

## THE ENTRANCE OF THE KING

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Today, synagogues celebrate Shabbat HaGadol, the Sabbath before Passover on which we hear the haftarah portion from Malachi that predicts the coming of the Prophet Eliyahu before the great and terrible day of the LORD. Tomorrow, on a Sunday, the Christian holy day, the Sunday before Easter, Christians will commemorate the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. In the story, he rode into the city on a donkey and a crowd of people came out to meet him, many of them carrying palm branches which they laid out in front of him—hence “Palm Sunday.”

These two occasions seem to have little to do with one another. One is firmly rooted in Christian tradition as the beginning of Holy Week, the other is a part of the Jewish lectionary cycle and marks the week before Passover. But I would like to point out some correlations between the two observances.

Let's start with the prophecy from Malachi. According to the prophecy, there will be a time when people no longer believe that there's any point to being godly or religious. People will become apathetic. They'll say to one another, “It's pointless to serve God. What's the point of keeping all these commandments?” And they'll say, “Blessed are the Haughty and the Evil doers, for they put God to the test and go unpunished.” There will be no fear of the LORD. This is a prophecy about the Jewish people in the days of the Master under the teaching of the Sadducees who claimed there is no reward or punishment in the hereafter.

That's one type of people. But then there's another type of people: Those who feared the LORD. It says:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. (Malachi 3:16)

They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. (Malachi 3:17)

The prophecy goes on to predict a coming day of wrath when God will punish the wicked in a conflagration of anger, but for those who fear him, “the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing.” Before this happens, however, he will send Elijah the Prophet to warn us to repent. “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:7).

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Malachi 3:22-24)

Elijah's job is to call for repentance before the day of God's wrath is unleashed. This is why we consider Elijah to be the forerunner who comes before the Messiah. And this is also why we read the prophecy at Passover—the festival of redemption. Tradition has it that, just as they were redeemed in Nisan, they will be redeemed in Nisan again. We anticipate the redemption and the coming of the Messiah in connection with Passover.

Yeshua taught us that John the Immerser was “the Elijah who is to come.” We believe John was born at Passover. John came with a message of repentance, the voice of one in the wilderness, fulfilling the role of the prophet of Elijah and invested with the spirit of Elijah. He called on the nation to repent, and he heralded the Messiah, saying, “The one who comes after me,” and saying, “Behold the lamb of God.”

But Yeshua did not take the title openly or let others refer to him as the Messiah openly. When his disciples said, “You are the Messiah!” he said, “Do not tell anyone.” He concealed his Messianic identity until the day that he entered Jerusalem, “humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). At that moment, on that day, he revealed himself to be the Messiah.

Yeshua spent Shabbat HaGadol in Bethany, in the home of his friends, Miriam, Marta, and Lazarus. He chose the next day, the day after Shabbat HaGadol, to be the day he revealed his Messianic identity publicly. How did he do it? First of all, he did it by riding that donkey.

The donkey story is one of my favorite gospel stories, and it actually entails several subtle miracles. First the Master tells the disciples to go into a village on the Mount of Olives where they would find a certain donkey. He didn't plan this ahead. This was revealed to him by the Spirit, like one of the prophets of old. He instructed them like Samuel instructed Saul. He tells them to take the donkey. If anyone asks them, “Why are you taking our donkey,” they are to tell them that the Master has need of it. This happens, and it works. The people who own the donkey let these strangers walk off with their animal. They don't know who these people are, and I don't think they knew who Yeshua was. Another miracle is that it's also going to be an unbroken donkey, one that no one has ever ridden on before, and he's going to ride it into Jerusalem. That was the plan.

What's the point of the donkey in this story? It's a signal. In Judaism, we associate donkeys with the coming of Messiah because of the prophecy from Zechariah that says:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

In Chasidic teaching, the donkey of King Messiah symbolizes the physical and material side of redemption. The natural side of things. (Some say that the secular state of Israel is Messiah's Donkey.) That's because the Hebrew word for donkey, “*chamor*,” sounds like Hebrew word “*chomer*” which means “matter” or “physical stuff.” I like this teaching because, to me, it speaks of the relationship between the spirit and the flesh, the *neshamah* and the body, and it speaks to

me of the relationship between the Spirit of Messiah in us and our physical person. He took a donkey on which no one had ever ridden, in other words, an untamed donkey. That's a fitting depiction of flesh and blood, untamed, unaccustomed to being controlled or ridden. Our inclination is to buck and kick and throw off the Messiah, as it says, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords" (Psalm 2). But the Messiah tames the wild animal and utilizes it to carry him into the kingdom. This is our role too. May he tame our evil inclinations and our wayward hearts and make us useful to carry his presence in the world.

So he takes this donkey, and his disciples lay a cloak on it for a saddle, and he rides it down the Mount of Olives. The significance is not lost on anyone. The Prophet Zechariah predicts that the Messiah's feet will stand on the Mount of Olives; he will enter into the city from the Mount of Olives.

What do you have when the King comes into his city and takes his throne? We have the kingdom. The triumphal entry is the moment when the kingdom is truly at hand. The gospel message has never been more salient (Repent, the kingdom is at hand) than when King Messiah is descending from the Mount of Olives to enter the holy city and take his throne.

So firm is the tradition that Messiah will enter the city from the Mount of Olives that the Eastern Gate of the City, the Messiah Gate, remains sealed up to this day, some say by the Muslims to keep the Messiah out of the city.

His disciples knew that the moment had come. For three years, perhaps three and a half years, they had been with him waiting for this moment, so they did not hesitate. As he descended the mountain, they acclaimed him with the words of Psalm 118, the final Psalm of the Halle. This Psalm was employed in ancient times to welcome a victorious Davidic King into Jerusalem and, according to Jewish tradition, the same psalm will be sung to welcome King Messiah to Jerusalem. The disciples began to call out the key stanzas, "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of Hashem. Hoshana! Hoshana to the Son of David. Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the LORD."

Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this acclamation, and they said, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." They were afraid for Yeshua. He could get himself killed, riding into Jerusalem with the acclamations of a king. So they tell him, "Rebuke your disciples. Hush them up." But he said, "If they are quiet, the stones will cry out." What stones?

The answer is in a similar prophecy from Isaiah. The Prophet Isaiah has a prophecy about the entrance of King Messiah into the city:

Go through, go through the gates; prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway; clear it of stones; lift up a signal over the peoples. Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." (Isaiah 62:10-11)

Tradition says that this prophecy refers to Elijah who comes to herald Messiah and prepare the way. The *Midrash Rabbah* says that the clearing away of the stones symbolizes repentance, that

is, to clear away the heart of stone – the evil inclination-- before the entrance of Messiah, as it says in the prophet Ezekiel:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

*Targum Yonatan* interprets Isaiah 62:10 in a manner consistent with the ministry of both Elijah and John the Immerser:

O prophets, pass through and return through the gates; turn the heart of the people into the right way; bring good tidings of good things, and consolations to the righteous, who remove the thoughts of an evil imagination, which are like a stone of stumbling; lift up a standard for the people. (Isaiah 62:11, *Targum Yonatan*)

The Targum depicts the prophets laboring to prepare Israel for the coming redemption by preaching repentance and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. They remove the obstacles and stumbling stones of sin which litter and obstruct the way. The the stones which must be removed from the way symbolize the evil inclination. Man's evil inclination is called the "heart of stone."

Elijah comes teaching repentance in order to prepare the way before the Messiah, which is the ministry and message of John the Immerser who came to prepare *the way* of HaShem. The prophecy says that he prepares "The Way" by removing these stones. The disciples of Yeshua then are called "The Way," perhaps short for "The Way of HaShem." The prophecy says, "Behold your salvation comes" which is paralleled in the prophecy of the donkey which says, "Behold, your king is coming to you"

If you try to silence the king's entourage, even the stones will cry out the king's acclamations. When Messiah comes, he subjugates even our evil inclination to serve him and acclaim him, as it says, "I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh." The stones will cry out: "If you confess with your mouth that Yehsua is Master and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

So too, as we prepare for Passover, may he subjugate our hearts of stone, to acclaim him and to hail him king and herald his entrance, that we should confess with our mouths and believe with our hearts.

The two prophecies are related. One from Isaiah, one from Zechariah, but they are related so closely that Matthew actually ties them together when he cites them. In the style of the Midrash, Matthew 21:5 marries the two prophecies, actually mashes them up:

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey.'"

Meanwhile, a crowd is coming out of the city to meet him. They are Galileans who have been waiting for his arrival and people of Jerusalem who have also come to believe that he is the

Messiah. They join with the acclamations, saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hoshana to the Most High!” They have cut palm branches and are laying down these palm branches before him. It’s the equivalent of rolling out the red carpet. Others are laying out their cloaks before him. They are hailing him as king, and they are according him the entrance of a king.

The significance of the triumphal entry is that it is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. This is the coming of the Messiah to Jerusalem: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you.

But the Master weeps. At this moment of triumph, he weeps over Jerusalem, because the city has not repented. He weeps and says, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes.” He prophesies regarding the coming destruction.

He enters the Temple, and as he enters the Temple’s outer courts, children are surrounding him, and they have taken up the chant. “Hoshana to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.” The Sadducean priesthood hears the children, and they say to Yeshua, “Do you hear what they are saying? Silence them!” But Yeshua says, “Yes, have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” He quotes Psalm 8:2, which is a Messianic Psalm about the Son of Man who is made a little lower than the angels but ascends to be crowned with glory and honor. The Sadducees, who do not believe in angels or in Messiah, are telling him, “Silence the children.” He replies, “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger’” (Psalm 8:2).

The Sadducees are his foes, enemies, and vengeful persecutors, but they are stilled and shut up by the mouths of children who have taken up the acclamation, “Hoshana to the Son of David.” These are literal children, but in the Gospels, Yeshua often speaks of his disciples as “little ones” and as “children,” and he says, unless you become like a child, you will not enter the kingdom.

He looks around, he sees the money changers, and a day later he returns and drives them out, cleaning the chametz from his father’s house. This is what Yeshua does when he enters the house. It’s like the priest in our Torah reading today (parashat Metzora) who enters the house and finds the mark of *tzaraat*, and he has it removed and the plaster scraped away and the stones of the wall actually removed and replaced. It’s like the search for chametz where we search very diligently for leaven and chametz to remove it before the festival.

So to may he remove from within us the merchants and the money changers and drive out from within our hearts every foreign and offensive thing that does not belong in the Temple of the LORD. He purges his father’s house. So too, may he purge us of those things which do not belong. King David invites God to search his heart. He says:

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24)

This is why we use a candle when searching for the chametz, because it says,

The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all his innermost parts. (Proverbs 20:27)

On Shabbat Hagadol we read about the ministry of Elijah, to prepare the way for the king, to call us to repentance and make us ready for the entrance of the King. And in the triumphal entry we see the entrance of the king accomplished. He tames the evil inclination, subdues a wild animal, namely our wayward physicality and material self, in order that our physical and material life of flesh should become the vehicle for his entrance into the world. We should become Messiah's donkey. He changes our heart of stone for a heart of flesh that can cry out and acclaim him, removing the stones from the way, and in this way even the stones cry out. He ordains praise from us, that we should be the ones to greet him and him welcome him, like the children in the Temple.

The story is about the entrance of the king. It foreshadows a future when the king will come again. The prophecy from Isaiah hints at this with its repetitions:

Go through, go through the gates; prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway...

"Go through" at the first coming of Messiah; "Go through the gates" at the second coming of the Messiah. "Build up" for the first coming of Messiah. "Build up the highway" for the second coming of Messiah.

On a personal level, we can speak in the idiom of the Evangelicals, who speak of receiving Jesus into one's heart. As we come to Passover time, every disciple can be likened to the city Jerusalem and to the holy Temple. King Messiah is come to you. Repent. Clear away the stones. Build up the road. Prepare the way. It's time to receive him into your heart. Cast out the chametz. Overturn the tables of the moneychangers and merchants, throw them out, as it says in the prophet Zechariah:

And there shall no longer be a merchant in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. (Zechariah 14:21)

In preparation for Passover, we should welcome King Messiah into our homes and into our lives, into our hearts. We should purge our homes and our heads of all that is offensive and inappropriate to holiness. We should become the Messiah's steed. Our evil inclinations and the waywardness of the flesh should be tamed by his presence; our stony hearts made alive to hail him and acclaim him, confessing with our mouths and believing with our hearts, like the stones that cry out, hailing him and welcoming him, like the children and his disciples who say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of Hashem, Hoshana to the Son of David."