YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

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In loving memory of my parents
Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l
- Benzion Lowinger

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**PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**“For A Priest’s Lips Should Safeguard Knowledge”**

An oracle: the word of the Lord to Israel through Malakhi. The Lord says, "I have loved you." But you say, "How have You loved us?" Is Esav not a brother to Yaakov? So says the Lord: Yet I loved Yaakov and hated Esav, I made his mountains desolate and gave his inheritance over to desert jackals. Even should Edom say, "We have been destroyed, but we will return and rebuild the ruins," says the Lord of Hosts, they will build; I will destroy, and they will be called the territory of evil and the nation that suffers the Lord's wrath forever. Your eyes will see this, and you will say, "The Lord is great beyond the territory of Israel." A son honors his father, and a slave his master; if I am a Father, where is My honor, and if I am the Master, where is My reverence? So says the Lord of Hosts to you, the priests who scorn My name. Yet you say, "How have we scorned Your name?" You offer defiled bread on My altar. Yet you say, "How have we defiled You?" In saying the Lord's table is repugnant. When you offer a blind animal to be sacrificed, is this no evil? And when you offer the lame and the sick, is this no evil? Offer it if you will to your governor. Would he then accept you – let you lift your face to him? So says the Lord of Hosts. Now, please, beseech God, and let Him be gracious to us. This was in your hands – would He turn His face for any one of you? So says the Lord of Hosts: O, who is there among you who would close the doors so that you might not light My altar for naught? I have no desire for you, says the Lord of Hosts. I will accept no offering from your hands. For from one end of the earth to the other, My name is great among the nations. Incense is offered in My name, a pure offering everywhere, for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts. Yet you desecrate it by saying that the Lord's table is defiled and its fruit too repugnant to be consumed. You say, "O, how wearisome," and you snort at it, says the Lord of Hosts. You bring what is stolen, the Lord says, what is lame, what is ill; you bring this offering. Am I to accept it from your hands? Cursed is the knave who has a ram in his flock but pledges and sacrifices a damaged animal to the Lord. For I am a great King, says the Lord of Hosts, and My name is revered among the nations. Now, this is your command, priests: If you do not listen, if you do not take it to heart to honor My name, says the Lord of Hosts, then I will set a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings – indeed, I have cursed your blessing, for you do not take it to heart. I will drive away the crops because of you, and I will scatter filth in your face, the filth of your holiday sacrifices, and you will be carried away after it. And you will know that I sent you this command so that My covenant may endure with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts. My covenant endures in him – life and peace. I gave them to him so as to be revered. He revered Me and was in awe of My name. True teaching was in his mouth, no sin from his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness and returned many from iniquity. For a priest’s lips should safeguard knowledge, and the people should seek teaching from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. (*Malakhi* 1:1-2:7)

**A. The Connection Between the *Parasha* and the *Haftara***

The beginning of the prophecy mentions the brotherhood of Esav and Yaakov, the issue with which our *parasha* begins. The prophecy adds that it is specifically Yaakov whom God chose and loves, whereas Esav He hates. There is a novelty here: the preference of Yitzchak over Yishmael may be justified by the fact that Yishmael was the son of a maidservant while Yitzchak was Sara's son, but Esav and Yaakov are twins born by the same mother to the same father, so why should the one be shown preference and the other rejected? The prophecy does not justify this preference, but apparently sees it as a fundamental choice stemming from God's will – not necessarily from the actions of Yaakov and Esav. It is possible that this is also how we should understand the resolution of the conflict between them in the *parasha.*

*Chazal* seem to have wrestled quite a bit with the question of why Yaakov was shown preference and Esav rejected, and made great efforts to justify this in terms of the principles of reward and punishment for man's free choices and actions. They saw Yaakov as a righteous man, who adhered to the spiritual heritage of his ancestors, and Esav as wicked:

"Yaakov was an innocent man who stayed among the tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27) – two tents; the school of Shem and the school of Ever…

For Esav fornicated with a betrothed woman and committed murder. This is what is written: "Esav came in [exhausted] from the field" (*Bereishit* 25:29) – that he fornicated with a betrothed woman, as it is stated: "But if the man encounters the betrothed woman in a field" (*Devarim* 22:25); "exhausted" (*Bereishit* 25:29) – that he committed murder, as it is stated: "My soul is exhausted by these murderers" (*Yirmiyahu* 4:31). Rav Berakhya and Rav Zakkai Raba said: He also stole, as it is stated: "If thieves come upon you" (*Ovadya* 1:5)… He worshipped idols, engaged in adultery, and shed blood… (*Bereishit Rabba* *Toldot* 63)

The verses in our *parasha* do not clearly justify the Sages' view of Esav. Scripture criticizes Esav for despising his birthright and selling it for a pot of lentils, and notes the evil of the Canaanite women whom he took as his wives (unlike his father Yitzchak, whose wife was brought to him from Avraham's family in Charan), as well as his desire to kill Yaakov, who stole his birthright and blessing. But it also describes his careful observance of the *mitzva* of honoring his father and states that when he saw his father's displeasure with his Canaanite wives, he married a daughter of Yishmael, from Avraham's family, and Oholivama, the daughter of one of the chiefs of Seir, who was not a Canaanite. The verses also note that when Esav met Yaakov on his return from Charan, he kissed and hugged him and offered him help, and even vacated the land of Canaan for his brother Yaakov and went to Mount Seir.

Why did *Chazal* choose a path that justifies the hatred for Esav? Scholars of Midrash usually say that *Chazal* evaluated Esav based on later events – that is to say, according to the wicked conduct of the Roman empire, which they associated with Esav's descendants. I prefer to say, however, that *Chazal* relied on the wisdom of Rivka, who loved Yaakov but apparently did not like Esav, and who presumably had good reasons.

As mentioned, the prophet Malakhi in our *haftara* mentions God's love for Yaakov and hatred for Esav without providing a reason, portraying it as a choice determined by His will alone. However, we will explore below the prophet's harsh claims against Edom, which explain God's hatred for him.

An accusation is also made in our *haftara* against the people of Israel, which opens with the words: "A son honors his father, and a slave his master”; this criticism becomes stronger in light of what we are told in our *parasha* about Esav's strict concern with his father's honor.

**II. Malakhi’s Prophecy About Edom**

At the beginning of his prophecy, Malakhi harshly criticizes Edom and its attitude towards Israel, which at the time of the destruction of the Temple included the element of speaking with a forked tongue – saying one thing but meaning another. The king of Edom was one of the five kings who came to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda seven years before the destruction to bring him into an alliance whose purpose was to rebel, under the auspices of Egypt, against the king of Babylon. The kingdom of Yehuda was a key kingdom in this plan because of its geographical location: it was located in an area that could link the Egyptian army, which was supposed to support the rebellious alliance, and the other rebel kingdoms (to the north of Yehuda – Tyre and Sidon; to the east of Yehuda – Amon and Moav; and to the south of it – Edom). The prophet Yirmiyahu, in the name of God, vigorously opposed this alliance, arguing that it would lead to spiritual and religious collapse and destruction. He warned Tzidkiyahu:

This is what the Lord said to me: “Make yourself the reins and bars of a yoke, and place them upon your neck, and send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moav, the king of the Amonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, and by way of the emissaries who come to Jerusalem, to Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda. (*Yirmiyahu* 27:2-3)

The reins and bars express the future failure of the rebellion in the eyes of the prophet, and so it was. Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylon, set his sights for the first time on Jerusalem, destroyed it and the Temple, and killed most of its inhabitants. The mentioned countries, supposed allies of Yehuda, rejoiced in Israel's misfortune, and joined the slave traders who bought the Jewish captives to sell them into slavery. Jerusalem remained isolated, with no ally to comfort her. Edom's treachery was apparently also reflected in the slave trade it developed on the backs of the prisoners of war.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yirmiyahu writes in *Eikha* about the joy of the Edomite “allies” at the capture of Jerusalem, and God's expected vengeance in its wake:

Rejoice, be merry, daughter Edom, sitting there in the land of Utz. The cup will come to you in turn; you will get drunk and be laid bare. Your offenses are done with, daughter Zion; He will exile you no more. Your offenses are noted, daughter Edom; your sins have been exposed. (*Eikha* 4:21-22)

He also prophesized at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem about the punishment to be visited upon Edom:

For this is what the Lord said: Even those who are not sentenced to drink the cup of wrath must drink it, and yet you expect to be absolved? You will certainly not be absolved. You shall certainly drink it. For by My own self have I sworn, declares the Lord, Botzra will become a desolation, a disgrace, a wasteland, and a curse, and all her towns shall be ruins forever. (*Yirmiyahu* 49:12-13)

But it was the prophet Yechezkel who best explained Edom's joy at Israel's misfortune and its reason:

Man, set your face against Mount Seir and prophesy against it; say to it: So says the Lord God: Behold, I am coming down upon you, Mount Seir; I will stretch My hand out over you and turn you into waste, desolation. I will make your cities ruins, you will be desolate; you will know that I am the Lord. Because you have displayed an endless enmity and delivered the Israelites up to the sword at the time of their ruin, at the time of final punishment… Because you said, “The two nations and the two lands will be mine; we will possess it,” and the Lord was there… Just as you rejoiced when the heritage of the House of Israel was made desolate, so will I do to you: you will be desolate, Mount Seir and the whole of Edom. They will know: I am the Lord. (*Yechezkel* 35:2-15)

Edom exploited the exile of the kingdom of Yehuda to spread from Mount Seir to the Israeli Negev and Mount Yehuda. In the days of the prophet Malakhi, during the return to Zion, the province of Geshem the Arabian (the Arabs of this period generally joined with the Edomites) reached Jerusalem, and he harassed the Jews. Later, when Herod the Edomite ruled in Jerusalem, his family's estate was south of Bethlehem, in the area of Herodion. The prophet likens Edom to a brother who is happy about his brother's death because it means he will acquire the entire inheritance that had been intended for the two of them.

Unlike Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel, who prophesied about the future of Edom, Malakhi prophesied after the kingdom of Edom had already been destroyed. According to an inscription found in the city of Sela, the capital of Edom in Mount Seir, it was conquered by Nabonidus, king of Babylon. It is possible that even in the days of Malakhi, Edomite settlements remained in the land of the kingdom of Yehuda whose inhabitants harassed Israel, and the prophet foretells that they will not succeed in rebuilding the ruins of their country:

Even should Edom say, "We have been destroyed, but we will return and rebuild the ruins," says the Lord of Hosts, they will build; I will destroy, and they will be called the territory of evil and the nation that suffers the Lord's wrath forever. (*Malakhi* 1:4)

With God's vengeance against Edom, Israel will understand that God's power is great even beyond Israel's borders, and that He can certainly take revenge on their enemies in their own lands as well:

Your eyes will see this, and you will say, "The Lord is great beyond the territory of Israel." (Ibid. 5)

**III. Rebuke for the Contempt Shown to the Temple Service and the Sacrifices**

In an unusual prophecy, *Malakhi* accuses the people, and especially the priests, of bringing disqualified offerings to the Temple: physically blemished, sick, and even stolen animals. The prophets of the First Temple period far more often rebuked the people for just the opposite – for overdoing their attention to sacrifices, at the expense of other *mitzvot*:

What then can I offer the Lord when I bow low to the God Most High? Should I come before Him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? Would the Lord want a thousand rams, untold rivulets of oil?… Man, God has told you what is good and what the Lord seeks from you: only to do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with your God. (*Mikha* 6:6-8)

Chagai, Malakhi's predecessor among the prophets of the return to Zion, similarly criticized the contempt for laws of purity and impurity in the sacrificial service:

"So says the Lord of Hosts: Now ask the priests for a ruling of Law: 'If a man carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment and with that fold touches bread, or a cooked dish, or wine, or oil, or any other food, does it become sanctified?'" The priests answered and said, "No." Chagai said: "And if someone who has become impure through contact with the dead touches any of these things, does it become impure?" The priests answered and said, "It becomes impure." Then Chagai spoke and said, "The Lord has spoken: So too is this people, this nation before Me, and so is all the labor of their hands. Everything they might offer there is impure." (*Chagai* 2:11-14)

The change in prophetic rebuke between the First Temple and the Second Temple, in relation to the Temple and its service, requires explanation. I will try to explain it in two ways, opposite sides of the same coin:

a. In the First Temple, magnificent and grand, the inner sanctuary housed the ark of the covenant and the *keruvim*,and with them, the *Shekhina.* The High Priest wore the *urim* and the *tumim,* which operated with *ruach hakodesh* (holy spirit), with the name of God in them. The people's connection to the *Shekhina*,via the Temple and the sacrificial service, created a foundation that was strong and clear. More than once, the entire nation assembled to make a covenant with God (in the days of Asa, see II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 15) or to pray together (in the days of Yehoshafat, ibid. 20), and the Temple was central to the people’s religious consciousness and their longing for God. This determined the weight of the sacrificial service in the eyes of the people – and the service sometimes overshadowed the need for efforts in other elements of Divine service and in the parts of Torah that deal with honesty, justice, and charity. The prophets of the First Temple challenged this mindset by saying that there is no point in the Temple service, as a way to bring about the resting of the *Shekhina*,without engaging in other aspects of Divine service and in matters of honesty, justice, and charity.

In contrast, the Second Temple was initially (until the days of Herod) a modest building, and its attraction in the eyes of the people was probably not great. This is how the prophet describes it:

Who is there still among you who saw this House in its first glory? As you see it now, it must seem like nothing to you. (*Chagai* 2:3)

The inner sanctuary inside it stood empty, without the ark or its cover and *keruvim*, and the *urim* and the *tumim* did not have their say. The people did not relate to it as a significant religious center, and this affected their attitude toward the Temple and the priests. The Temple service is portrayed in our prophecy in all its humiliation; the prophets of the Second Temple challenged this and demanded of the people that they change their attitude toward the Temple and the sacrifices.

b. *Chazal* (*Yoma* 69b) relate that at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the men of the Great Assembly nullified the inclination toward idolatry, which appeared to them like a young fiery lion emerging from the Holy of Holies. It would seem that there is a connection between the fiery lion and the absence of the ark and the two *keruvim*. It also seems that the price paid for nullifying the evil desire for idolatry was a dulling of the natural yearning for tangible service of God, such as the offering of sacrifices. This dulling of emotion reduced the desire for the sacrificial service, as reflected in the prophecy of Malakhi in our *haftara*.

Even today, we must pay attention to these two deficiencies and to their bitter consequences. We all aspire to the building of the Temple and the restoration of its service, but we do not do enough to educate our children and explain the importance of the sacrifices in our service of God, and or convey their ability to bring us closer to our Father in heaven. If the Temple is built on this background, the sacrificial service may look like what is described in our *haftara*. Do we expect Mashiach to do the educational work of addressing the importance of the Temple service and its sacrifices in our place?

**IV. “My Name is Great Among the Nations”**

For from one end of the earth to the other, My name is great among the nations. Incense is offered in My name, a pure offering everywhere, for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts. (*Malakhi* 1:11)

The reader is astonished, and perhaps even winces in pain. The Persian kingdom controls the land of Israel, and everything happens in accordance with its instructions. In the west, the kingdom of Greece is beginning to assume stature. The gates of Jerusalem are breached and desolate,[[2]](#footnote-2) and the local Jewish population is in a bad state vis-à-vis their many neighbors. Is this a situation in which God's name is great among the nations?! Where are the many places where incense is offered to God's name, and who recognizes His greatness after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile?!

It seems that this must be understood in light of events at the time of the prophet Malakhi. He prophesied a few years after the miracle of Purim and the great victory over Haman and his sons and the many oppressors of Israel who were under their command. Several verses from the book of *Esther* portray the impact of this victory on others:

And many of the local people joined the Jews, for awe of the Jews had overwhelmed them. (*Esther* 8:17)

And no man could stand before them, for fear of them had fallen upon all nations. And the ministers of the provinces, the viceroys and the governors, and the administrators of the king’s court, all promoted the Jews, for fear of Mordekhai had fallen on them. (*Esther* 9:2-3)

Many non-Jews joined the Jewish people and accepted upon themselves the yoke of the heavenly kingdom out of fear ("the converts of Mordekhai and Esther," as *Chazal* describe them in *Yevamot* 24b), and others remained frightened. One can imagine that at that time, the name of the Lord, God of the Jews, was magnified in the eyes of all the nations, which also affected Ezra's return to the land of Israel a few years later. In the land of Israel, which lay on the fringes of the Persian Empire, the situation apparently remained difficult[[3]](#footnote-3) – but even without salvation in the land of Israel, God's name remained great among the nations, and this is what Malakhi refers to in our *haftara*.

**V. “For He Is a Messenger of the Lord of Hosts”**

After his harsh rebuke of the priests, the prophet takes a surprising turn and speaks in praise of a single priest, with whom God made a covenant:

Now, this is your command, priests: If you do not listen, if you do not take it to heart to honor My name, says the Lord of Hosts… My covenant endures in him – life and peace. I gave them to him so as to be revered. He revered Me and was in awe of My name. True teaching was in his mouth, no sin from his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness and returned many from iniquity. For a priest’s lips should safeguard knowledge, and the people should seek teaching from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. (*Malakhi* 1:1-2:7)

The complaint against the priests is about their defective service in the Temple, while the praise of this one priest deals not with the Temple service, but with his close connection to the Torah and its commandments, his fear of God, the peace and good relationship that he maintains with the people, and that he brought many back from sin.

The prophet seems to be referring to Ezra the scribe, who was a priest (as is explained in detail in *Ezra* 7). Indeed, we do not find much stated about Ezra serving in the Temple, and he was never the High Priest, but he was very active in spreading Torah, in bringing the people closer to the *mitzvot*, and in enacting ordinances to prevent sin – especially the sin of marrying foreign women,[[4]](#footnote-4) which Malakhi talks about in the verses after our *haftara*.

*Chazal* say (*Megilla* 15:1) that Malakhi *is* Ezra. It seems to me that they do not mean they are one and the same person, but rather that Malakhi and Ezra were united in a single policy – removing the foreign women and leading the people in the path of Torah and *mitzvot*. The prophet Malakhi sees Ezra as "a messenger of the Lord of hosts" in the great mission that he took upon himself.

Let us also mention the words of Moshe, on the last day of his life, regarding the two roles of a priest:

They shall teach Your laws to Yaakov, and Your instruction to Israel; they shall place incense before You, and whole offerings on Your altar. (*Devarim* 33:10)

In the days of Ezra and Malakhi, the role was split into two: the High Priests took upon themselves the Temple service (in a way that was not successful, as described above), while Ezra the priest took upon himself the role of passing down the Torah to the people with the help of Malakhi, Nechemia, and the men of the Great Assembly.

Let us add a final word about Ezra, the "messenger [*malakh*] of the Lord of hosts." The term *malakh* can also be understood as "angel." *Chazal* likened Ezra to Moshe, despite the obvious differences between them:

It was taught [in a *baraita*]: Rabbi Yose said: Had Moshe not preceded him, Ezra would have been worthy of receiving the Torah for Israel. Of Moshe it is written: "And Moshe went up to God" (*Shemot* 19:3), and of Ezra it is written: "He, Ezra, went up from Babylon" (*Ezra* 7:6). As the going up of the former refers to the [receiving of the] Law, so does the going up of the latter. Concerning Moshe, it is stated: "And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments" (*Devarim* 4:14); and concerning Ezra, it is stated: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to expound the law of the Lord [his God] to do it and to teach Israel statutes and judgments" (*Ezra* 7:10). (*Sanhedrin* 21b)

Moshe is also called an "angel":

So too the prophets were likened to the angels, for thus it is stated about Moshe: "And He sent an angel, and brought us forth" (*Bamidbar* 20:16). Was it an angel? Surely it was Moshe! Rather, from here we see that the prophets were called angels. (*Tanchuma* *Shelach*)

What these two "angels" have in common is their delivery of the Torah to the people of Israel – Moshe brought us the Torah from heaven, and Ezra was the leader of the men of the Great Assembly, who are regarded as the cornerstone of the Oral Law.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This conclusion emerges from the prophecy of Yoel (4) about the slave trade involving the people of Jerusalem, which includes the promise that "Edom shall be a desolate wilderness," but this was in an earlier period. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Nechemia* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perhaps this is the reason for the Sages' initial opposition to Esther's enactments, which included the establishmen of a holiday and the writing of a book for future generations. This objection is mentioned in the Gemara (*Megilla* 7a), and is explained as due to fear of the enmity of the nations and other halakhic considerations. It is possible that the underlying argument of the Sages (in my opinion, these were apparently the men of the Great Assembly, the Sages of the land of Israel) was that despite the victory in Shushan and many other countries, the land of Israel and its Jewish inhabitants did not see a great salvation, and therefore they could not establish a lasting holiday and book for this miracle . [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here is another connection between our *haftara* and the *parasha*, for it was because of his marriage to the daughters of Canaan that Esav was removed from the world of holiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)