YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**Shabbat Ha-Gadol**

Then the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in days of old and years past. I will draw close to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and adulterers and those who falsely swear; against those who withhold payment from the worker or the widow or the orphan; against those who turn away the stranger. They do not fear Me, says the Lord of Hosts. For I am the Lord. I have not changed. And you, children of Yaakov, you have not perished. Ever since the days of your forefathers you have strayed from My statutes, and you did not keep them. Come back to Me, and I will come back to you, says the Lord of Hosts. But you say, "How shall we come back?" Can a person steal from God? Yet you steal from Me. But you say, "What have we stolen from You?" The tithes and donations. You are being cursed with the curse because you steal from Me – the whole nation. Bring the entire tithe to the treasury, and it will be food for My House, and put Me to the test, please, in this, says the Lord of Hosts. See if I do not open up the floodgates of heaven for you and pour out blessings upon you endlessly. I will drive away for you that which devours. Your produce will not be destroyed, and your vines in the field will not be barren, says the Lord of Hosts. All the nations will call you happy, for you, yours will be a desired land, says the Lord of Hosts.

The Lord says, "You have spoken harshly against Me." Yet you say, "What have we said of You?" You say, "It is useless to serve God, and what do we gain in keeping His watch, or by walking in dark sorrow before the Lord of Hosts? Now we call the arrogant happy; evildoers have built themselves up; they have tested God and escaped." Then those who fear the Lord spoke one to another, and the Lord listened and He heard, and it was written – a book of remembrance before Him for those who fear the Lord and keep His name in mind. And they shall be Mine, says the Lord of Hosts, on the day on which I choose My cherished possession, and I will take pity on them as a man takes pity on his son who serves him. And you will once again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven; the arrogant and the evildoers will be straw, and the coming day will consume them, says the Lord of Hosts, so that neither root nor branch will remain of them. But for you, fearers of My name, a sun of righteousness will shine with healing under its wings, and you will go out and frolic like stall-fatted calves. You will trample evildoers – for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day on which I act, says the Lord of Hosts. Remember the Teaching of Moshe My servant, which I commanded to him at Chorev, statutes and laws for all of Israel. Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will return the hearts of parents back to their children and the hearts of children back to their parents, lest I come and lay the earth waste.

Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. (*Malakhi* 3:4-24)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. *Shabbat Ha-Gadol***

The designation "*Shabbat ha-Gadol*" ("the Great Shabbat") is in our sources from the school of Rashi.[[2]](#footnote-2)It is found in *Siddur Rashi*, in *Sefer ha-Pardes*, and in *Sefer ha-Ora*, and also in *Machzor Vitri*, which was written by a disciple of Rashi. It is based on what is stated in the *baraita* of *Seder Olam* and in the Gemara in *Shabbat* (87b) that the day of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the 15th of Nisan, was a Thursday. From this it follows that the 10th of the month, when the Israelites began to prepare their Pesach offerings at God's command, was the Shabbat before Pesach – in the language of Rashi and his disciples, "*Shabbat ha-Gadol*." Regarding this day and the miracle performed on it, the *Tur* writes based on the *Rishonim* from the school of Rashi:

The Shabbat before Pesach is called *Shabbat ha-Gadol.* The reason is that a great miracle was performed on it, for the Pesach sacrifice in Egypt was taken on the 10th, as it is written: "On the tenth of the month each man must take a lamb for his family; one for every household" (*Shemot* 12:3). And the Pesach on which Israel left Egypt fell out on a Thursday, as we find in *Seder Olam*. It turns out then that the 10th of the month was Shabbat, and everyone took a lamb for his Pesach offering, and tied it to their bedposts. And the Egyptians asked them: "Why is this so [why do you have a sheep (the Egyptian god) tied to your bed]?" And they responded: "To slaughter for a Pesach offering at the command of God." And they were upset that they were going to slaughter their gods, but they were not permitted to say anything. And on account of that miracle, it is called *Shabbat ha-Gadol.* (*Tur*, *Orach Chaim* 430)

The *Chizkuni* and other *Rishonim*, on the other hand,passed over the miracle and instead exalted the mitzva that the Israelites performed:

"On the tenth of the month each man must take" – It was Shabbat, and because Israel performed the first mitzvaon it, i.e., taking the Pesach sacrifice on the tenth, it is called *Shabbat ha-Gadol*. (*Chizkuni*, *Shemot* 12:3)

Another explanation for the term *Shabbat ha-Gadol* relates to the sermon on the laws of Pesach that was traditionally delivered by the Rabbi (= the great one in the community) on that Shabbat, but we will not elaborate on this. I will, however, offer two additional explanations:

a. The first festival day of Pesach is referred to in the Torah as "Shabbat" with regard to the counting of the *Omer*, and therefore, the preceding Shabbat was designated as *Shabbat ha-Gadol* in order to differentiate between them, because the weekly Shabbat is holier than the “Shabbat” of Pesach (*Sefer ha-Me'orot ha-Gedolim*, cited by Rabbi M. M. Kasher in his *Haggada Shleima*).

b. Another explanation that is important for our purposes is brought by the author of *Mateh Moshe* (5542) in the name of his teacher Rabbi Shlomo Luria, the Maharshal. In his opinion, this Shabbat was called *Shabbat ha-Gadol* because of its *haftara*, which ends with the words "before the great and terrible day of the Lord" (the Maharshal rejected this explanation with a forced argument).

**II. The *Haftara***

The author of the *Levushim* suggests two reasons for reading a special *haftara* on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* even though there is no special *maftir* associated with this Shabbat:[[3]](#footnote-3)

It seems to me that the reason that we read "*Ve-arva* (it will be pleasing)" as the *haftera* for every *Shabbat ha-Gadol* is that in it is written: "Behold, I will send you Eliya, etc." which is similar to Moshe's heralding the redemption from Egypt, and so it is a *haftara* that befits the occasion on every *Shabbat ha-Gadol*.

And for those who read "*Ve-arva*" as the *haftara* only when *Shabbat ha-Gadol* falls out on the eve of Pesach, there is a different reason, that in it is written: "Bring the entire tithe to the treasury, etc.," referring to the removal of tithe [remaining in the house] during the fourth year of the Sabbatical cycle, and the time of this removal is Pesach eve. (*Levush Tekhelet ve-ha-Chur*, *Orach Chaim* 430)

The *Levush* is inclined to reject the second explanation. The removal of tithes involves removing from one's house any tithes that had been set aside during the past three years, especially the poor man's tithe. This includes giving them to those for whom they are intended, the Levites and the poor – and nowadays, removing them from one's house or renouncing ownership of them on the eve of Pesach in the fourth year of the Sabbatical cycle and in the Sabbatical year itself (i.e., the Pesach after the third and sixth years of the Sabbatical cycle, years in which poor man's tithe is set aside). Because of these years, it became customary to mention the removal of tithes in the *haftara* every year.

According to the plain meaning of the text, however, Malakhi is not speaking of the removal of tithes. Furthermore, another reason to reject this approach is that it primarily explains the custom of reading this *haftara* specifically on *Shabbat* *ha-Gadol* that falls out on the eve of Pesach – as noted by the *Levush.*

The first reason offered by the *Levush* more closely accords with the content of the *haftara* (like the reason of the Maharshal above): The day of Pesach is the clearest Biblical example of "the great and terrible day of the Lord"; many of the prophets spoke about this day and illustrated their words with what happened in the deliverance from Egypt. This is especially striking in the prophecy of Yoel, who spoke of the future day of the Lord as a day on which there will be a plague of locusts, a plague of blood, and a plague of darkness; a day on which the people of Israel will go free from their enslavers and from those who sold them in the slave markets, and God will pour out His spirit upon them. In our *haftara*,the prophet Malakhi sees the prophet Eliya[hu] replacing Moshe in bringing about the day of the Lord and the redemption of Israel, like the tradition attached to the night of the *Seder*:

Remember the Teaching of Moshe My servant, which I commanded to him at Chorev, statutes and laws for all of Israel. Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. (3:22-23)

Accompanied by this reasoning, we will proceed together to interpret the entire *haftara*. It may be recalled that our study of the *haftara* for *Parashat Tzav*[[4]](#footnote-4) mentioned another explanation for this reading, from the *Or Zaru'a.*[[5]](#footnote-5) The *parasha* that is usually read on the Shabbat before Pesach is *Parashat Tzav*, which is mainly concerned with the laws of the sacrifices. The Gemara mentions a *haftara* for that *parasha*: Yirmeyahu's prophecy in which he expresses disgust with the sacrifices that were regularly brought to the Temple in the days of Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu. The preciousness of the Pesach sacrifice (which seems to contradict Yirmeyahu's claim in that *haftara "*For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt, I did not speak to them, nor did I command them about matters of burnt offerings and sacrifices" – *Yirmeyahu* 7:22) resulted in preference being given to our *haftara*, whichbegins with the words "Then the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in days of old and years past."

**III. The Relationship Between Justice and Sacrifices**

Then the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in days of old and years past. I will draw close to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and adulterers and those who falsely swear; against those who withhold payment from the worker or the widow or the orphan; against those who turn away the stranger. They do not fear Me, says the Lord of Hosts. (3:4-5)

Many prophets condition favorable acceptance of sacrifices on our performance of justice. Here are two examples:

Why, says the Lord, would I want all these offerings? I am sated with burnt offerings, with rams and fleshy creatures' fat, the blood of bulls and sheep and goats – I do not want them… Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct what is cruel. Rule justice for orphans. Fight the widows' cause. (*Yeshayahu* 1:11-17)

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)

This connection finds expression in the proximity of the Sanhedrin (in the Chamber of Hewn Stone) to the altar, noted in the *Mekhilta*:

"And these are the laws that you shall set before them" – Learn[[6]](#footnote-6) from this that the Sanhedrin was located alongside the altar. (*Mekhilta Ba-Chodesh* 11)

This proximity is also portrayed in the book of *Devarim*:

Appoint judges and officials for your tribes in all the towns that the Lord your God is giving you, to govern the people with equitable justice. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and subvert the cause of the just. Pursue justice, only justice, so that you may live and possess the land that the Lord your God is giving you. Do not plant a sacred tree of any kind beside the altar that you make for the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 16:18-21)

At the gate of every city (when *bamot* were permitted) stood an altar, and next to it sat the judges, adjudicating the cases brought before them; one who was found liable for an oath would take the oath there while holding a sacred object – by placing his hand on the altar.

So too in King Shlomo's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, a connection is made between the altar, which is meant for sacrifices, and the doing of justice:

Should a person wrong another who then imposes an oath upon him and he thus becomes cursed, and he comes before Your altar in this House with the curse – listen from the heavens, take action, and judge Your servant. Condemn the wicked by bringing his own ways upon his own head, and vindicate the righteous by rewarding him as befits his righteousness. (I *Melakhim* 8:31-32)

In our *haftara* as well, the prophet hangs the favorable acceptance of our offerings on the doing of justice, but he specifically mentions God's judgment of the wicked – especially of those who pervert justice and oppress the stranger and the rest of society's underprivileged.

The background for the prophet's claim emerges from the verses that precede our *haftara*:

You have wearied the Lord with your talk. But you say, "How have we wearied Him?" By saying every evildoer is good in the eyes of the Lord and it is them whom He desires; or, "Where is the God of justice?" Behold: I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a path before Me. Suddenly, the Lord whom you seek will arrive at His Temple. The angel of the covenant whom you desire – behold, he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. Who can survive the day of His coming, and who can remain standing when He appears? For He is like the smelter's fire and the washers' lye. (*Malakhi* 2:17-3:2)

Malakhi's style in all of his prophecies, including these verses and those of our *haftara*, involves a dialogue of questions and answers between God and the people. He was a contemporary of Ezra and Nechemya, who made every effort to bring the people back to God in a period of intermarriage with non-Jews, abandonment of God's commandments, and a war of survival immersed in corruption and injustice. The disappointment caused by the great gap between the hope of redemption through the return to Zion and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the pressing reality of the ascent of Israel's enemies in the land and the wretchedness of Jerusalem and the Temple at the beginning of their reconstruction, was unbearable. The feeling was that there is no recompense for the righteous and for those who serve God, and that abandoning His path is more rewarding.

The prophet speaks of the "day of the Lord," when God will reveal Himself as on the day of the exodus from Egypt and redeem His faithful from their oppressors. He will come with his angel-prophet just as He appeared in Egypt with Moshe and Aharon, but before the desired revelation, the people must face a question:

Who can survive the day of His coming, and who can remain standing when He appears? For He is like the smelter's fire and the washers' lye.

In other words, when the day of judgment arrives, will you – based on your current actions – be included among the redeemed, or perhaps among those who will be judged? The redemption will be great, but the judgment will be painful. This was also the case in the deliverance from Egypt, when many members of Israel perished, and according to *Chazal*, only a fifth of the Israelites left Egypt. Is it really good for you that the God of Justice should come?!

Apparently, the answer is yes – because we are not counted among the absolute wicked: we are not sorcerers or adulterers, and it seems to us that we are also not steeped in social corruption. But before we answer the prophet's question in the affirmative, let us examine the words of Rabbi Yochanan:

Rabbi Yochanan, when he came to the following verse, wept: "I will draw close to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and adulterers and those who falsely swear; against those who withhold payment from the worker" (*Malakhi* 3:5) – a slave whose master draws him close to judge him and quickly testifies against him, is there any remedy for him? (*Chagiga* 5a)

If he was afraid, perhaps we too should be afraid.

Nevertheless, when God comes into judgment with us, and we too learn to do justice, then our offerings and sacrifices will be pleasing to Him – including the matter at hand, the Pesach sacrifice that we will offer before Him when we come to renew the covenant with Him.

**IV. Repentance in the Mitzva of Setting Aside Tithes, and its Reward**

Ever since the days of your forefathers you have strayed from My statutes, and you did not keep them. Come back to Me, and I will come back to you, says the Lord of Hosts. But you say, "How shall we come back?" Can a person steal [*ha-yikba*]from God? Yet you steal [*kov’im*] from Me. But you say, "What have we stolen from You [*keva’anukha*]?" The tithes [*ha-ma'aser*] and donations [*ve-ha-teruma*]. You are being cursed with the curse [*me’eira*] because you steal [*kov’im*] from Me – the whole nation. Bring the entire tithe to the treasury, and it will be food for My House, and put Me to the test, please, in this, says the Lord of Hosts. See if I do not open up the floodgates of heaven for you and pour out blessings upon you endlessly. I will drive away for you that which devours. Your produce will not be destroyed, and your vines in the field will not be barren, says the Lord of Hosts. All the nations will call you happy, for you, yours will be a desired land, says the Lord of Hosts. (3:7-12)

From our perspective today, the role of *terumot* and *ma'aserot* is merely to make the rest of the produce fit for eating. At the beginning of the Second Temple Period and during the oppressive famine that prevailed at the time, however, their role was to provide a meager living for the priests and Levites serving in the Temple and performing their duties in Jerusalem (such as guarding the city gates against non-Jewish traders who desecrated Shabbat).[[7]](#footnote-7) When *terumot* and *ma'aserot* were not given, the priests and Levites could not afford to serve in the Temple and be in Jerusalem; they were forced to flee to their fields across the country or make a living as hired workers. Nechemya, a contemporary of Malakhi, wrote about the time he traveled to Persia in the service of King Artachshasta and did not oversee what was happening in Jerusalem:

I also discovered that the portions allotted to the Levites had not been provided and that the Levites and singers who performed the ritual duties had fled, each to his field. (*Nechemya* 13:10)

From the "agreement," as it were, between God and the people, it appears that God will send the people rain and protect their grain from agricultural pests, and the people will provide for the priests and Levites serving in His Temple. When the portions of the priests and the Levites were not given, the people were in effect "stealing"[[8]](#footnote-8) from God, and God as well stopped fulfilling His part of the agreement: blight damages the grain, rain does not fall, the locusts and their like eat the grain, and the land turns into a wasteland. The prophet tells the people to give what they owe of *terumot* and *ma'aserot*, and to look forward to the salvation of the land – to rain, to endless blessing, and to the nations' seeing the good land that God desires.

 There is, however, something else that we learn from these verses. According to Torah law, each person gives his *terumot* and *ma'aserot* to the priest or Levite of his choice. Moreover, the later *halakha* also recognizes *"makirei kahuna*," associates of the priesthood; certain priests regularly receive *teruma* from a particular family, and to a certain extent, have a legal claim to it. But in Malakhi's generation, because of the hardships, the members of the Great Assembly enacted that everyone should bring their *terumot* and *ma'aserot* to the "treasury," a central donation center (and from there to many treasuries in various localities), and appointed officials would distribute the *terumot* and *ma'aserot* justly and fairly to the priests and Levites, in equal portions or according to the extent of their service. Indeed, the people accepted this ordinance (and many other commandments) in the agreement reached under the leadership of Ezra and Nechemya:[[9]](#footnote-9)

The initial offering of our dough and our donations of the fruit of all trees, and the wine and olive oil, we will bring to the priests, to the chambers of the House of our God, and the tenth from our lands to the Levites, those Levites receiving the tithes in all our farming towns. The priest, descendant of Aharon, will be with the Levites when the Levites tithe, and the Levites will bring the tithed tenths up to the House of our God – to the chambers, to the treasury. For it is to those chambers that the Israelites and the descendants of Levi will bring the donations of the grain, wine, and olive oil, where the Temple vessels are, as are the serving priests, gatekeepers, and singers – we will not forsake the House of our God. (*Nechemya* 10:38-40)

The concluding words, "we will not forsake the House of our God," indicate that non-observance of this ordinance would mean abandoning the House of our God, for the reason explained above.

The ordinance of the members of the Great Assembly was indeed fulfilled, as Nechemya testifies:

On that day, men were appointed to supervise the chambers, to collect within them the stores of the contributions, the firsts and the tithes from the village fields – those portions allotted by the Torah to the priests and Levites – for Yehuda rejoiced in the priests and Levites who stood…

And during the days of Zerubavel and of Nechemya, all Israel provided the daily portions allotted for the singers and gatekeepers and dedicated portions for the Levites, while the Levites in turn dedicated portions for the descendants of Aharon. (*Nechemya* 12:44-47)

**V. Crisis of Faith and the Doctrine of Recompense**

The Lord says, "You have spoken harshly against Me." Yet you say, "What have we said of You?" You say, "It is useless to serve God, and what do we gain in keeping His watch, or by walking in dark sorrow before the Lord of Hosts? Now we call the arrogant happy; evildoers have built themselves up; they have tested God and escaped." (3:13-15)

The difficult conversation between the people and God, through the prophet, continues. Above, the prophet offered an unusual proposal, which apparently involved the prohibition of testing God:

"You shall surely tithe [*aser te'aser*]" (*Devarim* 14:22) – Give tithes [*aser*], that you may be enriched [*tei'asher*]… Is it permissible to try the Holy One, blessed be He, seeing that it is written: "You shall not try the Lord" (*Devarim* 6:16)? He said to him: Thus said Rabbi Hoshaya: The case of tithe-giving is excepted [from the prohibition], as it is stated: "Bring the entire tithe to the treasury, and it will be food for My House, and put Me to the test, please, in this, says the Lord of Hosts. See if I do not open up the floodgates of heaven for you and pour out blessings upon you endlessly" (*Malakhi* 3:10). (*Ta'anit* 9a)

There was a suggestion to test God and see whether He would indeed fulfill His commitment in the "agreement," and bless the land in the wake of the people’s decision to bring the tithes to the treasury (and its fulfillment) on the part of those who heard the words of the prophet. But even though Rabbi Hoshaya permitted such conduct based on our prophecy, our prophecy actually shows that God, as it were, did not keep His promise and did not bless the land. From this, the people conclude that "it is useless to serve God," and there is no reward for those who reduce their needs ("walking in dark sorrow") in order to keep God's words and give their *terumot* and *ma'aserot*. From their words, it appears that many ("the arrogant," "evildoers") indeed did not listen to the prophet, "tested" God to see if He would punish them, and escaped His punishment.

How could it happen that God's prophet promised a clear reward for bringing the tithes to the treasury and allowed testing God in this manner, but God, as it were, "did not pass the test"? The solution was alluded to above: The book of *Nechemya* lists the families who signed the covenant about observing the *mitzvot* and bringing the tithes to the treasury. But an examination of the number of families that returned to Zion shows that these families, though many, were not the majority of the people who lived in the land; the majority did not join the covenant. Here, in my opinion, were sown the seeds of the calamity of the division into sects that marked the Second Temple Period. In this respect, the covenant failed.[[10]](#footnote-10) Ample rainfall and the blessing of the land are for an entire nation, not for individuals. God's blessing did not take place, and Malakhi had to provide another solution for those who believed in God and followed in His ways, as will be explained below.

**VI. The Solution – A Book of Remembrance**

Then those who fear the Lord spoke one to another, and the Lord listened and He heard, and it was written – a book of remembrance before Him for those who fear the Lord and keep His name in mind. And they shall be Mine, says the Lord of Hosts, on the day on which I choose My cherished possession, and I will take pity on them as a man takes pity on his son who serves him. And you will once again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven; the arrogant and the evildoers will be straw, and the coming day will consume them, says the Lord of Hosts, so that neither root nor branch will remain of them. But for you, fearers of My name, a sun of righteousness will shine with healing under its wings, and you will go out and frolic like stall-fatted calves. You will trample evildoers – for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day on which I act, says the Lord of Hosts. (3:16-21)

The solution offered by Malakhi is a solution for individuals (even if they are many) who cannot be defined as a people. God listens, hears, and writes a book of remembrance, in which are recorded the merits of those who love Him, just like the book of remembrance in which the merits of Mordekhai were written before Achashverosh.[[11]](#footnote-11) The book of remembrance has no effect now, nor does it now contain a satisfying answer to the question of recompense. But a day will come, "the day on which I choose My cherished possession," and everyone will see that God indeed rewards those who are righteous and who serve God. *Chazal* describe this day based on our verses:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: There is no Gehinnom in the future world, but the Holy One, blessed be He, brings the sun out of its sheath, so that it is fierce: the wicked are punished by it, and the righteous are healed by it. The wicked are punished by it, as it is stated: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven; the arrogant and the evildoers will be straw, and the coming day will consume them, says the Lord of Hosts, so that neither root nor branch will remain of them."… The righteous are healed by it, as it is stated: "But for you, fearers of My name, a sun of righteousness will shine with healing under its wings…." (*Avoda Zara* 3b-4a)

The big question that remains open is when that day will be. The verses point to a distant future, which currently cannot be seen. At the moment, the world seems to the observer to be devoid of the doctrine of recompense: there are righteous people who suffer and wicked people who prosper. Currently, there is no solution that is visible to the eyes of the observer, and if we do not instill within us the belief in the world-to-come, the recognition of God's infinite righteousness, and the belief that He will never dispense with righteous judgment, the observer will be left with the feeling that there is no judge and no judgment.

The discussion surrounding these verses in *Malakhi* recalls to a considerable extent the debate between Elisha ben Abuya and Rabbi Akiva:

They said: One time, he [=Elisha ben Abuya] was sitting and studying in the Ginosar Valley and he saw a certain person who climbed to the top of a palm tree and took the mother bird and the fledglings, and he climbed down unharmed. After Shabbat, he saw a certain person who climbed to the top of a palm tree, took the fledglings, and sent away the mother bird. He climbed down and was bitten by a snake and died. [Elisha] said: "It is written: 'Send away the mother and take the fledglings for yourself, so it will be good for you and you will prolong your days' (*Devarim* 22:7). Where is the goodness for this one? Where are the prolonged days for this one?" But he did not know that Rabbi Akiva had publicly expounded on it: "So it will be good for you," in the world that is entirely good; "and you will prolong your days," in the world that is entirely long. (*Ruth Rabba* 6)

Elisha understood from the plain meaning of the verses, and rightly so, that the promised reward for sending away the mother bird is in our world. It should be noted that a person of such high character would presumably not have abandoned the path of Torah and *mitzvot* based on a single case. Elisha ben Abuya lived in the days after the suppression of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, when the Torah sages, the cedars of Lebanon and righteous people of the world, died under torture and were not brought to burial at the decree of the emperor Hadrian. The doctrine of God's recompense was not evident in the world. Rabbi Akiva proposed that it is not void; during a time of concealment it continues to exist, but is reduced to a future world that is all good and all long.

The loss of the doctrine of reward in our world is the loss of all the teachings of the prophets. The prophets spoke, in the wake of the second *parasha* of *Shema*, "*Ve-haya im shamo'a*," and similar passages, about the reward that God will give us in the here and now for our actions. The loss of the doctrine of recompense, especially after an explicit test that the prophet set for it ("and put Me to the test, please, in this") means nothing less than the end of prophecy among the people of Israel until the day that God wants to restore it, and we have not yet merited that day. All of our deeds are written in a book and await a future day of recompense, which we may only meet in the world-to-come.

**VI. The Departure and the Conclusion**

Remember the Teaching of Moshe My servant, which I commanded to him at Chorev, statutes and laws for all of Israel. Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will return the hearts of parents back to their children and the hearts of children back to their parents, lest I come and lay the earth waste. (3:22-24)

Behold, I will send you Eliya the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord.

Malakhi, and with him prophecy as a whole, take leave from us with the commandment to remember the Teaching of Moshe, the statutes and the laws, all of our days and all of the days of our children. He who will come to replace him one day will be Eliyahu. He is the messenger mentioned at the beginning of our prophecy, who clears the way before God:

Behold: I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a path before Me. Suddenly, the Lord whom you seek will arrive at His Temple. The angel of the covenant whom you desire – behold, he is coming, says the Lord. (*Malakhi* 3:1)

Eliyahu is the angel of the covenant who, according to our tradition, will come a day before the coming of the Messiah son of David, which is the "day of the Lord" mentioned in the prophecy. He will prepare the people of Israel spiritually to absorb the meaning of the great day, the day of the Lord, and raise them to a higher level so they will not perish on the day of judgment that will come on the day of redemption, the day of the Lord. We can compare him to Matityahu the Hasmonean, who came with his spiritual message to his son, Yehuda the Maccabee, who bore the message of the reestablishment of the kingdom of Israel. He can also be compared to Yehoyada the priest, who makes a covenant with the people of God before renewing the kingdom of the house of David with Yoash son of Achazyahu (see, in this series, the study of the *haftara* for *Shabbat Shekalim[[12]](#footnote-12)*).

Here, Eliyahu will come to restore the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. Malakhi sees before him the members of his generation, many of whom are sons of foreign women who married Jews who returned to the Land of Israel from the Diaspora, and the sons do not trace their lineage to their fathers even according to Jewish law. Eliyahu will have to fix this situation. Eliyahu, in his day, did everything he could to separate Achav, the king of Israel, from Izevel, his foreign wife and the priestess of Ba'al. He tried and failed, but when he returns in the future, God will help him succeed.

**VIII. Two Additional Comments**

Yoram Taharlev, who recently passed away, wrote a well-loved song about the deep anticipation of the coming of Eliyahu the prophet:

in our narrow street

lives one strange carpenter

he sits in his hut

and doesn't do a thing.

no one comes to buy,

and no one visits,

and two years that he

is no longer a carpenter.

and one more dream remains in his heart

to build a throne for Eliyahu who will come

with his hands he will bring it

to Eliyahu the prophet

in our narrow street

lives one strange shoemaker

he sits in his hut

and doesn't do a thing.

his shelves are empty

they are covered in dust

already two years it's been left alone

the awl in the sack

and he dreams that he is sewing shoes,

in which, upon mountains, the feet of the herald will be beautiful.

with his hands he will bring them,

to Eliyahu the prophet.

The song is beautiful and moving, but I strongly disagree with its message. People who sit and do nothing, like the carpenter and the shoemaker in the song, cannot expect Eliyahu to come. In my opinion, Eliyahu will come to herald the redemption only after we have worked as hard as we can to bring the material redemption and the spiritual and religious redemption to our generation. There are no free redemptions!

Hence a second note: We sit reclining in our armchairs on the night of the Seder, after we have eaten our fill of its special foods, and then we get up to open the door for Eliyahu, who will come to redeem us. I do not share this hope and this action. He will not come into my house, and he is not invited to sit down next to me. I believe in opening the door after reciting *Birkat ha-Mazon*, at midnight, after we have eaten the *afikomen* – a reminder of the Pesach sacrifice, which was eaten on a full stomach. We open the door as did the Israelites in Egypt after midnight, after God struck the firstborn of Egypt and Pharaoh shouted "Get up, get out from among my people… Go, serve the Lord exactly as you requested." We too open the door as did our forefathers, not so that Eliyahu can visit us in our homes, but so that we can go out after him to the redemption, to Mount Sinai and to the Temple, which we will build with our own hands together with him.

Every year, I eat the *afikomen*, a reminder of the Pesach sacrifice, not dressed in my holiday clothes in which I recited the Haggada before the meal, but in my hiking clothes and shoes. On my head is a wide-brimmed hat, and on my back while I eat the *afikomen* is a backpack with a large bottle of water, and in my hands are my two walking sticks. When I open the door after *Birkat ha-Mazon*, I leave the house with my many grandchildren for a road trip, in search of Eliyahu, to follow him on the path of redemption to Jerusalem, our holy city and our holy mountain. We look for him and call out his name, and every year we come home, to our regret, a little disappointed that we didn't find him, to continue on to *Hallel* and *Nirtza*, with a firm decision to search for him again the same time next year.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Our study of this *haftara* is one of the longest in the series. I recommend that the reader read only part of it now, and leave the rest for the years to come. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As far as I know, before Rashi it was only the Karaites who referred to this Shabbat as *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, and it is a little surprising that this practice entered our sources. (See Rabbi M.M. Kasher, *Haggada Shleima*, chapter 12, end of section 4, p. 52.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The only parallel is the corresponding *haftara* in the second half of the year, read on the Shabbat that is known as "*Teshuva*" or "*Shuva*." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Editor’s note: Hebrew *shiur* is available [here](https://etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/neviim/sefer-yirmeyahu/haskel-veyadoa-oti); we hope to have it translated in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Or Zaru'a* II, 393: "It is written in the responsa… I saw the notation '*Tzav et Aharon*' by '*Oloteikhem*' [*Yirmiyahu* 7:21] and another notation of '*Tzav et Aharon*' at '*Ve-Arva la*' [*Malakhi* 3:4]. Therefore, the truth is that sometimes we read as the *haftara* for '*Tzav et Aharon*' '*Oloteikhem*,' and sometimes '*Ve-Arva*.' The condition in this matter: If it is a simple year and '*Tzav et Aharon*' falls out on *Shabbat ha-Gadol* that is before Pesach, we read as the *haftara* '*Ve-Arva*,' and all the more so when the eve of Pesach falls out on Shabbat. But if it is a leap year, and '*Tzav et Aharon*' falls out on one of the *Shabbatot* in the second Adar, and *Shabbat ha-Gadol* falls out on '*Aharei Mot*' – then we read the *haftara* of'*Oloteikhem*' for '*Tzav et Aharon*,' unless one of the four *parashiyot* falls out on that Shabbat." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Torah juxtaposes the section dealing with the building of the altar (*Shemot* 20:21-23) to the beginning of *Parashat Mishpatim* (*Shemot* 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Nechemya* 13:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Kevi'a* is stealing. See *Mishlei* 22:22-23: "Do not steal [*tigzal*] from a pauper, thinking that he is helpless; do not crush the poor man at the gate. For the Lord will plead his cause and confiscate [*ve-kava*] the life of the one who confiscated [*kov'eihem*]his." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. a. This is not stated explicitly in Scripture, but it stands to reason that Malakhi's rebuke preceded the covenant, and that in the wake of his rebuke, the people committed themselves to bringing their *terumot* and *ma'aserot* to the treasury in the House of the Lord.

b. As mentioned, it is possible to understand the verses in our *haftara* as referring not to the mitzvaof removing undistributed tithes from one's house, but to the very mitzvaof giving tithes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In my opinion, a phenomenon somewhat similar to the covenant was the *Chatam Sofer*'s decision during the Enlightenment to separate the communities that had decided to keep the Torah and *mitzvot* at all costs in accordance with their ancestral traditions, in spiritual defence against the Neologs (the reformers and the members of the Enlightenment movement in Hungary). Admittedly, there are also many differences between the phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Malakhi lived one generation after Mordekhai, and it is not impossible that he took the idea of a book of remembrance, in which are recorded the merits of those who fear God, from the book of remembrance mentioned in the book of *Esther*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Editor’s note: Hebrew *shiur* is available [here](https://etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-ki-tisa/brit-Hashem-hamelekh-haam); we hope to have it translated in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)