

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of
Rebbetzin Ruth Schonfeld z"l
by Melinda Menucha Robeson

Shiur #28: Harsher Criticism

While the priests are reprimanded in the first chapter of *Malakhi*, they are criticized even more harshly in the second. The prophet opens by emphasizing that his command is aimed first and foremost at the priests. The second verse cautions:

Unless you obey and unless you lay it to heart, and do honor to my name, said the Lord of Hosts, I will send you a curse and turn your blessings into curses.

Many of these motifs – “laying to heart,” giving honor, and dried up sources of income – directly parallel those of Chagai, who admonished that the lack of agricultural bounty was due to the Jews’ unwillingness to hearken to God’s command. The next verse, moreover, warns colorfully that God “will strew dung upon your faces, the dung of your festal sacrifices.” The Hebrew term for holiday – *chag* – seems to pun on the name Chagai. These parallels reinforce our suggestion that Malakhi in many ways represents a continuation of Chagai’s message, adapted for a time in which the Temple had begun to function regularly.

The Covenant of Peace

The continuation of the prophetic rebuke of the priests segues into a new theme. Malakhi declares (2:5-9):

I had with him a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave to him, and of reverence, which he showed Me. For he stood in awe of My name. Proper rulings were in his mouth, and nothing perverse was on his lips; He served Me with complete loyalty and held the many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts.

But you have turned away from that course: You have made many stumble through your rulings; you have corrupted the covenant of the Levites, said the Lord of Hosts.

And I, in turn, have made you despicable and vile in the eyes of all the people, because you disregard My ways and show partiality in your rulings.

Echoing the covenant of peace forged with Pinchas (*Bamidbar* 25:12), and especially Moshe's blessings before his death (*Devarim* 34:8-11), in this passage Malakhi castigates the priests for their shortcomings not in regard to their role in the sacrificial service, but as Torah teachers. In contrast to a previous era, in which the Levites observed the covenant and feared the Almighty, they have now "turned out of the way of that course" and "have made many stumble through your rulings."

As we have discussed previously,¹ the emphasis on the priests' lapses as *halakhic* decisors, although to a degree rooted in earlier Biblical passages,² sounds strikingly post-prophetic. Indeed, the criteria for one to serve as a Torah educator are derived in part from our verses: a teacher must be "similar to an angel of God," pure in Torah philosophy (*Mo'ed Katan* 15b) and overall character (*ibid.* 17a). Similarly, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 99a) condemns one who is *megaleh panim ba-Torah*, acts in terribly disrespectful fashion toward the Torah, drawing on the phraseology of our verses.³ All this betokens a clear transition in leadership from priest as primarily focused on the Temple service to one also centered on Torah education.

Accentuating the shift in emphasis, the terminology "*sartem min ha-derekh*," "you have strayed from the path," is invoked by Malakhi in reference to the failure of halakhic leadership. Previously, such as in the instance of the Golden Calf, similar terminology had been reserved for veering from monotheism toward idolatry. The use of the same language to refer to dramatically different shortcomings highlights the fundamental transitions afoot at the sunset of the prophetic era. It was on the basis of verses such as ours that the rabbis remarked that the Men of the Great Assembly "killed" the evil inclination toward idolatry (*Yoma* 69b).

These verses, unfortunately, have in too many instances been observed in the breach in our generation. The large number of highly publicized rabbinic scandals have contributed to an erosion in trust for rabbinic authority. The

¹ In our discussion of *Ezra* chapter 7.

² Interestingly, a similar treatment of the priests' roles appears in *Zekharia* 3:7.

³ It was not for naught that R. Shabtai Ha-Kohen, the famed 17th-century halakhic authority, named his classic work *Siftei Kohen* (*Shakh*) after the phrase "*ki siftei kohen yishmeru da'at*."

message that a representative of Torah must resemble “an angel of the Lord” has perhaps never been more critically important.

Intermarriage: An Act of Betrayal

Moving now to verses 10-12, Malakhi returns to the motif of a parent-child relationship. Following in the footsteps of Ezra and Nechemia, Malakhi censures the people for the sin of intermarriage. He does so, moreover, in terms that are highly similar to that of his predecessors, emphasizing the betrayal (*begida*), desecration (*chillul*), and abomination (*to'eva*) inherent in the act of marrying outside the faith, as opposed to the potential for idolatry inherent in such relationships (see *Devarim* 7:2). Malakhi takes a step further, suggesting that intermarriage also involves a betrayal between man and his fellow Jew: “Why do we break faith with one another” (2:10)? As children of God, we are bound to build families with one another. As in the first chapter, the intimacy of familial relationships forms the moral bedrock of the final book in *Tanakh*.

Shedding Tears

Malakhi concludes the chapter by fulminating against the Jews for the tears shed over the altar's failed sacrifices. After all, they are being punished for the sin of betrayal against “the wife of your youth,” intermarriage. It is not immediately clear who is shedding the tears. As a matter of *peshat*, numerous commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak and Metzudat David) understand that the woman is crying. Intriguingly, the Talmud (*Gittin* 90a) asserts that even the altar cries over a divorce, concluding the tractate with a citation of our verse. According to the Talmud, at least in a homiletical sense, it is the altar that cries over the marital shortcomings of the Jewish people. The Talmudic reading reinforces the centrality of the intimate relationship between God and His people to the message of Malakhi.

Family Matters

In concluding the second chapter, it is worth taking a step back and inquiring as to the significance of Malakhi's emphasis on the familial relationship between God and the Jewish People. Why is this such an important point of emphasis throughout the book? It would appear that in closing the era of prophecy, the prophet wishes to remind the Jewish People that despite God's diminishing presence, the fundamental relationship remains intact. That relationship manifests itself in the negative consequences of betrayal, but the same familial bond serves as a testament that the relationship between God and the Jewish People is eternal and unwavering.

This in turn explains two additional features of *Malakhi*. First, the book seems rather repetitive. Time and again, God rails against the people for having scorned the Temple service and intermarrying. Although repetition is certainly not unheard of among the later prophets, it seems to be taken to an extreme in *Malakhi*, especially given that it represents a single prophecy, not a series of rebukes delivered on different occasions. The model of a marriage helps to account for the seeming redundancy. Married couples tend to argue about the

same issues time and again. Repetition is therefore not a bug, but an essential feature of the divine-human relationship as presented in our *sefer*.

Finally, in the previous class we noted the dialogical structure that serves as the framework for *Malakhi*. Why is this book structured in such an atypical fashion? In light of the centrality of the familial metaphor, we may suggest that dialogue is the perfect organizing principle. Constructed as a series of tense exchanges between quarrelling but loving spouses, the discussion motif offers a realistic snapshot of a marital relationship and is therefore particularly apt.