

PROPHETS IN CYBERSPACE

by Chananya Weissman

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Mark Pollack was reading his e-mail at work when a new message flashed at the bottom of the screen. "Word of G-d," read the subject line. The sender was "Malachi."

Mark received as many unsolicited e-mails as the next fellow and he sometimes wondered who actually took advantage of the ludicrous offers. Occasionally he even received e-mails from psychics begging him to let them help him find love, wealth, and happiness. The first few times he responded that if they could really see the future they would have known that he wasn't interested in their services. They never answered him back, of course, and he soon turned to deleting their messages without a thought.

This one, however, was pretty original, and that impressed him. "Word of G-d." Not even the psychics had dared claim that their predictions were divinely inspired. Mark briefly considered rewarding Malachi's originality by opening the message before deleting it, but decided that would be a bad precedent. He had learned from his own kid when he was just a little nipper not to reward bad behaviour. He hit the **DELETE** button and took a sip of coffee.

Before the tepid liquid had made its way down his throat a new message flashed on his screen. "Word of G-d," read the subject line. The sender was Malachi.

Mark stared angrily at the screen. *Very clever*, he thought with a mixture of disgust and admiration. *They've rigged a program that alerts them when the message is deleted and prompts their system to send another.* To check his theory he deleted the second message as well. It was immediately replaced.

Mark was suddenly afraid. Not of Malachi, nor of G-d, for that matter, but that a new chapter in the onslaught of electronic advertising had begun. All spammers would soon acquire this weapon and force millions of innocent recipients to open their messages before deleting them. Worse, realized Mark, what was to stop them from resending the message even if the recipient opened it before deleting? Sure, at some point someone would develop a way to combat this blackmail, but in the meantime he was helpless.

Conceding defeat, Mark opened the message. "Shalom, Nation of Israel," it read. "These are the words of Malachi, messenger of G-d our L-rd. Return to Me, Nation of Israel, says G-d, and I will shower you with blessing. Learn My Torah and again become My People as in days of

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yore. Distance yourselves from theft, deceit and immorality. Turn away from things that pollute your holy soul — ” that was as far as Mark read before deleting the message. Thankfully, it did not return.

He spent the entire next day at dreary meetings and didn't have a chance to check his mail until he got home. By then it was well after sunset, and Mark was in no happy mood.

There were two messages from Malachi. Mark angrily deleted them, forgetting that the attempt was futile. When the messages instantly reappeared, his anger burst to the surface, and it suddenly became very clear to Mark that all of his problems and frustrations were Malachi's fault. At least, that's how he reacted, letting forth an angry scream, his face turning red.

His wife, Jane, came running. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“This crazy nut keeps sending me e-mail. I can't get rid of him.”

“You made me run in for that?” said Jane. She sounded almost disappointed that there wasn't a real emergency to justify her panic.

“I didn't make you do anything. Sorry I shouted like that, but this guy's really getting on my nerves.”

She looked over his shoulder at the computer screen. “I wouldn't worry about it. I've been getting mail from this religious lunatic myself.”

“Malachi?” he asked, but he already knew it was. Mark felt very uneasy and didn't know why.

As Mark soon found out, they were far from the only ones to be harassed by the mysterious Malachi. On Shabbat morning, people in synagogue talked about it and at community functions and gatherings it was the first topic of conversation, people sometimes griping, sometimes joking. His Jewish friends made oblique reference to Malachi in some of their own e-mails. Mark even discovered a new website, complete with bulletin boards, dedicated to finding and prosecuting this latest on-line villain. “CatchMalachi.org” it was called.

He found this last item extremely interesting. He learned that apparently Malachi had sent literally millions of e-mails in the week since he had appeared on the scene, and all of them had been sent to Jews. According to the site, not a single exception had been found. The mere fact that Malachi had obtained so many e-mail addresses was startling enough. But that he had filtered his targets, with absolute precision, by religious affiliation (however loose that affiliation was) or, even more amazingly, just by race (because, truth be told, the vast majority of the people contacted didn't have any religious affiliation to speak of) — this was very scary. The implications were no less than fearsome.

How in the world had he known who was Jewish out there anyway? wondered Mark. Even if Malachi knew how to crack every security system on the Internet, there was still no way for him to discover the family roots of all these obscure people. Genetics information rarely had any reason to make its way on-line. Besides, plenty of people out there didn't even know they were Jewish, and many who thought they were weren't. True, there was no reason for anyone

to assume that Malachi's implicit allegations were accurate — but then again, wasn't there? A small part of Mark was glad and even a little bit pleased, in a self-contented way, that he and his wife had both received e-mail from Malachi. But a much larger part of him wanted to join the throng of people against this insidious spammer and help blast him into the nether regions of cyberspace. He registered at the site and added a record of his own encounters with Malachi to the thousands already there, even though his contained nothing of insight or interest.

Mark received another e-mail from Malachi that afternoon. He ignored it for as long as he could, but the sight of it there in his inbox disturbed him. The only way to get rid of it would be to read it. Or at least pretend to.

"Nation of Israel," it read, "I bring you all a message from G-d Almighty. He asks, "Why do you not come back to Me and My Torah?" Is it not plain as day that I am a true prophet? I come with words of peace and hope! The true enemy is not I, the messenger of G-d, but the heart of stone that continues to pervert your thoughts and actions. Listen to my words, dear Jewish Nation, and G-d will take you back to Him as in the blink of an eye, just as He promised your forefathers. Do not follow in the evil ways of earlier generations for that way lies unhappiness. But G-d Almighty wants you all to be happy in your destiny as His People. Malachi."

Mark deleted the message, feeling really peevis and frustrated more than he thought possible by such a trivial circumstance. *How many millions of others are experiencing the same aggravation?* he wondered.

About twelve million others, according to Friday's local Jewish paper, and that was considered by many experts to be a low estimate. Computer programmers, antivirus professionals, encryption specialists and amateur hackers all agreed that Malachi's e-mails were virtually untraceable and, for the time being at least, totally unpreventable. Mark was dismayed to find that the Associated Press and Reuters and most other major news services had picked up the story as well. *They would*, he thought. "*Jews is news.*" But one way or another, he figured, this couldn't be good for the Jews.

What disturbed him a great deal was that his only son, Danny, vigorously supported Malachi. Danny was a serious youngster, a young teenager.

"Why does everybody hate him so much?" Danny asked one night at the supper table, ignoring his food. "He just wants us to be good so Moshiach can come. We learned about people like him in school."

Mark and Jane exchanged mortified looks. "Malachi is a very bad person," said Mark gently. "What he's doing is like breaking into people's houses, almost. It doesn't matter if he thinks he's doing us a favour. Bothering people every day is no way to make them better."

"Well, what other way is there?" retorted Danny. He looked exasperated, almost as if he was the one sending the messages, not Malachi.

"I don't know," said Mark. "Maybe there is no other way. Maybe there's no way at all. But what he's doing is still wrong."

“Eat your dinner, sweetie,” said Jane.

“But how can he be wrong if he is a messenger from G-d and G-d tells him to do this?” protested Danny. “He said it was time that the Jewish People became more religious, that we have to keep the Mitzvos of the Torah and through that to spread G-dliness among all the peoples of the world. That’s our job. “To be a light unto the Nations.” He said that we have a duty to others as well as to ourselves and that it’s wrong to shirk our responsibility. Well, what’s wrong with that?”

Mark was getting annoyed. He was about to tell Danny to be quiet, but Jane cut him off.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “He never said that.” Mark wouldn’t have known one way or the other, but apparently his wife had been reading the e-mails in full.

Danny assumed a smug expression. “Maybe not to you he didn’t, but he told it to me and to a lot of other people, too.”

Mark felt his heart sink and his legs go weak. Until now he had assumed that Malachi’s e-mails were standardized messages sent to one massive list of people. Danny had his own e-mail address and unless the youngster was totally spaced out, Malachi was suddenly much more than just an irritating missionary. He was a monster.

Mark and Jane interrogated Danny and the boy was more than willing to answer all their questions — as Malachi had instructed him to do. They learned with increasing anxiety that there was indeed a range of e-mails and that Malachi sent quite different messages to those of his followers who were more “committed to being Jewish,” as Danny put it. (Mark was conscious of how peculiar it was that he thought of them as “followers” even though he himself didn’t know of any and he couldn’t imagine that many people followed him at all.)

Since the Jews were spread out all across the world, Danny explained to his parents, on-line communication was by far the best way for Malachi to disseminate his messages. This was not the traditional way for prophets to transmit such information, of course, but hey! the prophecies were still authentic and would come true.

There was more. He told them that Malachi had said that because it had been so long since true prophets had come to speak to the people of the world and since it was difficult for all but the faithful and the gullible (two very different classes of people, Malachi had stressed) to accept his words, Malachi would soon be providing divine signs of his credibility.

Mark really didn’t have much more to say than that it was wrong to send these e-mails. But Danny asked, in all seriousness, “Why criticize Malachi? Why is he any different to all the advertisers who beam their messages into our living rooms all the time?” In any case, said Danny, there was a popular misconception about being Jewish.

“Being Jewish is more than just being good, Dad,” he said. “Lots of people are good. In fact, the overwhelming majority of human beings are good. But we’ve got a duty to be the People of G-d and that means keeping His Torah and the Mitzvos. Through us living the Torah and

keeping the Mitzvos and teaching everyone about G-d, the whole of Mankind is made aware of G-d and every one is a better person. That's our job. Malachi just wants us to be the People of G-d. What's wrong with that?" Danny spoke with all the zeal of a youngster.

For the first time in a long while, Mark found himself stirred out of his complacency. "The main thing is to be a good person, Danny, you know that. Your mother and I have always taught you that. If you want to be religious, we won't stand in your way. We've told you that, too. But it's wrong to harangue and harass people and frighten them with e-mails and force them to be religious. And that's what Malachi is doing."

"No, he's not!" said Danny. "He's just telling us to be truly Jewish and that means keeping the Torah and Mitzvos because that's the way to connect with G-d. Of course one can be a good person without Torah and Mitzvos, but that's not being Jewish."

"What do you mean?" interjected Mark. He'd never been challenged like this before now about his definition of being Jewish.

"Well, most Jews today think of their Jewishness (if they think of it at all, that is) in terms of philanthropic activities and charity works. But that's not what Judaism is. The Macfarleys down the road are good people, so are the Spencers and so are our neighbours the Hadleys. But they're not Jewish. It's sad that most people think that being Jewish means not much more than to belong to the greatest fundraising philanthropic organization in the world and perhaps to support Israel and that's it. But it's not true! Being Jewish means to live one's life according to the Torah, to observe the Mitzvos. Of course, with that one has to be a good person, too, and in fact we are urged to always 'find favour in the eyes of G-d and of Man.' But we can't ignore the Jewish part."

"I don't think you should criticize the charity work of your father," said Jane, sharply. "I'm very proud of his efforts on the part of the Charities Board and I'm sure you are, too. And I'd remind you, young man, that it was *our* Ladies' Committee that raised the money and paid for the new swimming pool for your school."

"And I'll tell you, Danny," added Mark, "that there's still a great deal of work to do to end exploitation and discrimination, not only in the developing world but even here in this country, too. We can't rest on our laurels."

"That's exactly the point I'm making!" said Danny with some exasperation. "All these good works, and charity activities, and fighting for the civil rights of others and all that, they're all fine and good. And I am proud of what you and Mum do, I really am. But this doesn't define one's Jewishness. Being Jewish means observing the Torah and keeping the Mitzvos. All of them, not just the laws of charity. And that's what Malachi wants us to do, to come back to keeping the Torah, all of it. He's been appointed to be the messenger of G-d, — that's what 'Malachi' means, 'My messenger' — to the Jewish Nation and if need be to the Nations of the world, too, and he just wants us to come back to being Jewish."

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There was a lot more of the same, with Danny and his parents arguing about what defines being Jewish. Mark and Jane were left with some ideas to think over. Danny made his apologies and went upstairs to his room. He had to revise for a maths exam and he wanted to do well. Mark and Jane stayed at the table and chewed over some of the things they had discussed.

“I’m rather proud of our Danny,” said Mark. “He’s got his head screwed on alright. Maybe he’s got a point there.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jane.

“Well, maybe we *should* try to be more Jewish, more religious. Shabbat. Kosher. It would make things easier for Danny, too.” They sat there, quietly thinking. After a minute or so, Mark said, “Jane, what do you say to accepting that long-standing invitation of the Goldbergs to join them for a Friday night meal? You know, he’s always so friendly and I’m sure it’ll be interesting to see how a really orthodox family keeps Shabbat. What do you say?”

“Well, yes, O.K., if you think that’s a good idea. I know that Danny would be happy, too, and he can tell us what to do and what not to do.” She smiled. “It can be useful to have a son who is religious.” Then, quite unexpectedly, she said, “And maybe I could go along to one of these evening classes at the Yeshiva synagogue about keeping Kosher? You know, they’re advertised in the flyer that comes through our letterbox every couple of weeks.”

Mark began reading Malachi’s messages in their entirety, but only to be informed, he told himself. He was still a bit sceptical but most of what he read, he had to agree, did make sense. In the following days the messages became increasingly specific. Malachi listed certain communal sins that needed to be addressed immediately, changing his style from his former, general calls for repentance. There were no particular surprises among the list; if anything, Mark thought, there were significant omissions that he could tell Malachi about! *Some prophet*, he thought.

Malachi also provided several predictions, as Danny had told them he would, that were supposed to serve as signs from Heaven that this was no game.

The first sign was that the River Euphrates would flow backward on a certain date. This was to signify that a major shake-up was in order.

The second sign was that the long period of drought in Israel was going to end in spectacular fashion: a torrential downpour would fill up all the reservoirs within the space of three days. This was to be taken both as a sign of G-d’s love and commitment to the Jews and as a warning that the line between blessing and disaster is extremely thin. There was a list of some other relatively minor signs in other parts of the world, but those two were the big ones.

Mark found that he believed these things were actually going to occur. So did a surprising number of Jews, non-Jews, and even enemies of Israel. To Danny, on the other hand, their occurrence was a foregone conclusion but he told his parents that Malachi had instructed him and the other believers to wait for the signs before placing all their trust in him. After all,

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Malachi had said, many false prophets had misled people in the past by preying on their hopes and good intentions. Mark and Jane were impressed with Malachi's candour.

All the signs came true exactly as Malachi had predicted. Israelis rejoiced that the drought that had crippled the economy and threatened the very survival of the country had finally ended. Some of the media people pointed out how fortunate it was that the rains stopped after three days. One more day of this kind of rain and the resulting floods would have ruined the country.

The River Euphrates flowed backward for just over ten hours on the day Malachi had specified. Eminent scientists interviewed on television claimed this was a perfectly natural event that Malachi had somehow known about in advance. They tried to allay people's anxieties by explaining that this occurs when conditions are right. (But they had to admit that no one in living memory knew of such a thing happening before.) Others claimed that since the river didn't flow backward that entire day (but only for 613 minutes, to be exact) it might as well not have flowed backward at all. Still others shrugged cynically and said, "Big deal." For them, if he couldn't predict winning lottery numbers, he wasn't much use as a prophet anyway.

There were no more messages from Malachi for nearly two months. Some people, especially Jews who had a real dislike for anything Jewish, were hugely relieved that this madness seemed to have come to an end. Others were profoundly disappointed. But there was a distinct change in the affairs of the world at large. The long and the short of it all was that as a result of those mysterious events, people all over the globe started to develop a sort of responsibility towards each other. Cynics said that this spirit of cooperation was born more out of fear of Malachi than out of love for each other. No matter. Be that as it may, governments and rulers, democratic and otherwise, started to cultivate in their populations a sensitivity to right and wrong. Generally, there was a marked improvement in peoples' regard for each other. Diplomats and ambassadors were less bellicose and there was more cooperation between nations. There was a more genuine effort to come together to try to end world poverty, for instance, and real collaboration amongst scientists to find a cure for some of the really debilitating illnesses. There was serious talk about treaties and trade agreements between countries that had not spoken to each other for years and even decades. Some of the minor wars that had been smouldering for years petered out as the local warlords realized that somehow the populace upon whom they depended had lost the will to fight and destroy. The world was becoming quite a friendly place. Social commentators had taken to calling it "The Age of Cooperation."

This peaceful state of affairs lasted a time but without any proper direction and leadership, things started to unravel and too soon the old ogres of hatred and jealousy reared their ugly twin heads and slowly, sadly, things returned to normal. There was a real danger that this Age of Cooperation would be over. Some who were able to remember thought it reminded them of the Prague Spring.

All this while, however, the hunt for Malachi did not cease. If anything, it picked up in intensity. CatchMalachi.org and their sympathisers around the globe couldn't deny that

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Malachi (or the fear of G-d Who sent him) had had a great beneficial effect but, as computer and internet experts, they were worried that Malachi had cashed in his chips and vanished forever, that he had committed the perfect hacking crime. To these people, it was unthinkable that Malachi could invade the entire on-line community with impunity and then just quietly disappear.

Then the messages resumed. There were warnings again to the Jewish Nation about keeping Shabbos, about keeping Kosher and the more general exhortations to “be a holy People.” There were calls for peace and brotherhood among nations. Then no more messages for a while. Stop, start, stop, start. It looked like Malachi was nervous about being discovered and whenever the sleuths came too close for comfort, he went to ground.

Then one day a crack was finally made in Malachi’s armour. A group of technicians who had devoted every free moment to catching the elusive spammer managed to trace some of his e-mails through a complicated maze of servers. The trail spanned the globe numerous times and was littered with dead ends and masterful encryption.

It was still too early to pinpoint his location, but he seemed to be operating from somewhere in the Middle East, possibly within the land of Israel and some said that he was actually quite near Jerusalem. That revelation wasn’t half as surprising as they tried to make out as Malachi had now taken to preface some of his messages with the quote from the Bible that says: “For from Zion will come forth Torah and the Word of G-d from Jerusalem.” Of course, that could mean anything — or nothing. But in a way, it did make sense. The pundits couldn’t be sure that Malachi was operating from out of Jerusalem nor, in a strange way, did they expect anything else. Everything about the trail was unpredictable enough for them not to make any assumptions. The bottom line, as one of the technicians put it, was that they could now ignore most of the encryption junk and zero in on Malachi. Barring something unforeseen, they could probably locate him in a matter of weeks. But most people knew they were bluffing.

As for what the boffins called Malachi’s “encryption junk,” it turned out that it wasn’t junk at all. On the contrary, some pretty smart mathematicians played with the encryption codes and even after some weeks of heavy number crunching, it didn’t make much sense. Until, that is, they found that it seemed to contain a great many complicated formulæ to do with the world of physics which all tied in with numerical values of certain Hebrew letters of specific passages in the Bible. It was all very complicated and rather other-worldly, in a way. But none of it led them to Malachi.

During all this time, even during his silence, most people guessed that Malachi had not completely stopped sending e-mails. They were right. He didn’t send any messages to the wider public but in fact he had been busier than ever communicating with certain of his addresses, even sending personal messages to a select few.

Danny Pollack received a few of these, unbeknown to his parents, of course.

One day some time later, Danny respectfully informed Mark and Jane that he was going to a seminar. It was only for a few days and he’d be coming home each evening. On the

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programme was a series of talks on self-improvement and responsibility with the keynote presentation on education. In fact, Danny told them, the main topic of these seminars was “Education for a Torah Jewry.” After all, how do you go about transforming so many Jews who are basically ignorant of their Jewishness into knowledgeable and observant Jews? Especially as so many are crying out to learn? That was what they were going to hear, he said. There are going to be other topics, too, of course, but everything was geared to a “brave new world.”

There was going to be a team of Rabbis and educators and Danny asked his parents if they would like to come, too. Everyone was welcome, he said. There were no secret sessions closed to the public. It was all going to be above board. If they came, he told them with a smile, they could keep an eye on things and make sure that he wasn't being brainwashed. In any case, they were bound to find things interesting.

Mark and Jane actually talked it over and they decided that it couldn't do any harm and quite possibly could do a lot of good to go. They made their way upstairs to Danny's room to tell him and knocked softly. They waited a few seconds and knocked harder. There was no response. “Maybe he's made an early night,” Mark said to Jane. He gently turned the knob and opened the door.

Danny was sitting by his computer desk deeply engrossed in reading his screen, quite visibly upset. He looked up at his parents and pointed to the screen. “The seminars are cancelled,” he told them quietly.

Malachi was signing off, Danny said to them, because he was upset with the negative response of too many people to his messages. Frankly, he was concerned not so much about his own safety as about that of his followers. In certain parts of the world, some of the people had turned ugly and were quite nasty to those that believed Malachi. He would keep in contact, he said, but the time for the showdown, if there was to be one, hadn't come yet. Unfortunately, some more shock tactics were called for. A short list of predictions followed.

The earthquakes came three months later. All over the globe. But these were no ordinary earthquakes, if there is such a thing. Scientists agreed that it was quite an amazing coincidence the way certain areas all over the world were utterly demolished while others adjacent to them, and even quite close by, were untouched. Most remarkable was how in some places individual houses or apartment blocks just collapsed while all those around them were unharmed and conversely, how within an area that was utterly destroyed there were individual buildings that were completely unscathed. It was as if certain people and groups had been targeted by this world-wide natural disaster. Except that it wasn't at all natural. Put quite simply, it was downright spooky, although the word on everyone's lips was “miracle.”

Insurance companies sent in their investigators but they admitted that they were completely mystified. Stymied. It just wasn't normal. Seismologists were stumped. This wasn't natural. It followed no known pattern. But then some sociologists and criminologists, together with investigative journalists, too, started to make some rather interesting discoveries about those areas that were hardest hit and found out some other things about the places that were spared and things started to make sense. Interestingly enough, shortly afterwards, the

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CatchMalachi.org site closed down quietly. And then, quite unexpectedly, after a silence of some months, Malachi sent one last message and then signed off. He would be back, he said, when the time was ripe. But for now, it was “*au revoir*.”

As far as Jewish people were concerned, there was again a concerted effort all over the world to return to Torah life. Only now that effort was sustained. Because of these events, everyone, Jewish and not Jewish, seemed to know that Jewish people are expected to live by the Laws of the Torah and one of the most remarkable developments was that non-Jews started to actively encourage their Jewish neighbours — sometimes quite forcefully — to do what was right and live their lives more Jewishly. At the same time, there was also a noticeable growth of interest by many non-Jewish people in the Noachide Laws. Study groups sprung up in the most unlikely places and people really wanted to know what they should do to make their lives more spiritually fulfilling and more often than not, they turned to Rabbis for instruction. In fact, it became quite normal for people to involve the local Rabbi in community moral issues and social questions and even individual guidance and many a clergyman was known to have long consultations with his local Rabbi. Attendances at churches and mosques and temples were on the rise.

Malachi had said that he would return. He'd said that his job wasn't complete yet because the goal was that the people of the world and all Mankind would bring about a better age by themselves, without having to be scared into it. When they were ready, he said, he would be back, together with King Moshiach. But meantime there was no doubt about it: he'd certainly started the best kind of social revolution. Jewish people especially started to take their Jewishness more seriously and non-Jewish people, too, realized that their own good fortune was tied to that of their Jewish fellow citizens. All in all the world became a much happier place. It seemed that nobody wanted to see a repeat of those fearsome happenings. There seemed to be a consensus that when Malachi returned, this time *everybody* would welcome him.

Danny is now a grown man, married with children. Even though all this happened quite a time ago, the effect hasn't worn off. He still checks his e-mail religiously every day, hoping, waiting.

And he's not the only one.

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