



The Message of Haggai

Cultivating Courage and Overcoming Adversity

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There is a known general rule with regards to all Biblical prophecy. All prophecies that have been recorded have an eternal message with application and interpretation unique to each and every generation. In other words, prophecies are not mere records of the past or predictions for the future; they are lessons and messages for each of us today.

In light of this we come to view the words of the Prophets and are often confused. So much of what they say seems to be so utterly unrelated to anything in modern everyday experience. Most of us fail to recognize any relevance in the words of the Prophets today. For this reason the study of the Prophets is probably the most neglected topic of study in the Jewish world today. Indeed, in almost every Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) yeshiva around the world, there are no official studies in the Prophets or prophetic writings.

The Book of Haggai, one of the "twelve minor prophets" is case in point of a book so neglected. Yet this small book of only 38 verses includes within it messages of character refinement and development the likes of which people today need greatly to learn.

The message of Haggai is cloaked within the words that he spoke over 2300 years ago. One must delve beneath the mere historical context of the words themselves and gaze upon their inner essence, in other words, what his words meant to those who originally heard them. When we understand his words as the people did then, then will we recognize the eternal nature of his message for us today.

Speaking in the days of the initial return from the Babylonian exile, prior to the building of the second Temple, Haggai receives HaShem's word for the early pioneers. Upon return to the Holy Land the original pioneers were faced within all types of economic adversity. They struggled to build for themselves houses in which to live and to plant crops that they could eat and sell thus establishing for themselves some form of basic economic stability.

Yet, time after time their best efforts were thwarted. As Haggai put it, *"you have sown much and you bring in little. You eat without being full, you drink without it being enough, you dress and it has no warmth."* (Hag 1:6). Haggai then reveals



something shocking. The lack of success faced by the early pioneers in their return to Zion is caused by none other than HaShem Himself! Indeed, HaShem who commanded them to return to the Land is now not blessing them to establish themselves therein!

Here are these brave pioneers, facing all kinds of adversity and hardship, all for the sake of returning to Zion to fulfill the promise of HaShem, and yet HaShem is not happy with their endeavors and withholds the necessary blessings from them. What is going on here? What is Haggai saying about HaShem? What is Haggai saying about the pioneers? What is Haggai ever so subtly saying about us and to us?

"Because of what, says HaShem Tz'vaot, because of my house that is lying in ruins. Yet, you run each to his house. Therefore because of you the heavens have been kept back, so that there is no dew and the earth has kept back its produce." (Hag. 1:9-10).

Haggai admonishes the people saying that you have come to rebuild the Land but you did not yet rebuild the Temple of HaShem. Because the honor of HaShem has not been placed first, for this HaShem has withheld His blessings. Now, this rationale on part of HaShem sounds rather reasonable. It makes the pioneers look somewhat selfish with a lack of proper priorities. So it would seem! Yet, as we know, not everything is as it seems. There is always more to a story if we learn all the details.

When Haggai spoke in the name of HaShem it was (as the book says) in the second year of King Darius of Persia. He was the Emperor who ruled over the Holy Land at this time and nothing transpired there without his consent and blessing. This was the law at the time. The Holy Land was a part of the Persian Empire. The Jewish leader in the Land at this time was Zerubabel ben Shealtiel. Leader as he may be, he is still only referred to as a governor, not as a king or even as a prince. His authority was similar to a governor of one of the fifty states within the United States. He could control most issues within his domain, but there was still a federal authority over him to which he was subject.

At this time in history, although permission was granted for the pioneers to return to Zion and resettle the Holy Land, the initial permission to rebuild the Temple was revoked. In other words, it was illegal for the pioneers to engage in the building of the Temple at this time. Their illegal efforts would have brought down on their heads the wrath of the Persian federal government.

The pioneers came to the Land as an act of faith in HaShem and they were thwarted in their efforts to build the second Temple. The Temple was not built because of an edict of the Persian federal authorities. The pioneers were not to blame! So then,



why did HaShem withhold His blessings from them? It wasn't their fault that the Temple was not being built! Or was it?

Haggai comes to admonish the people, to tell them to build the Temple. In essence he is telling them in HaShem's Name to break the law! Haggai is telling the people that G-‑s Law overrides man's law. When the two are in conflict HaShem demands that His Laws be followed and only by doing so will come reward and blessing.

Yet, this rationale sounds to us to be almost contradictory! How can we violate the law and thus incur all types of legal repercussions all the more so the scorn and hatred of others and at the same time receive reward and blessing from HaShem? The people in Haggai's day were faced with this very profound problem.

In Haggai's day, Zerubabel the governor was a righteous man who feared HaShem and walked in His ways. At his side was Joshua, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Joshua held no political authority in the eyes of the Persian federal government. He was merely a religious figure whom Zerubabel could choose to either ignore or unite with. As a righteous man Zerubabel recognized his spiritual obligation and together with Joshua at his side governed the pioneers of Zion in the spirit of HaShem and His Torah.

Upon hearing the word of HaShem from Haggai, Zerubabel knew full well his spiritual obligations and just how much this clashed with the orders he was subject to from the Persian federal authorities. He knew full well that if "heads were to roll" it would be his head first. Nonetheless, in spite of all, Zerubabel heeded the words of Haggai and violated Persian law and arranged for the building of the second Temple in Jerusalem.

Then, what a surprise happened. Upon being informed of Zerubabel's work, the Persian emperor instead of demanding punishment from his wayward governor instead reinforced his hand and ordered that the work of rebuilding actually be assisted, even by those who originally opposed it.

Was this a miracle? Maybe or maybe not. Whether it was a miracle or not is not the point. The point is that when we do HaShem's Will, we are blessed. Yet, as the story teaches us, sometimes doing HaShem's Will requires of us acts of courage and daring. It is very easy to serve HaShem when what we are required to do does not demand too much of us. Yet, once we have to "rock boats" or endanger ourselves to perform some uncomfortable or unpopular acts, then we seek all manners of rationalizations why it is not HaShem's Will for us to act in those "dangerous" ways.

Yet, all the while that we deny what it is that HaShem truly wants from us, we are lacking in receiving His blessings. This lesson of Haggai is as true today as it was long ago in his days. Even today, HaShem demands from us to act in ways which



are not so politically correct. HaShem demands from us deeds that may be deemed illegal under international or even local national laws. Yet, like Haggai has taught us: there are laws and then there are Divine Laws.

Divine Laws and their fulfillment are not subject to human scrutiny. They are not subject to human moral standards or review by boards interpreting international law. Divine Law is as Divine Law is; it is the Word of HaShem the Living G-d, Creator and Master of the Universe.

The mere concept alone of the existence of G-d; all the more so the existence of a Divine authority is enough to sicken many secularists and to drive them to irrational anti-religious frenzy. This is true throughout Western civilization today and especially glaring in both the United States and Israel.

The truly sincere religious person often feels under intense pressure to accept modes, concepts, ideas and norms imposed upon them by a secular society which so blatantly contradicts and defies HaShem's Will as revealed by His Prophets throughout the Bible. We are indeed involved in an intense culture war as serious as the war against terrorism.

In the days of Haggai, the pioneers in Zion did what they believed what was HaShem's Will; they returned to the Holy Land and began to rebuild it. But this was not enough for HaShem to shower upon them His blessings. HaShem demanded more.

HaShem demanded the people do it all, to go the distance, to do all the right things, not just part of them. Only in the wholeness of Divine surrender and service come the blessings of heaven. This lesson of Haggai is as applicable today to us as it was to the pioneers in Haggai's day.

It takes courage to walk in the ways of HaShem in a world so much set against those ways. The words of the Prophets help us to cultivate said courage. It is the words of the Prophets that teach us how to confront and overcome adversity. Their words ring true throughout the centuries.

Those who heed the admonishments of the Prophets will truly bring down upon us the blessings of HaShem. All we need is the courage of the Prophet to act. When we do our share, HaShem will do His. This is the Divine Promise.