

## Teshuva at the Seder?

The haftorah for Shabbat HaGadol can be found in the third chapter of Malachi, where the dominant theme is the future redemptive era. It is not a far leap to see how this specific chapter fits the themes found in the Seder nig, where so much of the learning surrounds the exodus from Egypt. Yet, when looking at one part of the chapter, a different focus emerges, one that does not seem to fit the feeling of joy and gratitude found at the Seder.

In prophesizing about the era of redemption, Malachi begins by critiquing those who are sinning (Malachi 3:5):

*“But [first] I will step forward to contend against you, and I will act as a relentless accuser against those who have no fear of Me: Who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their hire, and who subvert [the cause of] the widow, orphan, and stranger, said GOD of Hosts.”*

The above sins seem quite heinous, and it is sensible that God would act to punish those engaged in these dreadful offences. Were these the only sins being committed? Do these sins share something in common?

The prophet continues (ibid 6,7):

*“For I am GOD—I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be. From the very days of your ancestors you have turned away from My laws and have not observed them. Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you—said GOD of Hosts. But you ask, “How shall we turn back?””*

One theme that stands out in the above verses concerns the consistency by the Jewish people to avoid adherence to the Torah commandments. Why is this being stressed?

The prophet delivers God’s message that if the Jewish people repent, the compromised relationship with God will be restored. The final question of “how” seems shocking; after all, the prophet described a litany of sins that require *teshuva*. The Jewish people seem to be ignorant of what they might have done wrong. The answer is even more confounding (ibid 8):

*“Ought mortals to defraud God? Yet you are defrauding Me. And you ask, “How have we been defrauding You?” In tithe (maaser) and contribution (terumah).”*

After mentioning idolatrous acts and immoral behavior, the area of sin requiring *teshuva* is...providing *terumah* and *maaser* to the *kohanim* and *leviim*. The Sages understand the notion of “defrauding” as robbing (*gezel*) God through not giving the required *terumah* and *maaser*.

While of course withholding *terumah* and *maaser* are problematic, Malachi seems to indicate that these sins are the worst of the lot, as they should be the focal point of *teshuva*. It is hard to imagine that the other sins require no repentance at all. However, the fact that these two are singled out requires an explanation.

Looking back at the first set of sins, various commentators (such as Metzudat David) surmise that the sins share in common a unique trait. The first grouping of sins was of the type committed in private, away from prying eyes. Sorcery and adultery were done in secret, while those making false oaths kept their true thoughts to themselves. Those same commentators understand the final sin as withholding payment from those particularly in need, such as widows, orphans, and converts (usually considered those most vulnerable to abuse in the Torah). Such an individual possessed no fear when committing such an act.

These commentators are pointing to a very crucial and pivotal defect present among the Jewish people. A fundamental tenet of accepting Torah commandments is that they serve as the correct and ideal value system for the Jewish nation. What comes with this is the sincere belief that, for example, engaging in idolatry is harmful in some way. However, if one disputes this premise, then the value of these commandments is minimized. Adherence becomes dependent on external factors, such as when social judgment and the fear of embarrassment are considered. The system of Jewish law becomes more of a cultural phenomenon. The individual is guided by potential consequences in deciding to follow one commandment or another. Jewish law is simply not **the** value system. Malachi alludes to this in the damning indictment noted above, where the Jewish nation is accused of never actually adhering to God’s commandments in all its history. The Jewish people have constantly and consistently struggled with the correct attitude in acceptance and observance.

One would think this flaw reflects the lowest possible level for the Jewish people. Malachi's prophecy points us in a different direction, to the failure to supply the *kohanim* and *leviim* with *terumah* and *maaser*. Why is this considered the apogee of *teshuva*?

Why would someone not provide *terumah* and *maaser*? One possible reason is a very natural conclusion one has of control over the agricultural process. A farmer, for example, spends hours planting and harvesting, manual labor of the utmost difficulty. The fact that produce comes out from all of this is expected, an effect of toil. To give up a percentage of this to God seems both unnecessary and absurd. The resistance is almost built into the very agricultural process itself.

In denying that which is "owed" to God, the individual overestimates his influence over the natural world. In truth, there are countless factors outside of his control, whether able to be perceived or not, that play a part in the successful harvest. In such a framework, the farmer cannot see God as the ultimate power and authority. The inability to understand and accept God as such an authority leads to the inability to ever see the system of commandments from the Torah as being valuable. One first must acknowledge the supremacy and control of God, and only then will one be able to see how, through His omniscience, the commandments are beneficial. Within this understanding, the flaw of *terumah* and *maaser* is more fundamental than the first set of sins.

There is another approach as to why *terumah* and *maaser* are singled out. Radak points out how the first set of sins were "localized". Some Jews engaged in sorcery, others in adultery. However, the **entire** nation avoided giving *terumah* and *maaser* (this is born out from a later verse concerning these sins, where the Jewish people are referred to as "the whole nation"). What is the significance of such a distinction? The rationale of the first set of sins surrounded the denial of value in Jewish law, where lack of consequences functioned as a guide to adherence. Of course, repentance needed to be done for this, but the power of social judgment played a big role in ensuring these sins were more isolated. With *terumah* and *maaser*, the resistance noted above is present, yet attached to a different issue. In giving up some part of what one works so hard to achieve, there is a built-in expectation of receiving something in return. Where is the reward for giving these "gifts" to God? What is obtained in exchange? The notion of sacrificing one's own

produce is foreign to this way of thinking. Following Jewish commandments is fine, until one presents a challenge to an emotional outlook or introduces some type of conflict. Without sensing some positive outcome, the individual sees no reason to follow the commandments. Thus, withholding *terumah* and *maaser* is the focus, as the Jewish people must understand that the purpose of following the Torah commandments is not to receive compensation.

What does the focus on these sins have to do with the upcoming Seder experience? A central tenet of the Seder is the Pesach sacrifice, both as a core aspect of the retelling of the exodus as well as the foundation of the Seder meal. The Pesach sacrifice was the first commandment accepted and adhered to by the Jewish people. It contained the formula that is implied in Malachi's prophecy. The Jewish people recognized God as authority and understood the benefits of engaging in the commandment. They saw how the relationship between God and themselves would be manifest in avoiding the fate of the Egyptian first born. The Pesach sacrifice became the paradigm of how we should relate to the system of commandments. And the fact we do not have this critical part of the Seder present today should upset us, provoking the very overall repentance God is seeking. Thus, the Sages ensured that part of our preparation for this remarkable night was to internalize this reality and help frame the Seder experience properly.