

Bringing the Prophets to Life

**Weekly insights into the Haftara
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**Haftara for Shabbat HaGadol
21+1 p'sukim - Mal'achi 3:4-24**

Reward & Punishment

Over the years, we have struggled to understand why this selection from the navi Malachi, the very final words of the last prophet of Israel, was chosen to be read on the Shabbat before Pesach. A simple reading of the text reveals to us that the chosen perek focuses upon the sins of Israel and the punishments that await them. Malachi condemns the people for having abandoned G-d and warns them of G-d's retribution against the sinners. Certainly, not a theme we would regard as fitting for the Shabbat before the joyous holiday of redemption.

Upon closer study, however, we would find that Hashem's warnings are directed to those who have lost faith. The harsh words are aimed at the people who see no benefit in observing G-d's mitzvot and following His directives. "It is useless to serve G-d", they say, "and what advantage is there in following His ways?", they

ponder. The nation of Malachi's time was asking the eternal question that has troubled people of faith throughout history: Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked flourish? The prophet's message, therefore, addresses this very question and is meant to respond to these people.

G-d's wheel of justice, he explains, turns very slowly but grinds very finely. The wicked will yet be brought to justice, he reassures them; they will be properly punished for their immoral and sinful ways. The righteous, on the other hand, will be greatly rewarded for their faith in G-d and their unwavering commitment to Hashem's ways. Malachi then challenges the wayward, telling them to change their ways and improve their behavior, for, once they have done so, Hashem says to them: "Now test Me(!) and see if I don't shower you with limitless blessings." Reward and punishment are not immediate - but G-d's justice is eternal and, eventually, reward will come to the good and punishment to the wicked.

There is no greater example of this lesson than the story of Egyptian enslavement and Israel's redemption, i.e. the story of Pesach. For hundreds of years the Israelites were tortured and tormented by the Egyptians. Throughout these difficult years, the innocent suffered while the guilty prevailed. The victims cried out, but

to no avail. At first. But when Hashem decided that the time was right for His justice, the Egyptians went down to defeat while B'nei Yisrael marched to their eternal land.

It was this message that Malachi delivered to an impoverished nation during the Second Temple era. But his message was meant to resound throughout the years of Galut and life in an unbearable Diaspora. The words of the navi spoke to the suffering communities for almost 2000 years: G-d's justice is eternal and, eventually, reward will come to the good and punishment to the wicked.

Malachi understood that his words would be the last that Israel would hear from a prophet - the last time they would here Hashem's words delivered to them. It is no wonder then that his final words were: ZICHRU TORAT MOSHE AVDI, "Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe!" Even when you believe that there is no benefit in following G-d's ways, even when you think that the wicked flourish while the righteous suffer, even when you think all is lost... remember the Torah of Moshe! Remember that justice will be done and the Geula will come.

And we today, bear witness to the truth of his words. ✨