



Parsha Acharei Mot / Shabbat HaGadol
Haftarah Malakhi 3:4-24
April 11, 2014 / 12 Nisan 5774

“What did I do?” – it’s a question that’s also a denial, and a defense that’s also an admission.

Summon a child in a stern voice (or, even more so, by his or her full name), and the almost reflexive response is, “What did I do?” Of course, it’s not just kids who react that way. Seven-foot-tall NBA players have the same reaction when they’re called for a foul.

Work for hours on that report or paper or project, then hit the wrong key and watch in horror as it winks off the screen. Make an impulsive choice which turns out as badly as you might have expected it to. Get pulled over by the police. What do you say (which can be printed in a family publication)?

“What did I do?”

The Shabbat immediately before Passover is known as Shabbat HaGadol – literally, “the great Sabbath”. There are lots of possible reasons for the name. (My personal favorite is that rabbis supposedly gave lengthy discourses on the laws of Passover. So not so much “great” in the sense of “good,” as in the sense of “expansive.”) Most likely, though, it comes from a phrase in the Haftarah specially selected for this Shabbat: Behold, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the great, awesome day of Adonai.

“The great day of Adonai” is a day of reckoning for the wicked and vindication for the righteous. Elijah’s first task after his miraculous reappearance is to “reconcile parents with children and children with parents, so that, when [God] comes, [God] will not strike the whole land with utter destruction.” That’s actually how the Haftarah ends. But our tradition is to never end a Haftarah on a negative note, so the penultimate verse – the one about the great, awesome day of Adonai – is repeated.

In the midst of it all will be the wicked, the prophet Malakhi tells us, who will be asking “What did I do?” in the same combination of admission and denial we do. The message just below the surface of that question is clear enough: the wicked know full well they did. They had just convinced themselves that they could do it with impunity – or at least without anyone caring enough to do anything about it.

That they turn out to be wrong – catastrophically wrong – is an urgently relevant theme for Passover. Our ancient Israelite ancestors had suffered four centuries of privation, oppression, and hopelessness. They were, the Torah recounts, spiritually exhausted as well as physically worn down by their plight. Surely, they must have thought – and most likely uttered – what the wicked in the time of Malakhi said aloud: “It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping God’s charge...?”

Yet, evil does not prevail in the end. The Israelites went free. The truly evil empires of the past crumbled to dust. Today’s oppressed are tomorrow’s empowered. Or, as Martin Luther King put it, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

This week’s haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi David Kay, Congregation Ohev Shalom, 613 Concourse Parkway South Maitland, Florida (<https://ohevshalom.org/>). Rabbi Kay is the first Assistant Rabbi of Congregation Ohev Shalom since 2004. He was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2002. During rabbinical school, he served as a student Rabbi for several congregations, including Shalom Independent Congregation of Johannesburg, South Africa. He has been active in the Jewish Deaf community and is a founding member of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s á cappella group, Note-Nim and founding director of Kol Ram, Orlando’s community Jewish á cappella group.