



Shabbat HaGadol
Malachi 3:4-24
Parshat Tzav
Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:22-23
March 28, 2015 / 8 Nisan 5775

Shabbat HaGadol

Malachi, the last of our Prophets, delivered this prophecy sometime after the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 B.C.E. Malachi's messages, unlike the messages of some of the other prophets, are consistent through-out. Malachi is concerned with restoration.

1. Restoration of acceptable offerings in the Temple
2. Restoration of the covenant through repentance
3. Restoration of trust in God's judgment
4. Restoration of relationships between parents and children to one another and of all to God

Malachi must have believed that his world was one composed of failed connections blanketed by a pervading sense of mistrust, a mistrust that drove people to violate religious commandments and to perform immoral acts. Perhaps because of this, the prophet included a reference to Elijah at the end of his sermon.

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. V.23

This is one of the earliest references to the prophet Elijah recorded after his death. Elijah died at the end of the Ninth Century B.C.E., more than three hundred years before the writing of our haftarah. According to the second book of Kings, Elijah didn't actually die, he ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot. The inclusion of Elijah in Malachi's prophecy was one of the catalysts that catapulted Elijah into the Talmud, and the Passover seder and linked him to Messianic times.

Elijah's inclusion in the text emphasizes that a drastic change in relationships is needed before the final redemption and that this change is necessary to avert Divine anger.

The phrase Shabbat HaGadol (the Great Sabbath) refers to the Sabbath that occurs immediately prior to the beginning of Passover. I would like to suggest two possible reasons why this haftarah became associated with Shabbat HaGadol. One possibility, and I am not being facetious, is that it came to be called "great" because of the "great" amount of time that people had to sit in synagogue during rabbinic times listening to the lecture being delivered concerning the laws of Passover. We are told that the morning was so long that services stretched past noon and ended close to the afternoon Minha service. This seemed to the people to be a "great and long day".

Another possibility is that the haftarah was selected because the word Gadol is found near the end of the haftarah. Just as the word shuva (return) connects the Torah and haftarah to one another on the special Sabbath known as Shabbat Shuva (the Sabbath of Repentance), so does the word gadol connect the Torah and haftarah on Shabbat HaGadol.

Parshat Tzav Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:22-23

Jeremiah's prophetic career covered the last quarter of the Seventh Century and the first decades of the Sixth. According to the beginning of the book, Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiyah, a priest in the Levitical city of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. King Saul was also a Benjaminite. The book dates his life from the thirteenth year of King Josiah (627 B.C. E.) to the eleventh year of King Zedekiah (586 B.C.E.) This coincided with the destruction of the Judean state and the exile of our people to Babylon. Jeremiah was a contemporary of Ezekiel.

This was also the time of the rise of the neo-Babylonian empire, the successor to the Assyrian Empire. Nabuzaradan and his son Nebuchadnezzar (604-562) were responsible for the exile and for the subsequent destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Prior to Nebuchadnezzar's succession and as result of the Assyrian/neo-Babylonian conflict, Judah was able to regain its independence from Babylon for a brief period of time. It was during this brief respite that a national religious revival took place under the guidance of King Josiah (628). The revival reached its apex in 622 in a series of religious and national reforms often referred to as the Deuteronomic reforms.

This haftarah, which is normally corresponds to Parashat Tzav when it is not replaced as it is this year by Shabbat HaGadol, can be dated around 609, approximately a decade before the first deportation occurred. Josiah died in 609 and Judah became Egypt's vassal for the next four years. The Egyptians appointed Jehoiakim to serve as King, which he did until the Egyptians were decisively defeated by the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish in 605. In 605 Judah thus became a Babylonian vassal. One can imagine what Judah must have been like during this time. One can imagine Jeremiah's concerns for his people.

Jeremiah criticizes Judah for failing to properly worship God. An abundance of sacrifices will never be sufficient if spiritual intent is lacking. This is not unusual for our people and they have been criticized for this by previous prophets. Jeremiah feels, however, that the people's behavior in his time is more corrupt than it has been in the past. Jeremiah is bid to speak to the present generation even though he knows his message will be ignored.

The olah (burnt offering) and zevah (sacrifice) of well-being connect the haftarah to Parashat Tzav. The haftarah reflects a world in transition and a people being buffeted between two rival powers. It was an insecure world one that could only be made more secure if people maintained

a strict moral conduct. Jeremiah's message reminds us that how we conduct ourselves is more important than simply doing what is expected and that religious behavior is determined by much more than the fulfilling of ritual activities.

This week's Haftarah commentary is a reprint of one written for the Unraveller for March 27, 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of numerous books, including "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership". [Both of these books are available in the FJMC on-line store]