

Mourning for Individuals

Rabbi Jesse Horn

RA" M, Yeshivat Hakotel • YC '01, RIETS '06

Kina 23 recounts a tragic story that takes place after the destruction of Bayis Sheni and after Yerushalayim fell to the Romans. The Kina refers to the son and daughter of R' Yishmael Kohen Gadol, who each independently were taken as slaves by two neighbors. One day, the master of R' Yishmael Kohen Gadol's daughter was bragging to the other slave owner about how beautiful his newly acquired female slave was. The neighbor responded that he too had taken a slave who was unusually handsome. Together the slave masters decided to breed them in hopes of having beautiful children who could be sold at a high profit. The two slaves were placed alone in a room for the night. All night long, R' Yishmael Kohen Gadol's children cried, alone, in different corners of the room. Early the next morning, when dawn broke, the children recognized each other, embraced, and died together.

This particular event had no major impact on the course of our national history. What is it about this account that gives it the importance to be told as an independent Kina? What are we to take from this Kina? What does it lament?

There are a number of other questions that can be asked as well. At the end of the Kina, for example, Yirmiyahu himself mourns this event. However, he lived approximately five hundred years before this story occurred, so why was he lamenting? Additionally, the paytan used several unique details to describe his feelings and actions. He claims that, "their memory is like a fire in my heart." He also rends his garment, performing an act of kreyah. Why specifically here is this response appropriate? What about this story triggers tearing kreyah more than anything else?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik³⁵ suggests that Kina 21, Arzay H'Livanon and Kina 22, HaCharishu, are two kinos that deal with national issues, and the horrific things that happened to communities and Am Yisroel at large. Kina 23, by contrast, is a story of individuals. Judaism recognizes and values the mourning for regular, normal everyday people. "We mourn for a boy and girl who were not leaders or scholars and who did not play any major public role". Rabbi Soloveitchik further suggests that telling a story of individuals accomplishes a twofold goal. Firstly, it demonstrates that our mourning isn't just for large numbers, communities and other large scale events. We care for and mourn for individuals as well. Our sadness on Tisha B'av is caused by events that impacted us nationally, as well as individually.

³⁵ The Lookstein Edition Kinos p 443

Secondly, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that mourning for individuals enables the mourner to better connect with the events that have transpired. It's much easier to identify and sympathize with the pain of one person in trouble rather than a story of a national crisis. Human nature allows us to relate to stories of individual people more than large scale numbers or events.

To this second advantage of recalling a story of individuals, Rabbi Soloveitchik quotes a Medrash (Bereshis Rabah 33:5) that highlights this idea. It describes how Rabbi Akiva, while visiting Ginzak (a city), told the people there both about Noach and the flood that destroyed the entire world, as well as the heartbreaking events of Iyov. The reaction from the people to Iyov's tribulations was significantly greater, for after hearing about him, they broke out into tears. After the Noach story, the people's reaction was significantly less intense.

Rabbi Soloveitchik uses this hypothesis and expounds on several lines found in the kina. When the paytan says, "Their memory is like a fire in my heart," he explains, it's true "even though they are individuals, not a community (ibid 443)." Furthermore, when the paytan describes himself saying, "I rent my garments," Rabbi Soloveitchik comments that when it comes to death *al pi Kiddush Hashem*, "We do not analyze whether the person was a scholar, a prince or *Av Beit Din* (ibid 443)." Instead, we mourn regardless of their stature or position. Again, the theme of these two youths not being anyone special, but just plain and normal individuals resurfaces.

The kina closes with Yermiyahu's mourning. Here too Rabbi Soloveitchik understands that Yermiyahu "lamented each individual who perished during the destruction of the First Temple and the Second Temple (ibid 444)."

There is, however, a small problem with Rabbi Soloveitchik's approach to this kina. It is somewhat difficult to imagine that these two children were selected as paradigmatic examples of no-name individuals. After all, they were the children of the Kohen Gadol. Certainly, other people with a less illustrious lineage and family background could have been selected. And if no other story drives home the message as well as this one does, the paytan should have left out that particular detail. If the kina truly wanted to stress that these people were common people, it should have told the story anonymously.

However, it is true that this kina is very unique in its telling of such a long and detailed story of individuals. Perhaps there is a different profound element to the message of this kina. This kina intentionally uses individuals from aristocracy and superb pedigree as their tragic decline serves as a paradigm for a parallel phenomenon on a national level. All Jews suffered, even the Jews from the most respected and significant families. What could be more expressive of Klal Yisroel's demise than members of its most respected family being enslaved and bred for sale?

When crying all night long, R' Yishmael Kohen Gadol's son says, "How will a grandson of Aharon marry a slave-girl," and his daughter wonders how "a daughter of Yokheved (can) marry a slave?" The characters themselves are undoubtedly grieving this exact point. They aren't selfishly concerned with their own fate. They are mourning how Bnei Yisroel have so severely fallen. This is even more clearly seen when taking into account the fact that, in this kina, the children speak only once. Presumably, the paytan has them communicate something of great importance. They are recognizing Am Yisroel's collapse.

Addition support can be seen by how the paytan describes R' Yishmael Kohen Gadol's daughter to be "dressed in scarlet-wool." At first glance this may have been overlooked as an unnecessary detail. Yet based on our theory, it's an important description. She may be a slave, but she is still wearing clothing that reflects her previous wealth. She isn't a regular pauper. She has fallen from royalty.

The phrase, "I shall moan (about this) each year on this day" is mentioned seven times in this kina. This disproportionate emphasis can be understood because it supports the primary theme of the kina, Am Yisroel's plummet fits that description.

This can also explain why Yirmiyahu, himself, mourns these children's death, although he lived roughly five hundred years earlier. He doesn't have to be seen as mourning individuals who have not yet died. He could be mourning Am Yisroel's downfall, something which has already begun in his time period.

Finally, the paytan rending kreyah can be explained with our theory as well. For nationalistic catastrophes, one tears kreyah. For example, the death of an Av Beis Din, Rosh Sanhedrin, Nasi, or Talmud Chochom requires one to tear kreyah (Shulchan Aruch YD 40:7,8,17). The kreyah torn by the paytan too may be one that mourns the loss of Am Yisroel's honor.

Jews are meant to be similar to princes and princesses, being the children of Hashem. One of the aspects mourned on Tisha B'av is that fallen status. This kina reminds us of our unique status as Hashem's chosen nation, mourns us not living up to that responsibility, and the sunken stature that results.