

# Collected Tisha B'av Insights

From the Undergraduate Students of  
Yeshiva University and Stern College for Women

## Chazon Yeshayahu: A Haftarah of Lamentation and Redemption

Miriam Pearl Klahr

**T**he Shabbat before Tish'a B'Av is generally referred to as *Shabbat Chazon*. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, a Hassidic rabbi of the 18th century, taught that this name alludes to a vision (*chazon*) of the Third Temple, which God reveals to the Jewish people on this very Shabbat.<sup>1</sup> However, this beautiful idea is at odds with the more standard explanation, that the name is derived from the haftarah reading of the day: the mournful first chapter of Isaiah, which begins with the words of *Chazon Yeshayahu*.

While the Talmud only states that this chapter is to be read when Rosh Chodesh Av coincides with Shabbat, Tosfot (*Megillah* 31b) cites the customary practice of today:

ואין אנו עושין כן אלא מפטיר בירמיה שמעו דבר ה' ובשבת שלפני ט"ב חזון ישעיהו והטעם לפי שאנו נוהגין על פי הפסיקתא לומר ג' דפורענותא קודם תשעה באב ואלו הן דברי ירמיה שמעו דבר ה' חזון ישעיהו

*We do not do this, but rather the haftara comes from Yirmiyahu,<sup>2</sup> 'Shim'u devar Ha-Shem,' and on the Shabbat that is before Tisha B'Av, 'Chazon Yeshayahu.' The origin of this custom is found in Pesikta which says to read*

*the three haftarot of mourning, 'Divrei Yirmiyahu,' 'Shim'u devar Ha-Shem,' and 'Chazon Yeshayahu' before Tisha B'Av.*

As Tosfot mention, *Chazon Yeshayahu* is generally viewed as a prophecy of mourning.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, upon analyzing this chapter, one realizes that both its opening and conclusion focus on lamenting Israel's destruction. Verses two through nine employ vivid imagery, describing how, unlike "an ox who knows its master" (1:3), the nation of Israel has abandoned God. In turn, God has abandoned his people and "fair Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard" (1:8). Verses 21 through 27<sup>4</sup> further delineate the destruction that will befall Israel in order that "Zion shall be saved in judgment" (1:27). However, the middle section of this haftarah reading is of a slightly different tone, as this set of verses offers words of rebuke and a chance to atone.

"What need have I of all your sacrifices?" says the Lord" (1:11). God then specifies the different sacrifices that no longer provide Him with satisfaction, instructs the people to stop appearing before Him and finally instructs His people to devote themselves to justice and "learn to do good" (1:18).

God's statement is shocking.<sup>5</sup> The Torah commands the Jewish nation to offer sacrifices every day. They were the apex of the Jewish nation's

connection to God, a sacred act that was only performed in the Holy Temple. What does it mean for God to reject this ritual and His wish that the people appear before Him? Does God really no longer want sacrifices? This question is compounded for the modern reader of Isaiah's words, who is deprived of the ability to bring sacrifices. If God no longer wants sacrifices, is the inability to offer them today still considered a tragic loss?

One way to approach both questions is through exploring how the Jewish sages interpreted these words of prophecy. The words "*lama li rov zivcheichem*" or "What need have I of all your sacrifices?" appear only twice in all of the Talmud. In both instances, the Rabbis are not explaining the verse, but rather using it as a proof text for their ideas. However, analyzing how this phrase is employed still provides insight regarding their interpretations.

In the beginning of Tractate *Chagigah* (4b), we are told:

רב הונא כי משי להאי קרא בכי זובחת שלמים ואכלת שם עבד שרבו מצפה לאכול על שלחנו יתרחק ממנו דכתיב למה לי רוב זבחים יאמר ה'.

*When R. Huna came to the [following] verse, he wept: And thou shalt sacrifice peace-offerings, and shalt eat there. The slave at whose table his Master longs to eat should become estranged from him! For it is written: To what purpose is the*

**abundance of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the Lord.**<sup>6</sup>

According to Rav Huna's commentary on this verse in Deuteronomy, sacrifices are not what God is rejecting; He still wants sacrifices, just not those of His nation. The Jewish people have become so estranged from God that He no longer desires what they offer to Him.<sup>7</sup> Rav Huna's use of Isaiah's words is especially tragic because there, though God verbally rejects the sacrifices, physically they were still being offered. The exile represents God's more complete rejection of the Jewish people, when they are also deprived of the physical experience of bringing sacrifices.

Interestingly, a discussion in *Brakhot* 32b offers a slightly different perspective:

וא"ר אלעזר גדולה תענית יותר מן הצדקה מאי טעמא זה בגופו וזה בממונו. וא"ר אלעזר גדולה תפלה יותר מן הקרבנות שנא' למה לי רוב זבחיכם.

*R. Eleazar also said: Fasting is more efficacious than charity. What is the reason? One is performed with a man's money, the other with his body. R. Eleazar also said: Prayer is more efficacious than offerings, as it says, "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me?"*<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Eleazar suggests that sacrifice is not the form of worship that God cherishes most. Similar to how fasting, an act of the entire body, is preferred over charity achieved through money, which is external to man, the ritual act of a sacrifice is less effective than praying with one's body and soul. The purpose of all these actions is to come close to God; when performed without intent they lose their significance. Fasting and charity are easily transformed into mere ritual acts that are mechanically performed without contemplation. Thus, according to Rabbi Eleazar, perhaps God truly no longer desires sacrifice, a form of connection that is so easily abused and misused. Instead God desires prayer, service of the heart, which requires concentration and engagement of one's entire being.<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Eleazar's words are comforting to today's reader, who lacks sacrifices and uses prayer as a primary mode of connection to God. However, sacrifice is not the only form of service rejected in *Chazon Yeshayahu*. God also says (Isaiah 1:14-15), "Your new moons and fixed seasons fill me with loathing . . . though you pray at length I will not listen." Can these terrifying words really indicate that prayers, Rosh Chodesh and the holidays are all worthless before God?



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Combining the words of Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Eleazar, we can suggest that what is valueless to God are insincere actions. God despises neither sacrifices nor prayers. Rather what He abhors are the sacrifices of people who do evil outside the Temple without any signs of regret. He rejects insincere prayer whose quality is measured by length and not sincerity. Though Rabbi Eleazar says that God prefers fasting over charity, these words remind us that fasting too can become a meaningless service. God desires acts of devotion far more than empty stomachs. The poignant words of “What need have I of all your sacrifices” critique not just sacrifices but all ritualistic actions performed without devotion. The message of both rabbis is that God seeks wholesome, sincere actions of worship.

With this understanding of *Chazon Yeshayahu*, perhaps we can say that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev’s teaching about a vision for the Third Temple is not an alternative explanation of the source for *Shabbat Chazon*’s name, but a deep insight into the haftarah’s message. Though the chapter ends in destruction, the Rabbis chose to end the haftarah with its 27th verse on a positive note of redemption. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak highlights that amidst the lamentations of *Chazon Yeshayahu* lies a path of repentance, a vision of hope

What is valueless to God are insincere actions. God rejects insincere prayer whose quality is measured by length and not sincerity. While He prefers fasting over charity, fasting too can become a meaningless service.

for the Third Temple. “Zion shall be saved in the judgment, her repentant ones in the retribution.”

### Notes

1 *Kedushat Levi*, 3:18.

2 This is referring to the two *Shabbatot* before Tish’a B’Av.

3 The mournful tone of this chapter is highlighted by the word *eikhah*, which appears in verse 21 and brings to mind *Eikhah*, the book of Lamentations. Furthermore, many communities emphasize the mournful words of this haftarah through opting to replace the generally used trope for the haftarah of Shabbat with that of *Eikhah*.

4 Though the chapter contains 31 verses, the haftarah ends with the 27th verse.

5 Though similar sentiments are expressed in other books of Prophecies, such as Micah and Hosea, this is the first time the Jewish nation hears these shocking words.

6 *Chagigah* 4b, Soncino Translation.

7 Rashi on Isaiah 1:11, reads this verse similarly, “After you have transgressed my Torah, ‘the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination.’”

8 Soncino translation.

9 My understanding of Rabbi Eleazar’s words is inspired by Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 2: Ch. 33, where Maimonides uses this verse to prove that God never really desired sacrifices but allowed the people to use them as a means to connect to Him since it was the general mode of service to one’s deity at that era in history.

## The Midday Leniencies: Understanding the Second Half of Tisha B’Av

Matt Lubin

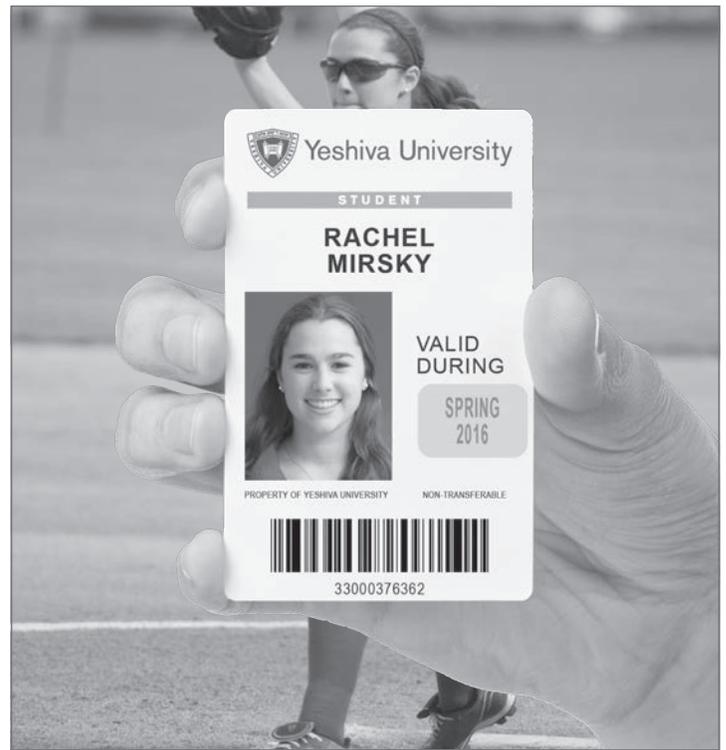
Anyone who has spent an entire morning in a shul or Orthodox summer camp knows that the mood of Tisha B’Av changes perceptibly at midday, or “*chatzos*.” Numerous restrictions or practices of mourning are eased upon the arrival of (halachic) midday. Perhaps most notably, the custom to sit on the ground for *kinnos* is limited to the first half of the day (*Shulchan Aruch O.C.* 559:3); the custom is to wait until Mincha to don one’s tallis and tefillin (*ibid.* 555:1) and to only recite the paragraph of *Tiskabel* in *Kaddish* at Mincha (*ibid.* 559:4). Additional leniencies include permitting cooking for after the fast, (*ibid.* 559:10) and, according to the Rama, working in general (*ibid.* 554:22). Additionally, a mourner who is in his week of *shiva* is similarly permitted to attend shul on Tisha B’Av morning, because everyone attending is also in a state of “mourning,” but this is not true of attending Mincha (*ibid.* 559:3).

The practice of lightening some of the restrictions of Tisha B’Av is mentioned by some of the most ancient, post-Talmudic sources. A responsum of Rav Hai Gaon (Babylonia, 939–1038)<sup>1</sup> discusses a custom that developed in Egypt to permit wearing leather shoes after midday. In order to defend this seemingly incorrect practice, it was suggested that perhaps one could apply a rule that is relevant to other laws of mourning: *miktzas*

*hayom ke-kulo*, part of the day can count as a whole day.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the questioner thought, perhaps fulfilling the practices of mourning for only part of the day of Tisha B'av is sufficient as if one had done so all day. However, Rav Hai disagrees with this analysis. The tragedy of Tisha B'av, he writes, is such that it would have been worthy of many days of mourning, but we simply cannot do so. Instead, the rabbis have instituted one full day of mourning, and therefore those prohibitions associated with mourning remain in full force for the entire day.

Although Rav Hai Gaon is discussing the rabbinically mandated prohibitions, and not those customs of mourning which have developed throughout the years (such as sitting on the floor), the idea of easing *any* expressions of mourning during the afternoon of Tisha B'av appears to run counter to the spirit of Rav Hai Gaon's responsa.<sup>3</sup> If the Sages declared a day of mourning, how could we be lenient before the day is over? Other sources, therefore, have tried to justify the common practice of lessening the sense of mourning on Tisha B'av afternoon. One such justification, expressed by Rabbeinu David bar Levi (13<sup>th</sup> century Narbonne),<sup>4</sup> is that we are worried that mourning fully for the entire day, year after year, has the potential to lead one to a feeling of hopelessness and to give up on the belief in our ultimate redemption. In order to counter this potential for despondency, some communities allowed for easing a few of the practices of mourning so as to create a "remembrance for the redeemer and comforter," just as we have a commemoration of the destruction. A student of Maharam of Rothenberg, the author of the *Tanya Rabbasi*, notes that the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are read only at Mincha of Tisha B'av, and explains simply that "the afternoon of Tisha B'av is a time of consoling." The reason for this, however, is left unexplained: why, of all times, is Tisha B'av afternoon the most appropriate time to be consoled and reminded of the eventual redemption? Especially considering Rav Hai Gaon's remarks, it would seem that the opposite should be true!

The simplest answer may just be that we don't want to fall into despair, as mentioned. Alternatively, the same line of thought provided to explain why our custom developed to recite the "*Nachem*" prayer only during Mincha of Tisha B'av may be applied here. Noting that it was only on Tisha B'av afternoon that the Temple began to burn down (*Taanis* 29a), many<sup>5</sup> have understood that until the afternoon, the tragedy of the day has not yet



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been finalized, and so it is impossible to be comforted, just as someone who lost a relative is initially preoccupied with the burial, and only after the burial can accept condolences.

Quoting the Vilna Gaon,<sup>6</sup> the *Mishnah Berurah* (555:3) provides another answer to this question, based upon a midrash (*Eichah Rabbah, Parsha 4*) that writes that due to their sins, the very existence of the Jewish people hung in the balance on Tisha B'av, but God decided to spare us and instead burn down His temple. Easing the mourning on Tisha B'av afternoon, then, is an expression of relief.

However, there may be a deeper reason as to why it would be so important to display a measure of comfort specifically during our day of mourning. The *Sefer Hamichtam* noted that dwelling too much on the tragedies of Tisha B'av has the danger to lead to despair, but the entire day and its history also presents us with a theological difficulty. The nighttime and morning of Tisha B'av are devoted to asking rhetorically, "*eichah*," how can it be, how can it be that God seems to have abandoned His temple, His city, and His people? Perhaps the second half of Tisha B'av is meant to answer this painful question. Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 2:5) writes:

ויש על הבוטה בשם להוהיל במעוף צוקתו, כי יהיה החושך סבת האורה ... אלמלא נפלת לא קמתי, אלמלא ישבתי בחושך לא היה אור לי.

*Whomever believes in God must anticipate, in the flight of his anguish, that the darkness will itself be the reason for the light ... that if I had not fallen, I would not have gotten up; if I had not sat in the darkness, I would not have had light.*

In other words, it is precisely because of and *through* the tragedy that God

will provide us with our ultimate redemption, and as believers in God's providence and benevolence we must believe that the destruction was somehow necessary for rebuilding.

In listing the five tragedies that occurred on Tisha B'av, the Rambam writes (*Hilchos Taanis* 5:3):

ותשעה באב חמשה דברים אירעו בו... ובו ביום המוכן לפורענות חרש טורנוסרופוס הרשע את ההיכל ואת סביביו לקיים מה שנאמר ציון שדה תחרש

*The Ninth of Av had five things occur on it ... and on that day which was destined for calamity, the wicked Turnusrufus plowed over the Temple and its environs, in fulfillment of the verse, "Zion will be plowed over like a field" (Micha 3:12).*

The formulation of the fifth tragedy, that Zion was "plowed over like a field," is contextualized by the Rambam as occurring "on that day," as if to emphasize that perhaps this particular tragedy is most emblematic of the nature of Tisha B'av. The catastrophes of Tisha B'av, in all their enormity, fulfill the words of our prophets and are surely part of God's plan. Metaphorically speaking, Zion has been "plowed," destroyed only in order to prepare for the sowing of new seeds.<sup>7</sup> May we see the sprouting of those seeds speedily in our days.

### Notes

1 Quoted in *Otzar Ha-Geonim, Taanis* pg. 48 and referenced by *Shibolei HaLeket* no. 272.

2 See *Mo'ed Kattan* 29b. It is for this reason that the current practice is for mourners to end the seventh day of *shiva* shortly after Shachris, instead of spending the entire seventh day sitting *shiva*.

3 However, the Ritz Gaies in *Hilchos Tisha B'av* quotes from Rav Hai Gaon that one should not change the custom that some communities developed to remove the coverings from the Torah on Tisha B'av morning but to return them for Mincha. Apparently, despite his strong stance

regarding the laws of mourning, Rav Hai Gaon himself does not disapprove of ceasing to practice the customs of mourning after midday.

4 In *Sefer Hamichtam* to Rif on *Taanis* 30a.

5 See Ritva (*Teshuvah* #63), R. Yosef Karo (*Beis Yosef, O.C.* 553), and Bach (*ibid.*).

6 Cf. the Ari z"l in *Shaar Ha-Kavanos, Derushei Chag Ha-Shavuot* 1.

7 R. Yitzchak Pinchas Goldwasser, *Lesason U-Lesimcha* pp. 108–109; see there for further elaboration.

## The Despair of Joy or the Joy of Despair?

### Eleorah Sandman

There are five prohibitions typical to major fast days observed on Tisha B'Av: eating and drinking, washing, anointing, marital relations, and wearing leather shoes. However, in the Gemara's discussion of Tisha B'Av in *Ta'anit* 30a, these abstentions are contextualized not as stemming from the day's character as a major fast, but rather due to the day being one of mourning, as the Gemara states:

כל מצות הנוהגות באבל נוהגות בט' באב אסור באכילה ובשתיה ובסיכה ובנעילת הסנדל ובתשמיש המטה.

*All prohibitions observed by a mourner are observed on the Ninth of Av: Eating and drinking,<sup>1</sup> anointing, wearing shoes, and marital relations.*

It is due to this that there is also a sixth prohibition listed that sets Tisha B'Av apart from other fasts, that of learning Torah. In no uncertain terms, the Gemara says:

ואסור לקרות בתורה בנביאים ובכתובים ולשנות במשנה בתלמוד ובמדרש ובהלכות ובאגדות אבל קורא הוא ... בקינות באיוב ובדברים הרעים שבירמיה ... משום שנאמר (תהלים יט:ט) פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב. *It is forbidden to read the Torah, Nevi'im,*

or *Ketuwim*, or learn *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *Midrash*, *Halakhah*, and *Aggadah* . . . however, one may read *Eichah*, *Iyov*, and the bad parts of *Yirmiyahu* . . . for it says, “The orders of God are straight, gladdening the heart” (*Tehilim* 19:9).<sup>2</sup>

The *Shulchan Arukh* codifies this, and further specifies what material may or may not be learned; commentaries and midrashim on *Eichah* and *Iyov* are also allowed, but the verses of consolation among the dire prophecies of *Yirmiyahu* must be skipped.<sup>3</sup> Only material that is likely to sadden and depress should be studied.

Despite this injunction, there are two occasions on Tisha B’Av where Torah learning is publicly conducted. The first is in the evening when *Eichah* is read, and the second is in the morning service when the Torah is read. *Eichah* deals with the raw pain and grief over the catastrophic loss of the Temple. The aforementioned Gemara states explicitly that learning *Eichah* is permitted, and a cursory glance at its heart-wrenching content proves why. Much harder to justify, however, is the Torah reading on Tisha B’Av morning. Public Torah reading is considered a form of Torah learning, and we would therefore expect the content of the morning Torah reading to be restricted to a morose or harrowing passage.<sup>4</sup> The Torah reading for Tisha B’Av is taken from *Devarim* 4:25–40, referred to by its leading words, “*Ki tolid banim*,” “when you beget children.” While the first four verses of the section are highly unpleasant, describing the exilic consequence of idol worship, the remaining three-quarters of the reading is consoling, inspiring, and even downright cheerful. *Ki tolid banim* moves through a progression of the Jew in exile — he will seek God, find Him, return to Him, listen to Him. And God will remember the covenant, cease destroying the Jews, and rescue them from among the nations. He loved the forefathers, chose this people, and as long as they do good, He will give them the Land of Israel upon which they will dwell forever. How could we read something so promising on Tisha B’Av?

In case one would have thought we read this passage simply because we have no better choice, the Gemara in *Megillah* 31b, presents three other opinions for this Torah reading. The first is *Vayikra* 26:14. This section is commonly referred to as the *tochachah*, the rebuke. It is verse after verse of horrifying punishments for abandoning Torah. Words of hope are scant. Surely this is a better fit for the theme of the day! The other two suggestions of the Gemara, *Bamidbar* 14:11–25 or *Bamidbar* 14:26–46, also make a great deal of sense.



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They describe the fallout after the sin of the spies, which occurred on Tisha B'Av, and, according to *Ta'anit* 29a, was the impetus for God marking the Ninth of Av as a day when further tragedy would strike the Jewish people. So why does *Megillah* 31b, reject these three possibilities and instead settles on a passage that appears halakhically problematic, *Ki tolid banim*?

One could search *Ki tolid banim* for a grimmer message, one that would be more appropriate for Tisha B'Av. However, this seems remote, if not downright impossible. These verses are imbued with such a distinct tone of positivity. Therefore, the answer must be that there is a compelling enough reason to permit a feeling of comfort and joy on an otherwise somber day.

Tisha B'Av feels fundamentally different from the other three fasts observed in remembrance of different stages of the Temple's destruction and the Jews' exile (17 Tammuz, Tzom Gedalyah, and 10 Tevet). On those days, we speak of repentance, recite *selichot*, and invoke God's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. But on Tisha B'Av, we sit and sob. We recite *kinnot* to express our pain, but do not petition God to the same degree. We simply grieve. This grief is important and it

aims to stir our emotions so that we never forget Jerusalem, never forget what our obligations are, and how it is we distanced ourselves so much from our Creator. But there is also a danger to that grief. If we allow it to overwhelm our capacity for action too long, we will never fix our wrongs. God does not desire our fasting if it is not followed by concrete action.<sup>5</sup> We are prohibited from learning any Torah we please on the day of Tisha B'Av because we must not distract ourselves from the severity of the day, but neither can we abandon hope and forget that we can, as *Ki tolid banim* says (4:29), seek out God with all our heart and soul. The ray of hope in the Torah reading, despite the general prohibition for Torah study, provides the appropriate framework in which we can get the most out of the day.

And perhaps it goes one step further. *Ta'anit* 30a, the source of the original prohibition of Torah study, cited a verse from Tehilim 19:9, "*Pekudei Hashem yesharim mesamchei lev* — The orders of God are straight, gladdening the heart." The concern of learning anything other than the saddest pieces of Torah is that it would cause joy, an emotion that is overall inappropriate for Tisha B'Av. But in the proper framework of the morning Torah reading, we do, for a fleeting moment, experience the joy of learning Torah,

of *avodat Hashem*, service of God, the joy of the promise of return contained in *Ki tolid banim*. And we understand that the joy, the *simchah*, the unfettered eagerness is that same feeling we yearn to experience in our return to Jerusalem. When we read of "lengthening your days on the land that Hashem, your God gives you, for all days" (4:40), we feel the joy that comes with it, and the despair that we do not have it now, and gain a great understanding for the directive of, "*kol hamit'abel al Yerushalayim zocheh vero'eh besimchatah* — Anyone who mourns for Jerusalem will merit to see it in its joy."<sup>6</sup> Speedily, in our days.

### Notes

1 See *Masoret HaShas* on that Gemara, who notes that eating and drinking, while definitely prohibited on Tisha B'Av, is not listed as part of this discussion in the Gemara of the Rif and the Rosh, as mourners are obviously allowed to eat.

2 The verse from Tehillim implies that learning Torah makes one happy, which is forbidden on Tisha B'Av.

3 *Orach Chaim* 554:1-2.

4 In terms of public Torah reading serving as a vehicle for Torah learning, see, for example, *Bava Kama* 82a, where the Gemara explains that the public Torah readings on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat were instituted so that Jews would not go three consecutive days without learning Torah.

5 See, for example, Zechariah 7.

6 *Ta'anit* 29b.

On Tisha B'Av, we simply grieve. But if we allow it to overwhelm our capacity for action too long, we will never fix our wrongs. God does not desire our fasting if it is not followed by concrete action.



## Arguing for Hope: An Analysis of *Petihta* 24 in *Eikhah Rabbah*

*Adapted from an essay written for Rabbi Richard Hidary's Yeshiva College course on Midrash.*

**E***ikhah Rabbah* (ER) interprets and deals with issues expressed in Megillat Eikhah while simultaneously modifying or adding emphases from its source-text. These differences are not disingenuous, but are appropriate for the exegesis of a work whose purpose the midrash's authors viewed as providing a paradigmatic response to any and all Jewish suffering. As such, it is no surprise when ER's lengthy *petihtot*, introductory chains of exegesis, build toward and culminate in messages of consolation, a theme largely unaddressed in Eikhah itself. The latter half of *Petihta* 24 of ER is an example of this phenomenon. This essay will analyze some of the methods employed by the midrash to furnish its final, hopeful assurance.

### Consolation in *Eikhah Rabbah*

While Megillat Eikhah devotes scant space to hope and reassurance, ER expands upon this theme significantly, moving it from an ancillary component to the main focus and, consequently, the conclusion of many a *petihta*. In so doing, the compilers of the midrash succeed in making the work not only more distant from the specific destruction of the First Temple, which serves as the backdrop for both itself and its source-text, but it becomes more applicable and palatable to the trials of future generations, including their own. While *Petihta* 24 does not

recall specific sins, thus removing the discussions from their post-First Temple context, it does end with an inspirational message of return, broadcast to an audience still in their own exile.

However, the notion that consolation should be administered is not an inherently intuitive one. Both of the works acknowledge that the suffering they respond to was brought about by Israel's sins, and that God meted out justice appropriately. Why, then, should hope and consolation be in Israel's future? What makes the people worthy of being redeemed? This philosophical difficulty is the root problem to which *Petihta* 24 responds. God wishes to redeem the Jews from their catastrophe, but cannot, so He calls for arguments to be made on their behalf, arguments that He eventually accepts.

The last two verses of Eikhah may, in fact, respond to the same problem, but in a markedly different way: "Return us unto you, God, and we shall be returned; renew our days as of old. You cannot have utterly rejected us, nor be exceedingly wrathful against us" (Lamentations 5:21-22). Quite simply, the lamenter insists to God that any further punishment would exceed the crime. However, in ER, the Jews gain hope from God based on their own merits, not simply based on their punishment being fully exacted.

### Man Mourns with God

As is typical of the *petihta* form, our midrash begins with a verse not found in Lamentations: "On that day, God called to weeping and lamentation ..." (Isaiah 22:12). The midrash deals with two fundamental exegetical problems. First, if God is the cause

of a tragedy, why should He call for mourning over that catastrophe? Second, of what use is it for God to hear the mourning cries of necessarily inferior beings? Neither of these problems are particularly difficult ones, but the midrash utilizes them to make fundamental points about the nature of responding to tragedy: First, God mourns with Israel; second, God wants Israel to mourn with Him.

These points are essential to a presenter seeking to make an eternal message for how Jews are to cope with travails in the future. The midrash insists to Jews of the post-Second Temple era that they are not alone in their suffering; God is with them in their sorrow. Furthermore, Israel is entitled and even recruited to express this sorrow to God, and, as outlined later in the midrash, to beseech God for a hasty end to their difficulty.

Specifically, the midrash addresses why God prefers that advocates for Israel make their cases. God views the destruction of the Temple not just as a tragedy for the Jews, but as an event with the potential for God to "become a joke for the nations and a mockery for the people." God's own honor is at stake, beyond that of the Jews, so God has an interest in mourning over the Temple. However, God later indicates another reason for Him to mourn: "Where are you, my priests? Where are you, my lovers? Alas, what can I do for you? I warned you and you did not repent!" God is not solely concerned for his own honor, but is compelled by His pining for His beloved nation Israel. The compiler of this midrash thus subtly adds an additional reason for God's mourning with the Jews and ultimate willingness to receive their arguments.

In fact, the first function that God

requests the forefathers to serve is not to argue on behalf of the Jews, but to mourn with Him. “They,” God says, “know how to cry,” and thus can aid God in His mourning process for the loss of His honor and beloved. However, this serves not only as a collective mourning, but also as a bestowing of credibility upon the forefathers. God wants to hear what the forefathers have to say.

## Man Pleads his Case

The midrash resumes with the licensed forefathers making the case for their progeny before God. Using courtroom terminology of witnesses and testimony, Abraham defends Israel against such unlikely prosecutors as the Torah and the Hebrew alphabet. Isaac, Jacob, and Moses all follow suit. Meanwhile, God does not reject any of these contentions, but remains silent. The logos of these arguments consists largely of recalling past merits Israel had accrued, or that the forefathers had accrued on Israel’s behalf. Israel, after all, accepted the Torah and observed the commandments associated with the alphabet, and the forefathers had engaged in righteous actions, magnified by the rabbinic interpretations of those events. For example, not only did Jacob survive 20 years in Laban’s home, but Esau attempted to kill him when Jacob emerged. This is a profoundly unusual scene: the forefathers, who had to be admitted especially to mourn with God, now debate God over Israel’s sentencing. Nonetheless, God is silent. Moses then takes center stage, visiting Israel in their exile. When God finally breaks His silence, offering merely that the Jews’ current status is “a decree from Him,” Moses promises that they will return. In a role heroically parallel to that of his

championing the Jews before God after the sin of the Golden Calf — an event not explicitly alluded to by the midrash, but clearly resonating from the descriptions of the character — Moses views the trials of his people and does not remain silent. Here, Moses begins to transition from logos to pathos, from debate to lament, as he bemoans Israel’s plight and curses the sun for shining and the enemy nations for barbarism. He makes one final appeal from logic — God violates His Torah with the terrible calamities that befall the Jews. And still, God is silent. However, this layer serves to both heighten the emotion for the reader and to serve as a setup for Rachel’s ultimately successful plea.

## Rachel’s Emotional Appeal

The *petihta* concludes with a well-known segment: Rachel recalls her meritorious actions in allowing Leah to marry Jacob, and God finally breaks His silence, declaring that Israel is to return to its borders. In intertextual fashion, the midrash intersperses the Biblical account of Laban’s switching Rachel and Leah with aggadic tales of Rachel handing over identifying signs to her sister. Several factors distinguish her speech from those of the forefathers who preceded her. First, while each of their speeches began with “*patah ve-amar*,” “he began to speak,” Rachel is said to have “*kafetsah ve-amerah*,” “leapt and spoke.” Her argument also follows that of Moses, who transitions from logos to pathos. As such, Rachel’s speech can be understood as a highly emotionally charged appeal to merit.

God, who solicited the forefathers in the first place, is more swayed by the claim of Rachel, whom He had not recruited to mourn or advocate. In keeping with the empowering

message of hope and consolation that the midrash seeks to impart to Jews in difficult exile, it is her unbidden message, made passionately and evocatively, that draws a response of hope from God. The previous arguments from reason are significant, but do not elicit God’s consolation and reassurance. It is only the pathos following the logos that provoke God into offering His compassion for Israel.

Structurally, this *petihta* does not follow the pattern of *petihtot* in midrashim on the Torah. Those begin with an external verse and tortuously arrive at the first verse of the section being analyzed. This *petihta* only cites one verse from Lamentations, toward the beginning, and concludes with poignant verses from Isaiah about Israel’s eventual return from exile. This is typical of the *petihtot* of ER. Perhaps this is a result of the central goal of this work of midrash: it is more concerned with offering hope for the future than with explicating the sorrows of the past. More realistically, it is likely because it would be impractical and ineffective to end public sermons on notes of gloom from Lamentations, so the alternative route of concluding with external verses of joy and hope is selected. Regardless, the unique structure of this *petihta* is a powerful method of conveying the writers’ intended message — one of ultimate redemption from whatever troubles or exiles the readers find themselves in.

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