



EICHA: “’TIS BETTER TO HAVE LOVED AND LOST THAN NEVER TO HAVE LOVED AT ALL”

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you agree with the line (from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “A.H.H. Memoriam”) “’Tis better to have loved and lost/than never to have loved at all”? Why or why not?
2. Think of a challenge that you experienced twice in your life, with the second one taking place a few years after the first. How did that challenge affect you the second time? What do you think changed between the first time and the second time?
3. In what ways do you think the experience of having the Beit Hamikdash forever altered the Jewish people?

I remember my high school orientation very well. I was starting a new school in a new city, and I was very nervous. The orientation did not go well. I didn’t feel like I had made any friends, even though it seemed like everyone around me had. Instead of getting upset, though, I tried to steel myself against the experience. I came home that night and told my mom: “Mom, it’s fine. I’ll just check out for high school and make friends in college.”

My mom looked at me with a strange face. “That’s probably not the best plan,” she said. “You can’t just ignore a whole stage of your life.”

I think what I failed to understand as a 14-year-old is that there is no such thing as moving forward in time while staying the same. I wanted to shut my eyes, duck underwater for four years and start life at the other end. But that’s not how things work. Every experience, whether good or bad (or, as most

experiences are, some combination of both), affects us in some way, and it *should*, if we are to be feeling, sensitive people.

Eicha teaches the same thing. The first perek of the megillah is filled with two-part *pesukim* that are formulations of contrast. The famous first *pasuk* reads: “*Eicha yashva badad, ha’ir rabati am*” — how is it that you sit in solitude, the city that was great with people. The fourth verse reads, “*Darchei tzion aveilot,*” the roads of Jerusalem are mourning, “*mibli ba-ey moed*” — and they are also missing the usual pilgrims that come for the *Shalosh Regalim*. Much of the chapter continues in this pattern. And of course, this makes sense. The megillah is much more poignant because it is written this way. Reminding us how beautiful and wonderful things once *were*, makes the destruction of Jerusalem that much more painful.

But maybe, in a strange way, there is also some comfort embedded in Yirmiyahu’s language. After all, the Jewish people, at the time of the churban, could have looked around with haunting *déjà vu* and said: “My God. This scene is so familiar. We are becoming wanderers again. We are being sold as slaves again. Jerusalem is in foreign hands. Is this not right where we were hundreds of years ago, before this entire miracle began? What could be more depressing than landing back at the bottom, right where we started?”

But I think this approach would have been flawed. This approach would have been like my freshman year self, who thought that experience does not change you — that if you have two scenarios that appear the same, but are separated by time, they can actually be the same. It would have been like one

who loses a loved one and then says, “Now I am alone again, back to who I was before, before I loved this person in the first place.”

Yirmiyahu’s writing reminds us that this is not the case. In recounting how things were before the churban, Yirmiyahu’s writing reminds us that even though the Beit Hamikdash no longer stands, it once did. By including descriptions of a Jerusalem teeming with people and light, he reminds us that even though we are now in exile, we once inhabited a holy city.

And this *matters*, and gives us strength. Because just like one who has lost a loved one feels depressed, yet strengthened, because of all his loved one taught him, awakened in him, and experienced with him, we are depressed — down one Temple, down one city of justice — but strengthened by having *had* those things in the first place. We are more spiritually attuned because of all the years we saw the Kohen Gadol emerge from the *Kodesh Hakadoshim* on Yom Kippur *bli pega*, unscathed. We are more charitable for all the times widows and orphans were cared for in the city of justice, *ir hatzedek, kiryah ne’emanah*. We possess a broader and deeper understanding of what it means to be a Jew, because we had once established an entire civilization based on the Torah.

The Jewish people may have once been a band of slaves, of Diaspora wanderers — and after the churban, we may well have felt that we were those again. But we were not. Instead, we were Diaspora wanderers who once entered the land of Israel. Who dedicated a Beit Hamikdash. We were Diaspora wanderers who had served in the *kodesh*, offered the *ketoret*,

and housed each other during the *Shalosh Regalim* on a thousand little crowded stone streets, as our homes swelled past capacity, and streams of farmers, baskets of *bikkurim* on their shoulders, paraded by our windows, led by a *chalil* (based on the Mishnah’s description in *Bikkurim* 3:2-4). And we still are all of those things today.

And because we remember, through Yirmiyahu’s words, both our love and our loss, both our great romance with Hashem during the era of the Beit Hamikdash and its horrific collapse, we also demonstrate that we are not a people who are afraid to feel. As Alfred Lord Tennyson says, “’Tis better to have loved and lost/than never to have loved it all,” and this, indeed, is our Jewish philosophy. We are not like the societies in *The Giver*, or *Brave New World*, which choose a lack of pain over any feeling at all. Rather, we are a nation that opened itself to a great covenantal relationship with God, even as all relationships come with pain and retreat. We are a nation that tries to come close, that believes in the beauty, depth, and spiritual enrichment that the encounter with God can offer, even as we know it will also come with disappointment, disillusionment, and loss. The Jewish heart may break, but it is not made of stone. In that merit, may each stone in Jerusalem find its way back to its place, as we merit to see its rebuilding.