

Ezra and Moshe: Whose Task Was Harder? By Rabbi Moshe Y. Shulman zt"l

- R' Moshe Yitzchok Shulman.

The first Chapter in Malachai portrays a dialogue between the prophet and the people. The Midrash - the people argued with Malachai, who was Ezra. What this tells us about Ezra's generation - and our own. And how Ezra's major achievement was to infuse the people with pride in their heritage without which we are lost.

Toldot: Ezra and Moshe
(Shamati meAvi Mori, Harav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman zt"l)

Today's haftorah is taken from the first chapter of the Prophet Malachi. It has a strange style. It is written as if it were a dialogue between the prophet in the name of God, and the people. In fact, it sounds like an argument. And that is unusual in the Bible. Masa devar Hashem el Yisrael beyad Malachi; ahavti etchem, amar Hashem." A message of God to Israel through Malachi. I have loved you, said the Lord. "Vaamartem bama ahavtanu? Halo ach Esav leYaakov neum Hashem, veahav et Yaakov; And You replied, "In what way have you loved us? Behold, Esav and Yaakov are brothers, but the Lord loved Yaakov."

The content too, is strange. Just because Yaakov and Esav are brothers, is that a reason to love one particularly?

The Midrash perceives a historical reason for the particular argument style found in Malachi. "In Malachi's generation, the people talked back to the prophet! Who was Malachi? Our sages accept the view that Malachi is really Ezra the Scribe who led our people back to Israel and founded the Second Commonwealth. If this is so, then we know the answer to our questions, for Malachi, Ezra, spoke to his generation and about its problems. And what were the problems of his time and his generation? There were problems of aliya; assimilation; ignorance. And enemies surrounded them. Like Moses before him, he spoke to people returning from exile to the Promised Land, with all the problems of exile with which we Jews everywhere in the world at this very time are sadly familiar.

Who had the more difficult task? Moses or Ezra? On the one hand, Moses had to teach a new Torah to a people with a slave psychology embedded over two hundred and ten years of slavery in Egypt, while Ezra taught a Torah handed down for generations. And his exile to Babylon had lasted only 70 years. Also, Moses' people had never before seen the Promised Land. Ezra's people had. At least their parents had been there, and many of them were old enough to have lived there and to remember it themselves.

But on the other hand, Moses taught a people who had seen the Ten Plagues; who had been saved at the splitting of the Red Sea; who had stood at Mount Sinai; to whom the Manna, and God's clouds of glory, and the pillar of fire were constant reminder of God's continued providence. And it must be remembered than anything was better than Egyptian slavery!

So in many respects, Moses' task was not as hard as the task of Ezra. The people in Ezra's time had forgotten or forsaken mitzvah observance. A whole generation had grown away from Torah. And many had intermarried. Even in Babylon this was the case, and it was certainly so with the community which had finally returned to Israel! It was, in fact, one of Ezra's greatest problems!

Our people had lived a good life in Babylon. Jeremiah, the prophet, seeking to give the people going into Exile hope, had commanded that we build homes, plant gardens, do business, and create communities in Babylon. Nor should we lose hope for 70 years later we would actually return to our land of Israel.

But we had taken his advice so well, and so "improved" upon it, that we had become wealthy and powerful; with jobs and businesses, farms and real estate, and investments to watch. So most of our people refused to go back to Israel's desolated slopes and cities, with Ezra. Why should we leave a good life? Let Israel be settled by homeless Jews, by refugees; by those too poor or too unsuccessful to make it here; those who have nothing else towards which to look forward. We have businesses to attend to; we need a shidduch for a daughter, and Israel has fewer and poorer Jews living in it. We have friends here in Baghdad, Sura and Pumbedita.

So Ezra had a particularly hard time getting Jews to go on aliya with him. He couldn't find Leviim to go with him. And only a few of the rest would go.

Yes, Ezra's task must have been much harder than that of Moses. In fact, it was harder than the challenge of any other prophet! All the other prophets, when admonishing the people, were opposed by a few powerful and wicked men. The masses of the people, however, believed in Hashem and accepted His prophets. And if they had strayed, it was because the temptation was so great to act like the Gentiles around them, and not because they disbelieved in Hashem. The worship of idols and the worship of the Almighty, got mixed somehow. And that is why Elijah the prophet had to place before the people the choice: "Till when shall you stand on both thresholds? If the Lord is G-d, follow Him, and if Baal, then follow him!"

But in Ezra's time, the people were more stubborn. They would not admit their sin! They didn't see anything wrong with their conduct! They argued with the prophet, wouldn't accept his words, nothing he could do or say was right! That is what our sages mean by stressing the dialogue in our haftorah. Hu haya medaber vehem hayu meshivin; The people argued, rejected, criticized. Nothing the prophet said found favor in their eyes. Hu amar hayikva adam E-ohim, vehem omrim, bame kevaanucha? Hu omer boze Shemi, vehem omrim, bame bazinu et Shimcha? He would say, "Shall a man curse Hashem", and they would say, "How have we cursed Him?" He would say, "You have despised My Name," and they would say, "Why? How have we done so?"

And yet, in spite of all of this, Ezra succeeded! He did establish Israel's settlements. With Nehemiah's help he beat off all enemies and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and more important, he rebuilt the spirit of our people! The people finally did dedicate themselves to God and to Torah with one dramatic declaration, and most of them kept their word! What was his secret? How did he succeed? At a time like this when we are beset with the very same problems and challenges, we would surely like to know!

To begin with, Ezra was the greatest teacher of our people. He exposed the people to Torah, and the light of Torah attracted them. He was surely inspiring, and patient, and kind. His blessing when they wept with shame was "Go, return home to celebrate the holiday with joy, and do not be cast down because of past failings." That blessing is a model of tolerance, understanding and patience. But above all, he had one quality that was the most important, and the most telling. He could inspire pride into the hearts of our people.

The Talmud asks why the Land of Israel was destroyed. Among several answers, they make one startling statement; because they neglected the beracha before reading the Torah, Asher bachar banu mikal haamim venatan lanu et Torato, thanking God for choosing our people by giving us the Torah! By this the Talmud means to say that only pride in our mission as Jews and in our Torah can hold our people together. Without it, our land and our people are lost. With it, our land is secure and our people are safe.

For it is pride in our heritage that especially keeps us as loyal Jews! When we lose this pride, we learn to adopt the customs and conduct and worship of the Ashdodites, the Zidonites, and all the people who comprised the Babylonian empire, and of course the same applies to us today.

Gedaliah Bublick described a scene he saw which might be familiar to your grandparents who came from Europe. Four snowy white horses, drawing a beautiful carriage, in it sits a general with golden epaulets, a driver with top hat and gloves, black and silver livery, and next to the general, the meshumedet, the Jewish girl who left her faith. A poor Jew walks down the street with his burden of rags. And the rag-picker looks, and turns away with a sad shake of his head... nebach, how unfortunate. To become the wife of a Gentile magnate, a general, was a fate worse than death in those days. Every water carrier and street sweeper, if they were Jewish, would have been full of pain and shame if it happened to his son or daughter. Aza umglick!

Thus Jews used to feel and think! Because we believed that in the Jewish book was expressed all that was good and true, all that was beautiful and holy! Only from such books could we learn how to live, suffer and fight for truth and for faith! Only from such a book can we learn to earn our reward in this world and in the next! Could such Jews assimilate? Could they exchange their gold for the tin of the neighbors?

Of course, many of us do not think so any more. And often it is not because we have a higher regard for secular wisdom, but because many of us have lost our respect and regard for Torah! Usually, it is simply indifference. But today's political pressures upon Israel and anti-Semitism everywhere, has awakened many Jews and dispelled their indifference. Yet many still retain old prejudices. And the main reason is not far to seek! For just as the Christian faith has brainwashed the world into thinking that they have a religion of love and ours is one of stern harshness, and in fact even succeeded with many peripheral Jews, so they have brainwashed the world into thinking that what they call the Old Testament is indeed old and outworn, that the laws of Torah no longer apply, and that the Torah is not worth being studied! And that teaching is poison for our people!

So many Jews have lost their respect and reverence for the Book of Books, and in fact ignore it

so that it is no longer a force in their lives. The rejection of Ezra's message is still strong today.

Why should a young Jew differentiate between Esav and Yaakov; our culture and the culture that surrounds us? Ezra in our haftorah presents the problem! He stresses, ahavti etchem! "I have loved you," said the Lord. 添ou are different. You have a mission! You have a unique set of laws and commandments! You are special, segula! You are a people chosen for the calling of Torah!

But our generation like his, argues, Veamartem 'bame ahavtanu' halo ach Esav leYaakov? And you have said, "Why are we special? Jews and Gentiles are really just the same! What's wrong with their culture? Isn't it better than ours? What's wrong with assimilation? Why stay a separate people anyway?"

And the prophet repeats: veahav et Yaakov. "My love can be seen to Yaakov especially, veeyneychem tirena, veatem tomru, Your own eyes will see it, you yourselves will acknowledge it, yigdal Hashem meal ligvul Yisrael, Your own existence and your own survival, your own return to the Land of Israel, your own growing awareness of the Torah's treasures, will testify that God is great and exalted, not only in the boundaries of Israel, but all over the world!

Today, college students all over America are facing growing pressure from forces seeking to vilify Israel, demanding that colleges submit to divestiture of all stocks in Israel, that faculty and students come out openly against Israel. Many Jewish students in Universities, even many who were once indifferent, now have renewed pride. They would like to argue, and defend Israel, but lack the knowledge and the know-how to respond effectively to these debates and presentations. Only with pride that leads to study and commitment will they succeed, and that will only happen when they gain the hope and courage Ezra sought to give our people who at that time were returning to Zion.

So Ezra gave hope and courage to Jews who returned to Zion; who sacrificed home and security of Baghdad to come back to Jerusalem's ruins, disregarding the mockery of those who derided, saying, "What are these poor unfortunate Jews trying to do..." How well such a plea could give hope and courage and heal the hurt of those beset by intermarriage, ignorance, and feelings of inferiority.

The people could not arise as long as they considered themselves dry bones. Only when they recognized their own value and worth could they grow flesh and sinews, and the spirit of life, and then they arose, a mighty army. So may it be in our time as well.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman, in the name of his father, Harav Moshe Yitzchak Shulman zt"l.