



Parashat Toldot - #257

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On the Haftarah... A True Cohain

[Ashkenazim/Sefardim: Malachi 1:1-2:7
Yemenite Jews: Malachi 1:1-3:4]

In our Haftarah, the prophet Malachi bitterly laments the catastrophic state of the priesthood during the period of the Second Temple: the cohanim had turned into the lowest level of technocrats offering sacrifices. Following the behavior of the cohanim, Malachi warns with anger: "Hashem of Hosts says to you: O Cohanim, you who despise My name. And you respond: In what way have we despised Your name? You offer disgusting bread on My altar and you say: In what way have we polluted You?" (Malachi 1:6-7). The prophet emphasizes that the religion has changed radically from what it is supposed to be, service and closeness to Hashem, into something mechanical, a ruse close to idol worship, a device designed to attain favors from Heaven. If service of Hashem could sink to the level of business for profit, why shouldn't the cohanim limit their expenses? They simply decided: we have spoiled food which cannot be used, so why don't we save money by offering it on the altar? After all, either way it will be burned in the fire, and G-d Himself will not notice anything!

The cohanim were unaware of the seriousness of their behavior, and their attempts at justification made their transgression even worse. "In that you say: The table of Hashem is contemptible" (7). You are profaning Hashem's Name and turning the religion into a business of fraud. "And if you offer the blind for a sacrifice, is it not evil? And if you offer lame and sick animals, is it not evil? Please offer it to your governor; will he be pleased with you or will he show you favor? – says Hashem of Hosts" (8). "You have brought stolen, lame and sick animals as a sacrifice. Should I accept this from your hand? – says Hashem" (13). We must not forget that a worker

in the Temple, whether a kohain or a levi, is before all else an educator. Before his death, Moshe Rabbenu described the role of the Tribe of Levi in this way: "They shall teach Your statutes to Yaakov and Your Torah to Israel. They shall place incense before Your presence and burnt offerings on Your altar" (Devarim 33:10).

They were obviously involved in the holy service in the Temple, but they also had great influence over Torah learning throughout the entire Land. Their role in the Temple only occupied them for a few weeks each year. During the remaining time, they would travel from place to place to teach, educate and build spirituality. This was all in order to come closer to G-d, since they themselves were capable of getting ensnared in the monotonous routine of daily life and forgetting about the light (Maran Ha-Rav Kook in Orot, Orot Ha-Techiya 4).

Our prophets returned to this topic with a special emphasis. "And you should know that I have sent this commandment to you, so that My covenant will be with Levi, says Hashem of Hosts. My covenant was with him for life and peace, and I gave them fear with which he feared Me and was afraid of My Name" (Malachi 2:4-5). The kohain – and in our time, the educator - needs to actualize in his own life the great ideals which he will teach to others: awe of Hashem and humility. The Divine service he performed in the Temple was not merely the focus of his activities - it had to be his way of life as well. His service was built upon an inner sense of nullifying one's ego before the Creator, a merging of one's character with the Divine light. "The Torah of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found on his lips" (6). The character became united with the Torah in all of its truth. Intellect and emotion are Torah, the body and the spirit are Torah. And unjust words never departed his lips.

His behavior was to be without stain, and his societal relations were to be the climax of his purity: "He walked with me in peace and uprightness" (6). Closeness to Hashem must reveal itself not only in the highest spheres of his character but also in his interpersonal relations. When people would meet a person such as this, they would have to be influenced. Before they would judge the kohain on his actions or his worship, they would judge him on his behavior towards other people. They thus would see that the Kingdom of Hashem is not only in Heaven, but is also on earth; that the awe of Hashem which fills and directs the kohain is expressed through behavior of peace and love. Therefore, "many turned away from iniquity" (6). In order to return others to the straight path, one must first be an example of uprightness himself.

"For the kohain's lips should keep knowledge and they should seek Torah from his mouth" (7): The kohain is a man of knowledge, a Torah scholar, but the essence is "for he is an angel of Hashem of Hosts" (ibid.). He is an angel on earth! This expression says it all! Our Sages rule that one should only learn Torah from a rabbi without blemish. "If the rabbi is similar to an angel of Hashem, seek Torah from his mouth, and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth" (Moed Katan 17a).

The Torah is not only a theoretical science, it is instruction for life. It is told that a professor of Jewish thought was asked by a student: "Why doesn't his honor perform what he teaches?" He responded: "Does a math professor have to be a triangle?" The comparison obviously lacks reason.

Our Sages tell us that in a large city in Babylonia, with many wise people, there was once a great rabbi who allowed himself to be involved in extra-marital relations – and this caused major gossip. The Sages were extremely distressed by this desecration of Hashem's Name. After a difficult discussion, they decided to excommunicate him (Moed Katan ibid.). One needs great courage for a decision such as this, but it was necessary since their rabbi, despite his wisdom, was far from being an angel of Hashem.

Rav Aviner on... The Chief Mistake of Religious Zionism

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Chayei Sarah 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

What is the chief mistake of the disciples of Ha-Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Cohain Kook, and of Religious Zionism in general? Obviously we are only human and we make many mistakes, but it is good to know the main point from which all of the problems derive - such that if we rectify that main point, all the details will be rectified as well.

The chief error is that their longing for the fear of G-d was shunted far aside by their overwhelming longing to love G-d, rejoice in G-d, find strength and fortitude in G-d, and find pleasantness and tranquility, faith and belief in oneself.

All of these things are fine and important, and essential in our generation, which is a generation of redemption, as Maran Ha-Rav Kook wrote in his famous letter, Letter #378, in which he notes the need to explain the repentance suitable to the generation: "Before all else we must clarify the confidence, tranquility, strength and joy with which the individual must be enveloped when the light of repentance illuminates his soul..." (page 36).

The reason for this need is that "if someone seeks to achieve a lofty understanding of repentance in these times without taking into account the redemption unfolding before us, and the light of salvation, he will not arrive at the truth" (ibid., 37).

Now we can understand Rav Kook's testimony about himself: "What a harsh inner struggle I wage, and what a powerful spirit induces me to talk about repentance. All my thoughts are concentrated on this" (Introduction to Orot Ha-Teshuvah).

We therefore wonder: if this letter was written in 5671, why did Rav Kook delay publishing Orot Ha-Teshuvah? As of 5685 he had written only three chapters and then stopped? In fact the book was only published when his son, Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook, compiled that work from his father's various manuscripts.

It is well-known that Maran Ha-Rav Kook was blessed with divine intuition. That being the case, what caused the delay? Rav Kook answers this himself: "The greater the matter, the more the hindrances" (Igeret #378). The reason for this is that the person must also "seek ways to ensure that this true joy and holy bliss do not impinge on one's fear of G-d, and do not in the least lessen the spiritual arousal acquired through all sorts of aspects of earthly fear. Quite the contrary, that joy and bliss should be increasing the force of one's spiritual caution and alacrity" (ibid.). In other words, Rav Kook was afraid that sublime repentance would harm our conventional fear of G-d, as well as jeopardize the caution and alacrity elucidated at

the start of Mesillat Yescharim, i.e., caution to avoid all sin and alacrity to perform every mitzvah.

“Particularly difficult for me was achieving a precise clarification” (ibid.). That is, Rav Kook expressed his difficulty in striking a precise balance between how much we must address joy and how much we must avoid this. This is the hard work of finding a balance (and see Orot Ha-Teshuvah at the end of Chapter 14).

The rule is this: joy does not erase the fear of G-d. Rather, it constitutes a stage above it, and quite the contrary, it strengthens it. Rav Kook likewise writes in Chapter 1 of Orot Ha-Teshuvah, that supreme repentance will appear after the lower stages of repentance, they, themselves, having developed into the higher stages.

We find the same in the Zohar, which notes the contradiction between “Serve G-d in fear” (Tehillim 2:11), and “Serve G-d in joy” (Tehillim 100:2), and resolves it by stating that first one should serve G-d in fear and afterwards in joy (Zohar Vayikra 56:1).

True, in his article “Ha-Dor,” about his generation, Rav Kook wrote, “They are incapable of repenting out of fear, but very fit to repent out of love” (Ikvei Ha-Tzon 111). Yet that involves a non-ideal situation in which the edifice is constructed starting with the upper stories. All the same, when we have to rescue someone, we do it however we can.

Obviously, however, afterwards the fear of G-d has to be filled in, for the Torah includes a mitzvah of fearing G-d, and that mitzvah has not been nullified.

Moreover, fear of G-d is the foundation of all else. “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d” (Tehillim 111:10); “What does G-d ask of you other than to fear Him?” (Devarim 10:12);

Fear the L-rd your G-d and serve Him” (ibid., 10:20); “Any person who has Torah in him but not the fear of G-d is like a thief who has been given the inner keys, but not the outer keys” (Shabbat 31a); “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere G-d and observe all His commandments, for this applies to all mankind” (Kohelet 12:13).

Moreover, if there is no fear of G-d, the love of G-d will collapse as well, as the Jerusalem Talmud explains: “One verse states, ‘Hashem your G-d’ (Devarim 6:5), while another states, ‘Fear Hashem your G-d and serve Him’ (ibid., 6:13). Exercise both love and reverence.

Exercise love, so that should you be prone to hate Him, your love will already be there, and one you love you cannot hate. Exercise reverence, such that should you be prone to show G-d disrespect, your reverence would stop you from doing so.” (Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 5:5).

One who loves cannot hate, but he can show disrespect. There are all sorts of disrespect. There is harsh disrespect, such as rebellion, trespass, willful sin and casting off one’s yoke. There is subtle disrespect, coated in a false coating of love. Examples include, “I can’t connect to Torah”; “It doesn’t speak to me”; “I have to be true to myself”; “I have to heed my inner voice”; “I listen to the G-d within me”; “Accept me as I am”. All these comments represent New Age thinking, which was adopted by “Neo-Chassidism”, which is actually Neo-Paganism.

Although it is possible to find such expressions amongst the great figures of Chassidism, or in the writings of Rav Kook, they are only in very small doses. When, however, such an approach occupies a much larger place, when a marginal point becomes the be-all-and-end-all, it turns into idolatry. This subtle disrespect creates all sorts of sins, under the veil of serving G-d joyfully.

Yet reverence can save one from such disrespect, because fearing G-d means seeing yourself as a servant of G-d who created us and brought us out of the House of Bondage. As it states in the “Sefer Ha-Gan” by Rabbi Yitzchak ben Rav Elazar, a disciple of Moshe Ha-Darshan: one who fears G-d constantly thinks: “I was created only to wholeheartedly be G-d’s servant, as it says, ‘Serve G-d with all your heart’ (Devarim 10:12)... This means sincerely... Every individual must undertake to submit himself totally to G-d, to fear Him at all times, and to serve Him as a servant who must serve his master. He mustn’t behave like a person who sometimes obeys and at other times does not. Rather, one must perform G-d’s commandments with constancy... Neither should one pass up the least commandment of His Maker” (Sefer Ha-Gan Le-Yom Rishon).

Some will say, "But surely we attach ourselves to G-d better as G-d's children than as G-d's servants." The answer to that appears already in the Zohar: Even a son cannot escape being his father's servant, albeit that he has permission to glimpse into the king's treasure house. (Zohar Vayikra, Behar, 111:2:272).

Remember this: "The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere G-d and observe all His commandments, for this applies to all mankind."

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Laws of Mourning

Flowers on a Grave

Question: Is it permissible according to the Halachah to place flowers and wreaths on a grave?

Answer: Many authorities forbid it on account of "Chukot Ha-Goyim" - following the practices of the non-Jews (brought in Shut Yabia Omer vol. 3 Yoreh Deah #24), but the basic Halachah is that it is permissible. Not every act performed by non-Jews is forbidden on account of "Chukot Ha-Goyim"; the Rama (Yoreh Deah 178:1) rules that only practices which violate the laws of modesty, or something which has no sensible reason, is forbidden. Since placing flowers is meant to honor the deceased, there is no issue of "Chukot Ha-Goyim" (Shut Yabia Omer ibid. Kol Bo Al Avelut p. 59). This is especially true since there was an early custom to place branches of myrtle on coffins (Nidah 37a. Rashi ibid.), and the Sages even permitted to cut the myrtle off the trees for this purpose on Chol Ha-Moed (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 526:4) and the Mishnah Berurah (#18) does not make on a comment on this Halachah. Nonetheless, may a blessing come to one who is strict. But one who does place flowers or a wreath has on whom to rely and one should certainly not protest against him (Shut Yabia Omer ibid.).

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