

Torah Table Talk

The Qualities of Priest and Prophet

Parshat Toldot

Genesis 25:19 – 28:9 / Malachi 1:1 – 2:7



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Prophecy ended some time toward the end of the fifth century, B.C. E. The last of the prophets is called *Malachi*; most likely, however, this is not really his real name. The word *Malachi* means my messenger and is taken from the opening verse of this short book. "A pronouncement: the word of the Lord to Israel through *Malachi*, my messenger."

Speaking after the return of the exiles to the land and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, the prophet Malachi was deeply concerned by the lack of enthusiasm and the apathy of the people and the priesthood. The priests have forgotten their duties and the people have become lax in the fulfillment of their ritual obligations. Ironically, the other nations offer sacrifices and incense to God but Israel continues to profane God's name. Even though God has accepted Israel (Jacob) and rejected Edom (Esau) because of their wickedness, Israel now scorns the worship of God, just as Esau once scorned his right as the first born. Malachi concludes by describing the ideals of the priesthood. His image of the priest is one who is not only faithful to God and teaches God's teachings to others.

Malachi 2:6 -7

The law of truth was in his mouth and nothing perverse was on his lips; He walked with Me in peace and uprightness and held the many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest guard knowledge and people seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts.

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 6b

R. Eliezer son of R. Yose the Galilean said: It is forbidden to arbitrate [in a dispute before the court], and he who arbitrates commits a sin. The law must prevail, even if it involves cutting through a mountain, for it is said, "Judgment is God's." (Deut. 1:17). Thus, Moses used to say, "Let the law cut through the mountain." Aaron, however, who loved peace and pursued peace, made peace between a man and his fellow [before they came to court], for of Aaron it is said, "The law of truth was in his mouth . . . he walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Mal. 2:6).

R. Joshua ben Korhah said: Settlement by arbitration is a meritorious act, for it is written, "Execute the judgment of truth and of peace in your gates" (Zech. 8:16). But is it not true that where there is [strict] justice, there is no peace, and where there is peace, there is no [strict] justice? However, what is the kind of justice with which peace can abide? You must admit, it is justice through arbitration. Thus, of David we are told, "David executed justice and charity" (2 Sam. 8:15). Is it not true that where there is [strict] justice, there is no charity, and where there is charity, there is no [strict] justice? However, what is the kind of justice with which charity can abide? You must admit, it is justice through arbitration.

Pirke Avot 1:14, Avot D'Rebbe Natan

"They wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the House of Israel" (Num. 20:29); whereas for Moses only men wept, because he rendered judgment strictly according to the truth and used to rebuke people besides. But Aaron never said to a man or to a woman, "You have acted offensively." Furthermore, he sought peace, as is said, "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Malachi 2:6). What is meant by the words that follow in the verse: "held the many back from iniquity" (ibid.)? These words teach that when Aaron would walk along the road and meet a wicked man, he greeted him warmly. The next day, when that man was about to go

and commit a transgression, he would say to himself: Woe is me, how could I ever raise my eyes and face Aaron? I would be too embarrassed by the man who greeted me so warmly. The result: That wicked man would refrain from further transgression.

Tanhuma Exodus 24-27

"Oh that thou were as my brother" (Song 8:1). Like what kind of brothers? From the beginning of the world's creation until the present, you find brothers who hate each other--Cain hated Abel and slew him, Ishmael hated Isaac and sought to slay him, Esau hated Jacob, and the tribe fathers hated Joseph. Like what kind of brother, then? Like Moses and Aaron--of them it is said, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Ps. 133:1). Each loved the other, each cherished the other. Thus, when Moses was given the kingship and Aaron the high priesthood, not only was neither brother envious of the other, but each rejoiced in the distinction accorded to the other...

"And he (Moses) went and met him (Aaron) at the mountain of God, and kissed him." (Exodus 4:27). These words are to be considered in the light of the verse "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85:11). In this verse, "mercy" alludes to Aaron, who is referred to in the words "And of Levi he said: 'Thy Tummim and thy Urim be with Thy merciful one'" (Deut. 33:8); "truth" alludes to Moses, of whom God said, "He is trusted in all My house" (Num. 12:7); "righteousness" refers to Moses, who "executed the righteousness of the Lord" (Deut. 33:21); and "peace" refers to Aaron, of whom God said, "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Mal. 2:6).

Questions to Ponder

1. How does the prophet Malachi depict the ideal priest? Is there anything in this verse that might suggest the Malachi was a priest himself?
2. Malachi focuses more on priestly and ritual questions rather than moral and social issues. In this he is very different from the other prophets. Why do you think this is the case? What was it about Malachi's generation that made this a deeper concern for him? Why do you think prophecy stopped in his generation?
3. What does the prophet mean when he talks about "the law/Torah of truth?" Is there any other type of Torah? Note that in some contemporary translations this expression is translated "proper rulings. Which translation do you think is more appropriate here?
4. What are the two points of view on arbitration, or allowing the law to be decided by a third part? Do you think it is better to arbitrate than to allow the court to decide a legal argument? Do you think that society is too litigious today? What other alternatives to arbitration are there in modern day society?
5. The Torah says that "All Israel," mourned for Aaron when he passed away. What was it about Aaron that made him so beloved to the people of Israel? What were some of the weaknesses and frailties in Aaron's attitudes? Is it good to always seek peace and pursue peace?
6. The Tanhuma draws a contrast between Moses and Aaron: one is remembered for mercy and peace while the other is known for righteousness and truth. How did Aaron and Moses compliment one another? What role should these qualities play in religious and political leadership today? Should rabbis today be more like Aaron or Moses?
7. What does the text mean when it has Moses say that "The law must cut through the mountain?" Should the law be flexible or should it be unbending and firm?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*