

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #29: Malakhi's Grand Conclusion

We will now discuss the third and final chapter in *Malakhi*. As we will see, the genius of this chapter is in the prophet's facility in simultaneously achieving two goals: concluding the *sefer*, while bringing the entire prophetic period to a close. To paraphrase the words of the *midrash* (*Yalkut Shimoni* 1:76), Malakhi's prophecy is one that was needed for his generation and all future generations.

The Messenger of the Covenant

Malakhi begins by promising to send a messenger ("*malakh*") who will clear a path for the arrival of the master ("*adon*") and angel of the covenant ("*Malakh Ha-Brit*"). The term *malakh* alludes to Malakhi's own name, as well as the reference to the *kohen* as "*malakh Hashem tzevakot*" (2:7). What is the significance of this term?

We can gain insight by examining a parallel to our verses in *Parashat Mishpatim* (23:20-33), in which God promises to send a messenger to accompany the Jews to the chosen land. In that context, as the Torah itself notes (*Shemot* 33:2-3; see Rashi to 23:20), the promise is double-edged: while God demonstrates His love by sending an angel, He chooses to appoint a representative rather than accompany the people Himself. Similarly, in our context, God is dissatisfied with the people's behavior. Still, He wishes to shower them with mercy. He therefore sends his *malakh* to clear a messianic path. This tension is a microcosm that sums up the messages of many prophetic works, including *Zekharia*, where we explored a similar dichotomy: the people must repent, but ultimately God will have mercy on His children regardless.

The *Malakh Ha-Brit* is an enigmatic personality to whom we will return. For now it suffices to note that our verse evokes the covenant of priesthood described in chapter 2: "*briti hayta ito ha-chayim ve-hashalom*," "I had given him a covenant of life and well-being" (2:5). Our messenger, it would seem, is a priest who upholds that same commitment. Indeed, Pinchas, a priest, was the original recipient of the covenant of peace and priesthood (*Bamidbar* 25:13).

There is some question as to whether the *adon* and *malakh* are synonymous or different. Ibn Ezra says they are identical. Rashi writes that the

adon refers to God, while the *malakh* refers to another figure who will mete out vengeance upon God's enemies. Metzudat David maintains that the *adon* is Mashiach, whereas the *malakh* is Eliyahu. Radak is unsure, although he too raises the possibility that the *malakh* refers to Eliyahu.

Next, we learn that his appearance (it is not entirely clear to which of these individuals Malakhi refers) will be overwhelming, and he will purify the people like precious metals. Apparently, the messenger will play a dual role, incinerating the wicked and purifying the Levites. The fire imagery resembles a number of other prophecies in which God is depicted as destroying the wicked with fire.

Balancing Two Mandates

In 3:4-6, the *navi* explains that during this eschatological epoch, "as in the days of yore and in the years of old," the offerings of the Jewish People will be sweet to God.¹ Ibn Ezra suggests that the "the days of yore and years of old" refer to the First Temple period. That the verse mentions Judah and Jerusalem, terms that are used specifically in regard to the First Temple era, supports Ibn Ezra's interpretation. By addressing the immediate concern of the mediocre Temple service while nostalgically hearkening back to a golden age, Malakhi hews to his mandate of remaining anchored in his own times while summing up all of *Nevi'im*.

Concluding this section, Malakhi prophesies that God will mete out justice and serve as a zealous witness against "those who practice sorcery, commit adultery, swear falsely, cheat laborers of their hire, and subvert the widow, orphan and stranger." A comparison to a parallel passage in *Sefer Tzefania*, who prophesied during the end of the First Temple period, demonstrates that here too Malakhi seeks to balance his overarching goals. Tzefania prophesies that God will "wipe out... those who bow down and swear to the Lord" yet also swear to other Gods (1:5-6).

Even as Malakhi mirrors Tzefania, his subject differs. For Tzefania, the major issue remained that of idolatry. It was due to the profession of allegiance that God will cut down the sinners at the end of days. For Malakhi, however, idolatry is no longer a burning issue. The point of emphasis therefore shifts from pagan worship to an exclusive focus on ethics and morality.² By building off the language of his predecessors yet addressing contemporary concerns, all the while prophesying about the Messianic period, Malakhi continues to stay true to his multiple mandates.

¹ Rav Kook cites our verse as support for his view that only flour offerings will be offered in the Third Temple (*Olat Reiya*, vol. 1, p. 292).

² Of course, earlier prophets had emphasized the importance of ethics, but Malakhi is striking in that he evokes a passage focusing on idolatry, recasting it in terms of the ethical issues of his day.

Our section closes by emphasizing that God has not changed. Just as God does not change, so too Malakhi's message, despite certain shifts in emphasis, is fundamentally an extension of that of his predecessors.

The Storehouse of Tithes

Malakhi returns to a now-familiar trope. God tells the Jews to repent, guaranteeing that He will in turn be restored to them. The nation cynically retorts, "In what way should we repent?" God's reciprocal call to return draws directly on the opening prophecy of Zekharia (1:3), who had utilized almost identical language, underscoring the dialogical nature of *Malakhi*. Issuing a generic call to repentance, yet one that draws on his contemporary Zekharia, Malakhi once again brilliantly straddles between the local concerns of *Shivat Tzion* and the wider enterprise of prophecy.

Thundering back, God accuses the people of having stolen from the Temple by neglecting to distribute *teruma* and *ma'aser*.³ If they bring the tithes to the Temple, the agricultural bounty will grow yet again. At that time, all the nations shall praise the Jews and will call Israel "a desired land." The reference to the storehouse is taken directly from Nechemia, who instituted a centralized system of *ma'aser* that was to be delivered to "the storehouse" (*Nechemia* 10:36). Apparently, this remained a significant concern in the time of Malakhi.⁴

One more allusion to the local concerns of his time appears in verse 11: "I will banish the locusts from you, so that they will not destroy the yield of your soil; and your vines in the field shall no longer miscarry." This verse could have just as easily appeared in *Chagai*, which emphasizes that material success is contingent upon the Temple's construction. During the time of Ezra and Nechemia, moreover, the Judean economy was mired in crisis. In a matter of just a few verses, we find Malakhi building on his earlier contemporaries Zekharia (call for repentance), Nechemia (tithes), and Chagai, Ezra, and Nechemia (agricultural bounty), highlighting the variety of ways in which Malakhi speaks to the concerns of his generation.

Confronting Theodicy

Next, God accuses the Jews of having claimed that their religious practice is in vain, as the wicked seem to be rewarded despite their misdeeds. Even the righteous begin to wonder about the question.

³ The verse uses the root *kuf-vav-ayin*. In fact, four of the six occasions in *Tanakh* in which the word appears with this usage are in our chapter.

⁴ God's blessing is taken by the Rabbis (*Ta'anit* 9a and parallels) to be a reference to *ma'aser* and/or charity in particular. In the context of our *sefer*, however, it would appear that the larger concern is that of properly supporting the Temple.

God responds that He carefully records every person's activities and will eventually recompense accordingly.⁵ God will ultimately have mercy on the righteous as one has mercy for his son.⁶ At that point, the distinction between righteous and wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not, will become clear.

While the general thrust of God's response is clear – in the End of Days, He will punish the wicked and reward the righteous – the details are difficult to make out. Of what will God's mercy consist? And if the people are truly righteous, why is He depicted as saving them as a father would relate to a child? If they are deserving of salvation, the parent-child analogy is beside the point. We will see that these verses will become clarified only upon *Malakhi's* conclusion.

The End of Days

Next, we turn to more classic images of the End of Days. The Day of Judgment shall be hot as a furnace. The evildoers will burn like straw, while the sun will provide healing for the righteous. The wicked will be ground like dust beneath the feet of the righteous. The imagery of the Day of God as involving searing heat draws upon earlier descriptions, such as those of *Yoel* (2:3) and *Zekharia* (13:9). The very sun that provides punishment for the wicked, moreover, will offer balm for the righteous.⁷

Despite the parallels, Malakhi's eschatological vision is significantly muted relative to those of his predecessors. For comparison, here are a few verses in *Sefer Yoel*:

A day of darkness and gloom, a day of densest cloud spread like soot over the hills. A vast, enormous horde. Nothing like it ever happened, and it shall never happen again through the years and ages. (2:2)

After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. I will even pour out my spirit upon male and female slaves in those days. (3:2)

The sun shall turn into darkness and the moon into blood. (3:5)

Malakhi's relatively mild rendition of the End of Days likely owes to two factors. First, consistent with the family motif, Malakhi's focus is less upon miracles and more on the relationships that will be renewed at that time. Second, his

⁵ This verse appears prominently in the Rosh Hashana liturgy.

⁶ The emphasis on the father-child metaphor dovetails nicely with the overarching family motif we have emphasized throughout our treatment of *Malakhi*, including his conception of intermarriage as a sin against both God and His people.

⁷ Radak, following *Avoda Zara* 4a, against Ri Kara.

understated portrayal is consistent with the weakening intensity of the prophetic spirit that was well underway.

The Arrival of Eliyahu

Finally, Malakhi turns to his conclusion. He charges the Jews to remember the Torah of Moshe His servant. God will send Eliyahu prior to the Day of Judgment. Eliyahu will “return the heart of fathers to children and that of children to fathers, lest God utterly smite the earth.” Traditionally, when reading our chapter as the *haftara* for *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, the penultimate verse describing the sons and fathers is read again at the *haftara*’s conclusion.

The reminder to follow the Torah of Moshe can be understood as a coda to the entirety of *Nevi'im*. In the end, all the prophets sought to uphold the law of Moshe. It is also the key to redemption.⁸ As Ri Kara puts it:

Malakhi said to the Jewish People, “From this point forward you will not have prophets who rebuke you.” For during his days prophecy ceased from among the Jewish People. “Remember, though, the Torah of Moshe My servant, and you shall hasten the redemption.”

In the penultimate verse of *Nevi'im* we finally learn that God will send Eliyahu the prophet prior to the great and awesome day. To what end? The final verse explains:

[Eliyahu] shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.

Eliyahu, in other words, will have a dual role: reconciling family and relationships and, in doing so, inspiring repentance. This fits perfectly with the emphasis on family relationships and reciprocity that lies at the heart of *Sefer Malakhi*, and is a profoundly uplifting way to conclude *Nevi'im*.

Still, many questions remain. Why Eliyahu specifically? In what way is the role of reconciliation fitting for him? How does this reconciliation ward off utter destruction, and why is that the conclusion of the *sefer*?

Apparently, our verse clarifies the nature of God’s mercy that had been cryptically described in verse 17. We wondered what exactly the nature of that mercy was, and in what way mercy for the righteous is comparable to a father who acts mercifully toward his son. In light of *Malakhī*’s final verses, we may conclude that it is the same Eliyahu who will facilitate God’s compassion by

⁸ It is for this reason that many have the practice to recite this verse following *havdala*, at a time when we pray for the return of Eliyahu the Prophet. We thus link “*Zikhru Torat Moshe avdi*” with Eliyahu and our messianic aspirations.

inspiring repentance. God will not automatically forgive the sinners, but He will offer everyone the opportunity to return to Him. That is the role of Eliyahu Ha-Navi.

In fact, as asserted explicitly by Ri Kara (to 3:23), there is good reason to believe that the messenger noted at the chapter's outset is none other than Eliyahu. We saw earlier that Radak and Metzudat David identify Eliyahu as the *Malakh Ha-Brit*. This fits quite nicely with the covenant of priesthood mentioned in the second chapter, as Eliyahu is closely associated with Pinchas, the original recipient of the priestly covenant. Our tradition endorses the view that Eliyahu was the messenger noted at the chapter's outset; at a *brit mila*, we refer to Eliyahu explicitly as the *Malakh Ha-Brit*.⁹

But questions remain. Why is Eliyahu chosen for this role? How does this relate to his career and the theme of *Sefer Malakhi*? And why did the Rabbis specifically connect him to the *brit mila* ceremony?

As noted by Radak and Metzudat David (to 3:2), a passage in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (29) offers a direction that illuminates both the Rabbinic view and *pehuto shel mikra*. The *midrash* is critical of Eliyahu for harshly judging the Jews of his era. Eliyahu had been unsparing in his criticism of the Jews of the Northern Kingdom for having neglected to circumcise their children. In general, Eliyahu is portrayed as an extreme zealot, describing himself as one who was “moved for zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant...” (I *Melakhim* 19:10). In so doing, he continues the legacy of Pinchas, who similarly “displayed [God’s] passion” in killing Zimri and Kozbi during their act of immorality (*Bamidbar* 25:13). *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* is critical of Eliyahu’s overly zealous style, which was ineffective at inspiring long-term repentance and unfairly defamed the people. As an act of reparation, Eliyahu must be present at each *brit* and witness his people’s commitment to this commandment. In the words of the Zohar, “the mouth that testified that the Jews abandoned [the covenant] shall testify that they fulfill this *brit*.”¹⁰

⁹ This identification is also made plain in the final “*ha-rachaman*” recited during *Birkhat Ha-Mazon* following the meal in celebration of a *brit mila*: we pray for the *kohen tzedek* who was taken to heaven (Eliyahu), concluding “*briti hayta ito ha-chayim ve-hashalom*,” our verse in *Malakhi* (3:2).

¹⁰ It is due to the Pinchas-Eliyahu connection that the *brit* ceremony opens with the verses of “*briti shalom*,” taken from the beginning of *Parashat Pinchas*.

It should also be noted that this *midrash* may help to explain the line recited during the *brit* ceremony: “*Eliyahu malakh ha-brit hinei shelkha lefanekha, amod al yemini ve-samkheni*,” “Eliyahu messenger of the covenant, behold – what is yours is before you; stand on my right and support me.” What does this odd phrase mean? Possibly, the circumciser is turning to Eliyahu and making precisely the point of the *midrash*. Now that your argument against the people has been rebutted (“what is yours is before you”), please advocate for the family and help to ensure the physical and spiritual success of the circumcision (*amod al yemini ve-samkheni*).

A similar drama unfolds in *Malakhi*. As an antidote to the shortcomings of Eliyahu's overly zealous leadership, at the End of Days he will enact an historic reconciliation among family members and between God and His people. The same Eliyahu who will "act like a smelter and purger of silver" (*Malakhi* 3:3) will "reconcile parents with children and children with parents" (3:23), manifesting God's compassion.

For this reason, Eliyahu must be present during the *brit mila*. The father demonstrates his commitment to initiate his son into the covenant – precisely the opposite of Eliyahu's overly pessimistic portrayal of the people of his time.

Malakhi and the Mishna

The presence of Eliyahu at the *mila* and the phrase "*ve-heishiv lev avot al banim*" lead us to an insightful and creative observation of R. Yaakov Nagen, Ram at the Otniel Yeshivat Hesder.¹¹ The *mishna* famously describes the mutual obligations of a father and son: "*Kol mitzvot ha-ben al ha-av... ve-khol mitzvot ha-av al ha-ben*," "All the obligations toward a son upon the father... and all the obligations toward a father upon a son" (*Kiddushin* 1:7). The language is awkward. We do not find similar phraseology elsewhere in *Chazal*. In seeking to account for the *mishna's* language, Rav Nagen points to the striking similarity between the *mishna's* formulation and the verse at the end of *Malakhi*:

לב	מצוות
אבות	האב
על	על
בנים	הבן
ולב	ומצוות
בנים	הבן
על	על
אבותם	האב

R. Nagen suggests that the *mishna* intentionally draws its language from the verse in *Malakhi*. The *mishna* nearly implies that the mutual obligations of a father and son described in *Kiddushin* are in fulfillment of Eliyahu's prophecy. Indeed, the list of a father's obligations toward a son are very much on point: *mila*, *pidyon ha-ben*, teaching Torah, marrying him off, teaching a trade, and, according to one view, teaching him to swim. All these responsibilities manifest a

¹¹ Available at www.daat.co.il/daat/dapey/dapim/nagen-kidushin6.doc.

father caring for his son, whether spiritually or materially. Similarly, the Talmudic list of a child's responsibilities toward one's parents – feeding, clothing and bathing – exemplify the familial reciprocity so movingly portrayed throughout *Malakhi*, particularly at its conclusion.

The culmination of *Sefer Malakhi* and *Nevi'im*, then, offers an inspiring message that is at once relevant to his time and simultaneously universal: The reunification of family is a signal of redemption. That family includes both the Jewish people and God Himself. This comforting message must have proven powerfully uplifting for the beleaguered *Shivat Zion* community. Like Zekharia, Malakhi reminds the people that redemption would ultimately arrive, and that modest steps toward repentance and building families were steps toward that deliverance.¹²

Having examined *Sefer Malakhi* as a lens to the final Biblical account of our era, next week we will consider from 10,000 feet the wider significance of the legacies of Ezra, Nechemia, and the period of *Shivat Zion*.¹³

¹² This might offer fresh insight into the Rabbis' decision to designate the end of *Malakhi* as the *haftara* for *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*. According to Rabbinic tradition, in the year of the exodus, *Shabbat Ha-Gadol* was the date the Jews took their sheep for the *korban Pesach*. Family is an essential halakhic ingredient to the *mitzva* of *Pesach*, which must be eaten in a pre-designated household unit. Family is essential to *Pesach* in another sense, in that we perform *pidyon ha-ben* as a commemoration of the salvation of the Jewish firstborns during the final plague. As noted, *pidyon ha-ben* is, appropriately, one of the obligations incumbent upon a father toward his son. Most obvious, the *seder* night centers on the obligation of *ve-higadta le-vinkha*, retelling the story of the exodus. This obligation is similarly reciprocal, with the child inquiring about the exodus and the parent expounding. Indeed, according to many, the obligation of *ve-higadta le-vinkha* is, at its core, an obligation of retelling the story by way of Torah study. This emphasis on family makes *Malakhi*, especially its penultimate verse, an excellent match for the themes of *Pesach*, and thus an excellent choice for the *haftara* of *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*.

¹³ It is worth noting that the conclusion of *Malakhi* is also quite similar to the conclusion of *Megillat Eikha*. In both cases, the book concludes with strikingly similar verses about loving familial reciprocity (in *Malakhi*, “*ve-heishiv lev avot;*” in *Eikha*, “*hashivenu Hashem eilekha ve-nashuva*”) followed by a threatening or negative phrase (in *Malakhi*, “lest I come and destroy the world with destruction”; in *Eikha*, “For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us”). Moreover, in both instances it is traditional to repeat the final phrase as a way of accentuating the positive. That both works conclude in similar fashion echoes the similarities between the books. In both cases, the prophet concludes a description of punishment and destruction with an uplifting conclusion that builds on the theme of familial relationships. In the end, it is the intimate, loving relationship between God and His people that ensures our survival.