

## Haftara Text Study: Malachi 3:4-24 = Shabbat HaGadol, The Shabbat Before Pesach

Rabbi Richard Hirsh

1.Context: There are four “named” Shabbatot leading up to Pesach, each dealing with a different dimension of preparing for the holiday: *Shabbat Shekalim* (Temple tax); *Shabbat Parah* (purification & red heifer); *Shabbat HaHodesh* (announcing the month of Nisan); and *Shabbat HaGadol* (lit. “The Great Shabbat,” technically “the Shabbat on which the *haftara* mentions the Great {*gadol*} Day of the Lord.”).

2. The Book of Malachi: There are 15 named prophets whose books appear in the Hebrew Bible.

- The earliest appear to be the books of Hosea and of Amos (c. 850 BCE);
- the largest books are Isaiah (chapters 1-39 are c.700 BCE + chapters 40-66 are c. 550 BCE), Ezekiel (c. 597-587 BCE); and Jeremiah (c. 586 BCE).
- The smaller books are individually named, and collectively known as “The Twelve” (*trei asar*). Of these, chronologically, the final book of prophecy preserved in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Malachi (c. 500-450 BCE)

3.Rabbi Gunther Plaut teaches about the Book of Malachi:

“Malachi stands at the end of the prophetic books in the Tanakh, and tradition held that **after him prophecy ceased in Israel**. Malachi thus represents a watershed in the development of Judaism: until then, God would speak to selected individuals and charge them with a mission to exhort and predict. **But from then on, humans and not God would [have to try to] identify [spiritual] truth.**

“Malachi” [is likely not a proper name]; it simply means “My (that is, God’s) Messenger.” The whole spirit of the book suggests that the Second Temple had been rebuilt (516-515 B.C.E.). But it was an era of spiritual disillusionment, for the glorious age [of restoration] that earlier prophets had foreseen had not materialized.”

4. Why is this selection from the Bible read as the *haftara* on the Shabbat before Pesach?

Although *haftarot* are usually chosen to connect a passage from The Prophets with the weekly reading from The Torah, in the case of Shabbat HaGadol, the connection is seasonal, not scriptural.

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- *Content Connection:* Malachi ch. 3 mentions tithes of produce, which by Jewish law had to be submitted/collected before Pesach.
- *Messianic Connection:* there is a Jewish tradition that the Messiah will arrive on Pesach. (All four Gospels of the New Testament place Jesus' final days in the context of Pesach.) Because Jewish tradition assigns to Elijah the announcing of the coming of the Messiah, the mention of Elijah at the very end of the Book of Malachi (= the last line of our *haftara*) accounts for this being the *haftara* selection for the Shabbat before Pesach.
- The New Testament alludes to this tradition in the Gospel of Matthew [11:7–14]: “Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John [the Baptist]: ‘What did you go out into the desert to see?...A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”’ (*Jesus here quotes Malachi 3:1*) I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist... And if you are willing to accept it, **he is the Elijah who was to come.**”

### 5. Our *Haftara* Text, Excerpted:

...I [God] will act as a relentless accuser against those who have no fear of Me: Who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their hire, and who subvert [the cause of] the widow, orphan, and stranger, said the LORD of Hosts.

For I am the LORD—I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be. From the very days of your fathers you have turned away from My laws and have not observed them. Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you—said the LORD of Hosts. But you ask, “How shall we turn back?”

... The LORD has heard and noted it, and a **scroll of remembrance** has been written at His behest concerning those who revere the LORD and esteem His name. And on the day that I am preparing, said the LORD of Hosts, they shall be My treasured possession; I will be tender toward them as a man is tender toward a son who ministers to him.

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...And you shall come to see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between him who has served God and him who has not served Him...For lo! That day is at hand, burning like an oven. All the arrogant and all the doers of evil shall be straw, and the day that is coming... But for you who revere My name a sun of victory shall rise to bring healing...

Be mindful of **the Teaching of My servant Moses**, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, **I will send the prophet Elijah** to you before the coming of **the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He 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.[repeated, to end on ‘a good note’: Lo, I will send the prophet **Elijah** to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD.]

### 6. The Greatest Hits of the Haftara:

#### a. “**Scroll of Remembrance**” : סֵפֶר זִכְרוֹן *sefer zikkaron*

*Nahum Sarna, JPS Commentary on Exodus:* The Hebrew Bible differentiates three types of heavenly books. There is “**the book of life**,” mentioned in Psalm 69, in which God is thought to inscribe the names of all the living. This notion undoubtedly drew its inspiration from the civil census lists that were kept by municipal or state authorities.

Then there is the “**book of divine decrees**,” [mentioned in Zechariah 5:1-3] in which the destinies of people/s are recorded.

Lastly, there is the “**book or remembrances**” in the book of the prophet Malachi in which the deeds of human beings, both good and evil, are written up:

“The LORD has heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance [סֵפֶר זִכְרוֹן] has been written at His behest concerning those who revere the LORD and esteem His name.” [Malachi 3:16]

(Sarna-) It is hard to decide whether the notion of heavenly books was taken literally in ancient Israel...The perennial Jewish greeting on the High Holy Days – *L’shana tova tikatayvu*, May you be inscribed...” echoes the ancient idea.

**b. *Torat Moshe*: The Torah of/from Moses**

Satan went to Moses and said to him: The Torah that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave you, where is it? Moses evaded the question and said to him: And what am I that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would have given me the Torah? I am unworthy. The Holy One, Blessed be He, then said to Moses: Moses, are you a fabricator? Moses said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have a hidden treasure [the Torah]...Should I take credit for myself and say that You gave it to me? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Since you humbled yourself, the Torah will be called by your name, as it is stated: “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant to whom I commanded at Horeb laws and statutes for all of Israel” (Malachi 3:22).

**c. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents.**

Rabbi Joshua said: I have received a tradition...that Elijah will not come to pronounce unclean or to pronounce clean, to put away or to bring near... Rabbi Judah says: to bring near, but not to put away. Rabbi Shimon says: to conciliate disputes. And the Sages say: neither to put away nor to bring near, but to make peace in the world, for it is said, “Behold I send to you Elijah the prophet and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers.” (Mishna Eduyot 8)

**d. Elijah**

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin: But what kind of person is Elijah who will be the “messenger of good news, salvation and comfort”? The biblical Elijah was a zealot who slaughtered 450 prophets of Baal after a contest at Mount Carmel, and challenged God to punish the Israelites for having rejected his covenant and allowed Jezebel to murder the Lord’s prophets. But somehow in Talmudic and folk tradition, Elijah morphs into a benign, grandfatherly figure who drinks from a special goblet at everyone’s seder table, graces every newborn male baby with his presence at their circumcision and frequently appears as a *deus ex machina* to teach important lessons and save people’s lives at critical moments...

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When the Talmud asks a question for which no satisfactory answer is evident, it uses the word *teiku* as a way of indicating that we'll have to wait for the coming of Elijah--messianic times--to receive the correct answer. Elijah will resolve our questions and difficulties.

[ *Teiku = Tishbi yetaretz kushiot u-va-ayot* -- “the Tishbite [Elijah] will resolve difficulties and problems”]

A question is raised: why will we bring our questions to Elijah? After all, tradition teaches that the messianic era will include the miraculous resurrection of the dead. That means that Moses will also be among us. Why don't we bring our questions to him, rather than to Elijah? Moses is our ultimate and greatest teacher of Torah.

An answer was offered in the name of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. He explained: when Moses died, he ascended to heaven and has remained there all these centuries. But when Elijah ascended to heaven, he still has managed to stay in touch with humanity. Elijah attends our Passover seders; Elijah is present at the circumcision ceremonies of our baby boys; Elijah turns up to help the poor and needy of every generation. While Moses has lost contact with humanity, Elijah has remained closely involved with us. Thus, we bring our questions to him, and not to Moses. Only a sage who is fully aware of and sympathetic to our situation can offer proper religious guidance.

