

Haftarah Helper 5781: Shabbat HaGadol

Zachary Beer (Nachshon Project Fellow, The City College of New York) and
Barry Kornblau (Rabbi, Young Israel of Hollis Hills-Windsor Park, Queens, NY)

Malachi 3:4-24¹

Initially, things were looking up for the Judeans who returned from the Babylonian exile and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. But after a few generations, the restoration was losing spirit. The grand promises of the previous generation's prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, were unfulfilled. The Bible's final prophet, Malachi², once again directed the people, especially its priests and Levites, on God's path; the Haftarah conveys his, and God's, final messages. He exhorts them to desist from a variety of sins against one another and God. To encourage them, God even challenges them to test His ability to reward them so that He can bless them. More profoundly, seeing this blessing of His will partially answer the complaint of even those who fear Him: why do they suffer while evildoers prosper? The rest of His reply to that question will come on a "great and fearsome day" which Elijah's arrival will portend. God will punish the wicked, and the righteous will triumph over them. While awaiting this final redemption, the righteous must continue to follow Moses's law.

Redeeming His people while punishing the wicked strongly parallels the events of the Exodus and the forthcoming Passover holiday, and directs attention to the future messianic redemption.

The prophet's style is to debate the people: **[A]** a complaint is lodged; **[B]** a reply, often sarcastic, is offered; **[C]** one side elaborates its point; **[D]** and the prophet concludes with a rebuke or promise.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verse 4: After a harsh punishment and purification of its wayward priests, God will again accept Judah's offerings...

Malachi 3:4	מלאכי ג:ד
[D] Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of yore and in the years of old.	וְעָרְבָה לָהּ מִנְתַּת יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם כִּימֵי עוֹלָם וּבְשָׁנִים קִדְמֹנֹת:

Verses 5-7: ...but for now, as He awaits their return to Him, God must punish Judah for generations of sin.

Malachi 3:5	מלאכי ג:ה
[A] "I will come near to you in judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, the adulterers, and those who swear falsely; against those who oppress [by withholding] a worker's wage, the widow, and the orphan; and [against] those who turn aside the stranger and do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts.	וְקָרַבְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהֵייתִי אִי עֵד מְהֵרָה בְּמִכְשָׁפִים וּבִמְנַאֲפִים וּבְנִשְׁבָּעִים לִשְׁקֹר וּבְעֵשְׂקֵי שֹׂכֵר־שֹׂכֵיר אֶלְמָנָה וְיָתוּם וּמִשִּׁי־גֵר וְלֹא יִרְאוּנִי אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת:

Verses 8-9: Judeans have sinned by not giving tithes to its (sinful) Levites and priests.

Malachi 3:8	מלאכי ג:ח
[A] Ought man to defraud God? Yet you defraud Me. [B] You ask, "How have we defrauded You?" [C] [By not giving] tithe and terumah.	הֲיִקְבָּע אַיִם אֱלֹהִים כִּי אַתֶּם קֹבְעִים אֹתִי וְאַמְרַתֶּם כִּמָּה קֹבְעֵנוּדָה הַמַּעֲשֹׂר וְהַתְּרוּמָה:

¹ The reader repeats verse 23 to end the Haftarah "בכי טוב" (on a "positive note").

² "Malachi" (literally, "My Messenger") may be the prophet's personal name, a nickname for Mordechai or Ezra (Megillah 15a), or the era's High Priest, Joshua son of Jehotzadak (Da'at Mikra).

Verses 10-12: God will more than compensate Judeans for the tithes they will give.

Malachi 3:10	מלאכי ג'י
[D] “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house. Test Me with that!”, says the Lord of hosts, “[to see] if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you immeasurable blessing.”	הָבִיאוּ אֶת-כָּל-הַמַּעֲשֵׂר אֶל-בַּיִת הָאוֹצָר וַיְהִי טָרֶף בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחַנּוּנַי נָא בְּזֹאת אֲמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אִם-לֹא אֶפְתָּח לָכֶם אֶת אַרְבּוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִרִיקֹתִי לָכֶם בְּרֶכֶת עַד-בְּלִיָּדַי:

Verses 13-15: God knows the complaint of His servants: Why serve God when evildoers flourish?

Malachi 3:14	מלאכי ג'י"ד
[C] You have said, “It is vain to serve God! What profit is [there] for our having kept His charge, and for having walked mournfully ³ before the Lord of hosts?”	אָמַרְתֶּם שְׁוֵא עֲבַד אֱלֹהִים וּמַה-בְּצַע כִּי שְׁמַרְנוּ מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ וְכִי הִלְכְנוּ קַדְרָזִית מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:

Verses 16-21: God will cause the righteous to triumph over evildoers whom He will punish at a time of judgment.

Malachi 3:21	מלאכי ג'כ"א
[D] “You shall trod upon the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,” says the Lord of hosts.	וְעַסְוֹתֵם רְשָׁעִים כִּי-יֵהְיוּ אֶפְרַח תַּחַת כַּפּוֹת רַגְלֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה אֲמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת: (פ)

Verses 22-24: God’s final message: Remember the Torah while awaiting Elijah who heralds the final judgment.

Malachi 3:23	מלאכי ג'כ"ג
Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.	הִנֵּה אֲנִי שְׁלַח לָכֶם אֶת אֵלֵיָהּ הַנָּבִיא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם ה' הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

Connections

The Mishnah records a debate concerning **Elijah’s future role** as set out in the Haftarah.

Mishnah Eduyot 8:7	משנה עדיות ח'ז
Rabbi Joshua said: “I am in receipt [of a tradition] from Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher [heard it] from his teacher, as a law [given] to Moses from [God on Mt.] Sinai, that Elijah will come not to [pronounce] impure or to [pronounce] pure, to distance or to bring near, but rather to distance those brought near by force and to bring near those put away by force.”[...] Rabbi Judah says: “to bring near, but not to distance.” 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 (Malachi 3:23-4) said, “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet”, etc., “and he [Elijah] shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”	אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, מִקַּבֵּל אֲנִי מֵרַבֵּן יוֹסֵבֵנוּ בֶן זַכַּאי, שֶׁשָּׁמַע מֵרַבּוֹ וְרַבּוֹ מֵרַבּוֹ, הִלְכָה לְמֹשֶׁה מִסִּינַי, שֶׁאֵין אֵלֵיָהוּ בָּא לְטָמֵא וּלְטָהֵר, לְרַחֵק וּלְקַרֵּב, אֲלָא לְרַחֵק הַמְקַרְבִּין בְּזָרוּעַ וּלְקַרֵּב הַמְרַחֲקִין בְּזָרוּעַ. [...] רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, לְקַרֵּב, אֲבָל לֹא לְרַחֵק. רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, לְהַשׁוּוֹת הַמְחַלְקֵת. וְחֻקִּים אוֹמְרִים, לֹא לְרַחֵק וְלֹא לְקַרֵּב, אֲלָא לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (מְלָאכִי ג) הִנֵּה אֲנִי שְׁלַח לָכֶם אֶת אֵלֵיָהּ הַנָּבִיא וְגו' וְהַשִּׁיב לֵב אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְלֵב בְּנֵים עַל אֲבוֹתָם:

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³ Translation uncertain.