

Haftarot Unrolled: Shabbat HaGadol

Who will write for us?

One of the reasons that the Shabbat before Pesach is known as Shabbat HaGadol, "the Great Shabbat", is that this is the day that the Jewish People performed the very first commandment that was given to them as a nation. It was on that day, Shabbat, 10th of Nissan, that they took the lambs for the Pesach sacrifice into their homes. It marked the transition between the era of the Avot, forefathers, of individuals who do G-d's will, to the era of the Jewish Nation, an entire people who do G-d's will.

The Haftarah of Shabbat HaGadol is taken from the last chapter in the section of the Tanach known as "Ne'vi'im", Prophets. It also marks a transition, the transition from the era of prophets to the era of Torah. The last time that G-d addresses the Jewish People through a prophet, He says:

זָכְרוּ תוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אוֹתוֹ בְּחָרֵב עַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים:
Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe, that I commanded to him in Chorev for all of Israel, the laws and the statutes. (Malachi 3:22)

We no longer have prophecy, but the Torah that G-d gave Moshe, with all its laws and statutes, is enough for us to know what G-d wants us to do.

However, prophecy served a purpose besides being a source of commandments. It also recorded the deeds of individuals, the actions and decisions that they made, which ended up having ramifications for eternity. When prophecy ended, so did the possibility for our actions to matter on a prophetic level.

The following Midrash suggests otherwise:

א"ר יצחק בר מריון בא הכתוב ללמדך שאם אדם עושה מצוה יעשנה בלבב שלם . שאלו היה ראובן יודע שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו (בראשית ל"ז) וישמע ראובן ויצילהו מידם בכתפו היה מוליכו אצל אביו . ואילו היה יודע אהרן שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו (שמות ד') הנה הוא יוצא לקראתו, תופים ובמחולות היה יוצא לקראתו . ואלו היה יודע בעז שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו ויצבט לה קלי ותאכל ותשב וותר, עגלות מפוטמות היה מאכילה . ר' כהן ור' יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי לשעבר היה אדם עושה מצוה והנביא כותבה ועכשיו כשאדם עושה מצוה מי כותבה אליהו כותבה ומלך המשיח והקדוש ב"ה חותם על ידיהם הה"ד (מלאכי ג') אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו וגו' . (רות רבה ה')

An expanded translation of the Midrash:

R' Yitzchak bar Meryon said: The text comes to teach you that if a person does a Mitzvah, he should do it with his whole heart.

When Yosef went to meet his brothers and they decided to kill him, Reuven managed to protect Yosef from being murdered. He did not do enough to prevent him being sold into slavery, yet the Torah records: "Reuven saved his life". If Reuven had known that G-d would dictate this to be written, he would have picked up Yosef and carried him on his shoulders back to his father.

When Moshe was negotiating with G-d about his role in the Exodus, one of the obstacles to his accepting the position of the leader of the Jewish People was his fear of displacing his brother Aharon. G-d tells him, "He is coming, and when he sees you, he will be happy in his heart." If Aharon had known that G-d would dictate this to be written, he would have come out with a marching band to show how truly happy he is to have Moshe back, and to have him lead the Jewish People out of slavery.

When Boaz met Ruth for the first time, and was impressed with her character and loyalty, he made sure that she did not go hungry, and it says: "he gave her toasted wheat." If he had known that G-d would dictate this to be written, he would have fed her stuffed veal.

They did not know at the time that what they were doing was anything out of the ordinary, but from the point of view of prophecy, their deeds were valuable enough to be recorded in the Tanach. Thus, concludes R' Yitzchak b' Meryon, one should always do all good deeds to the utmost, because one never knows what is being recorded, what has eternal meaning.

But then, the Midrash presents a challenge in the name of R' Levi: "In the past, a person would do a Mitzvah, and the prophet would write it. Now, a person does a Mitzvah, who writes it?" If prophecy is over, then our deeds are not recorded at all. Perhaps they have less meaning than the deeds of those who lived at the time of prophecy.

He answers by referencing the Haftarah:

אִז נִדְבְּרוּ יְרֵאֵי ה' אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וַיִּקְשֹׁב ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע וַיִּכְתֹּב סֵפֶר זִכְרוֹן לְפָנָיו לְיְרֵאֵי ה' וַיִּלְחַשְׁבֵי שְׁמוֹ:
הֲנֵה אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם אֶת אֵלְיָהּ הַנָּבִיא לְפָנַי בּוֹא יוֹם ה' הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

"Then those who fear Hashem speak to each other; Hashem pays attention, and hears. He writes a book of remembrance before Him, for those who fear Hashem, and care about His name.... I am sending to you the prophet Eliyahu, in advance of the coming of the Day of Hashem, the great and dreadful." (Malachi 3:16, 23)

R' Levi says: "If a person does a Mitzvah, who writes it? Eliyahu and the King Moshiach, and G-d signs it."

Jewish history is not over just because prophecy is over. Our actions still matter, they are still being written. Eliyahu, the prophet who never quite died, represents the eternity of the connection between G-d and the Jewish People, regardless of historical circumstances and eras. The Midrash asserts that throughout the generations, our deeds have mattered. Eliyahu has been writing them down, as the eternal historian of the eternal people. One day, there will be another transition to another era, where we will have an even greater level of prophecy than ever before. Eliyahu will lead us to it, and he will also show us what he has been writing down all these centuries.

And then, we too will see which of our ordinary everyday actions had eternal meaning.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל