. Moreover, although we do not know the exact date of Malakhi’s prophecy, we get the sense that the Temple had already been functioning for some time. At this point, the Temple was likely no longer a novelty, and quite possibly was taken for granted by the priests.

Here, Malakhi anticipates one of the great challenges to Zionism in our times. Many younger people take the existence of Israel for granted; they did not see the founding of the State or the miraculous victories in wars, such as in 1967.

The challenge of the current generation is not to fall into the trap that ensnared the priests – to remain passionately committed to Jerusalem even when its restoration is no longer freshly imprinted upon our hearts.

Continuing to rail against the priests' hypocrisy, Malakhi adds, "*u-mincha lo ertze mi-yedkhem*," "I will accept no offering from you" (1:10). This phraseology is doubly important. First, the word *mincha* appears six times over the course of *Sefer Malakhi*. *Mincha* denotes a gift born of a relationship. That is what God desires from His people, not their insincerity. In this way, *mincha* is consistent with the theme of intimacy. Second, the term *ritzuy*, which emphasizes the personal relationship between the people and God, is particularly apt.<sup>1</sup>

In verse 11, drawing on the language of *Tehillim* (113:3), Malakhi goes on to contrast the hypocrisy of Jewish worship with the authenticity of the gentiles: "From where the sun rises to where it sets, my name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to My name." This description, of course, seems perhaps overly fantastic. Which nations at the time truly worshiped the God of the Bible with purity?<sup>2</sup> But the point seems to fit nicely with the work's larger message to this point. How ironic it is that the immediate family members scorn God, while the distant relatives worship wholeheartedly! Indeed, the chapter ends with the sarcastic words: "My name is revered among the nations."

---

<sup>1</sup> Ritva (*Sukka* 9a s.v. *ha*) asserts that the law disqualifying a *mitzvah ha-ba'a ba'aveira*, a positive command facilitated by a sin, is limited to *mitzvot* whose purpose is to generate *ritzuy* between God and the individual. His ruling would appear to be rooted in our verse.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion on this point see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Malbim and *Da'at Mikra*.