

Megillat Eicha: Catastrophe, Creativity, and Catharsis

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After forty years of calling to Israel to repent, prophesying the dire consequences of ignoring God's command, and remaining unheeded by a people unwilling to face the unfortunate truth, Yirmiyahu *Hanavi* finally saw his awful predictions fulfilled with the destruction of Yerushalayim and the *Beit Hamikdash*. But for him there was no spark of satisfaction in vindication. Bearing witness to the tragedies that befell the Jews and their land, Yirmiyahu's agony was heightened by the knowledge of how relatively easily the horrors could have been avoided. Crushed by pain and sorrow he cried out: "Eicha!" While commentaries offer differing interpretations of the term—explaining it variously as an expression of lament, shock, anger, or rebuke¹⁴⁰—Yirmiyahu's call echoes still today.

What is the role of the book that bears this title, the book we read each year, sitting cross-legged on the floor in our Crocs? What might it have been to its author, observer of these grisly events; and what might it be to us, millennia removed from the disasters it describes?

Yirmiyahu's *Eicha*: Creative Catharsis

While the words of *Megillat Eicha* certainly have important global implications and contain homiletic instructions, the *megillah* can and should be read, in part, as the personal diary, the written disclosure, of a man trying to come to terms with the destruction of the temple and the city he spent his life trying to preserve.

Psychological research has long pointed to the therapeutic effects of confronting trauma through emotional disclosure. Communicating past personal traumas has been correlated with higher emotional and physiological functioning.¹⁴¹ The communication need not be verbal; even writing about traumatic events has been shown to engender increased positive emotions,

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, *Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1:1

¹⁴¹ Pennebaker, Barger & Tiebout (1989)

cognitions, and behaviors.¹⁴² Since emotional inhibition is harmful and often manifests itself in severe physiological and psychological stress, disclosure facilitates improvement by allowing for the release of built-up tension.¹⁴³ Thus, writing that is most expressive and psychologically raw—that is least influenced by logical and emotional constraints—is the most powerful form of creative catharsis.

In *Megillat Eicha*, Yirmiyahu uses written disclosure to grapple with the tragedy he has witnessed. The text displays a progressive intensification of emotion, culminating in a release of accumulated anguish. *Perakim aleph* and *bet* of the *megillah* are emotionally saturated expressions of Yirmiyahu's grief and rage. He confronts the destruction without distancing himself from either the emotional pain or the physical reality. Yirmiyahu begins by portraying the state of the city from a third-person perspective: "Alas, she sits in solitude! The city that was great with people has become like a widow. (1:1)" He personifies the city as an independent character, whose state he must describe, as she cannot speak for herself. The use of the third-person in the first ten verses seems a logical choice for an author describing a reality not confined to his own experiences. However, in *pasuk yud alef*, the narrative voice switches to first-person, as Yirmiyahu becomes a mouthpiece for Yerushalayim, speaking as the city. One of the more famous first-person verses laments, "Over these do I weep; my eye continuously runs with water because a comforter to restore my soul is far from me. (1:16)" Yerushalayim is transformed from a "she" to an "I." Her figurative experiences intermingle with Yirmiyahu's own recollections and descriptions, until the line between them blurs, as Yirmiyahu experiences the destruction as if he were the city herself. His emotional reality cannot be contained in the slightly more dispassionate third-person narration, so he is compelled to adopt a first-person perspective to adequately communicate the intensity of his feelings.

While the first *perek* with its shifting perspective conveys the extent of Yirmiyahu's grief, the second expresses unbridled anger. The first half of the *perek* dramatically describes the effects of Hashem's ire, depicting Hashem as "without pity, (2:2)" "like an enemy, (2:4,5)" and "pour[ing] out His wrath like fire. (2:4)" Yirmiyahu's fixation on Hashem's fury contains an implicit accusation, a palpable undercurrent of resentment for the excessive nature of His retribution. Yirmiyahu then momentarily sublimates his rage, directing his attention toward the desolate city in a futile effort to find words of comfort with which to allay her sorrow, asking "To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you? (2:13)" Instead of consolation, he is able only to continue bemoaning the decimation, but this time addressing the city directly. After having drawn close to the city in his failed attempt to comfort, Yirmiyahu turns back to Hashem with renewed indignation: "See, O Hashem, and behold whom You have treated so! (2:20)"

Over the course of the *perek*, Yirmiyahu transitions from addressing the presumed audience—that is, readers of the text—to directing his words toward the city, the "maiden daughter of Zion, (2:13)" to confronting Hashem accusatorily. These shifts in address reflect emotions unchecked by rational intentionality: Yirmiyahu is overwhelmed. He faces a spectrum of varied emotions; he doesn't know whether to lament, comfort, or accuse. This *perek* reflects an intensification of the grieving process commenced in *perek alef*, as Yirmiyahu becomes increasingly enmeshed in his

¹⁴² Donnelly & Murray (1991)

¹⁴³ Rachman (1980)

feelings and invested in the therapeutic writing process, grieving without inhibition, without distance between himself and his words.

Creative catharsis in its truest sense—the relief, comfort, and acceptance of traumatic past experiences through an intense and emotionally raw creative process—does not happen for Yirmiyahu until the third *perek*. *Perek gimel* contains Yirmiyahu’s personal identification with the tragedy, which ultimately leads him toward a measure of acceptance. The opening words of the chapter personalize the tragedy: “I am the man who has seen affliction. (3:1)” Yirmiyahu no longer expresses his grief by adopting the voice of the city, and he no longer accuses Hashem. In this *perek*, Yirmiyahu confronts his own feelings; he explains how the tragedy affects him as an individual. This heightened awareness of the magnitude of his suffering ultimately causes the emotional catharsis and the shift to acceptance that occurs later in the *perek*.

The crescendo of personal identification with the tragedy leads to a deafening buildup of Yirmiyahu’s internal psychic tension until he is finally able to achieve catharsis. The turning point comes halfway through the *perek*, with a set of verses dealing with the concept of memory: “Remember my afflictions and my sorrow; the wormwood and bitterness. My soul remembers well, and makes me despondent. Yet, this I bear in mind; therefore I still hope: Hashem’s kindness surely has not ended, nor are his mercies exhausted. (3:19-22)” Yirmiyahu confronts his anguish, recognizing the intensity of his own painful memories. Having recorded his harrowing experiences, he does not try to deny their reality, and this acceptance leads him to the hopeful affirmations that follow. The iterations of faith that comprise much of the remainder of the *perek* can be seen as the outcome of the therapeutic process, rather than as the therapy itself. It is only after Yirmiyahu has expressed his sorrow, once he acknowledges that his “soul remembers well,” that he can move forward to the verses of consolation. There is a causal link between the juxtaposed expressions: the painful memories and the emerging hope. Only by admitting the true extent of his suffering is Yirmiyahu able to work through that pain to acceptance and faith.

The end of *Eicha* marks an impressive attempt to make sense of the tragedy; Hashem is ultimately merciful, yet He deals with a recalcitrant, sinning nation. This sort of theological justification can often lead to the callous conclusion that all those afflicted by God have sinned against Him, emptying the observer of sympathetic instincts. However, Yirmiyahu does not espouse a shallow theology that disregards the people’s anguish. He identifies with the sinners and with their suffering, as he includes himself in their confession: “We have transgressed and rebelled; you have not forgiven. (3:42)” In the fifth *perek*, this tendency is even more pronounced. Having described the destruction as a third-person narrator, as the city herself, and as an individual affected by the tragedy, Yirmiyahu finally settles on a narrative voice: “Remember, Hashem, what has befallen **us**: look and see **our** disgrace. (5:1)” Yirmiyahu is, ultimately, one of a nation, a member of *Am Yisrael*. After years of being scoffed at by his people, he eventually shares in their fate, suffering alongside them.

Yirmiyahu, the messenger of God, now cries out to God as emissary of the people. The lips that prophesied destruction now eulogize the city and its inhabitants. Years of suffering and persecution at the hands of his brethren culminate not in disassociation from them, but rather in an empathic

identification with them. Yirmiyahu is transformed through the words of *Eicha* into a spokesperson for the nation's distress. His emotional catharsis, as recorded in *Eicha*, serves as a model and an inspiration for his fellow sufferers.

Eicha Today: Heightening Grief and Initiating Hope

While *Megillat Eicha* may have served as a powerful cathartic avenue for Yirmiyahu and his contemporaries, does this cathartic experience still resonate with us today? How ought we to relate to this text, as Jews generations removed from the overwhelming emotional experiences of firsthand observers? The mere fact that we still read *Eicha*, that we recall and mourn a destruction that occurred so long ago, indicates an aspect of our unique national character. In *Out of The Whirlwind*, Rav Soloveitchik describes the distinction between *avelut hadashah*, mourning for a recent, personal loss, and *avelut yeshanah*, national mourning “due to a historic disaster that took place 1,900 years ago. This category is the handiwork of man ... The *avelut* is a result of recollection of events. Judaism here introduced a strange kind of memory, a very unique and singular memory.”¹⁴⁴ This type of memory, he argues, is based on Judaism's belief in a unitive time consciousness. We do not acknowledge the gap that seemingly exists between ourselves and the events of our history, but rather view our past as a current, living reality.

However, there is no escaping recognition of our unavoidable emotional distance from the *churban*. The Jerusalem Talmud, compiled in the 4th century, already acknowledges and notes this distance. *Masechet Ta'anit* recounts that Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, redactor of the Mishna) was able to derive by exegesis twenty-four disasters from a verse in *Eicha*, while Rabbi Yochanan was able to derive sixty.¹⁴⁵ The *gemara* notes that Rabbi Yochanan's ability to expound more than his Rabbi and predecessor, Rebbe, reflects a problematic reversal of the Talmudic assumption that the generations progressively decline in exegetical capabilities. It deals with this issue by explaining that the emotional potency of the temple's destruction interfered with cogent interpretation. Since Rabbi Yochanan's generation had more time to distance themselves from the tragedy, they were able to view the text objectively, as an object of study, and thereby to derive more interpretations. However, their emotional reaction to the recounting of the tragedies could not compare to that of earlier generations.

In light of this truth, Rav Soloveitchik points out that while *avelut hadashah* is a spontaneous response, *avelut yeshanah* must be cultivated. For this reason, he explains, our practices of mourning increase in intensity as we near the day of Tisha B'Av, culminating in the fast itself, about which the *beraita* states, “All the restrictions which are observed during *shiva* are observed on Tisha b'Av.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Soloveitchik, Rabbi Yosef Dov. *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, 2003.

¹⁴⁵ *T.Y. Ta'anit* 4:5.

¹⁴⁶ *T.B. Ta'anit* 30a. However, the *braita* ought not to be taken literally, as there are several halakhic distinctions between the two states.

After three weeks of preparation, we usher in the fast day by reading *Megillat Eicha*. We have fostered grief both internally and externally, and have finally reached the climax, the point at which we, observers of *avelut yeshanah*, come as close as possible to experiencing the poignant and painful emotions of one who has experienced tragic loss firsthand. *Eicha*, the instinctive cry of sorrow, brings us to the peak of our suffering, as we see the destruction through Yirmiyahu's eyes and call out along with him. The distress expressed in the text becomes ours in that moment; our anguish is heightened and intensified.

However, these emotions do not encompass the totality of the modern *Eicha* experience. The Rav notes a further difference between *avelut hadashah* (which he equates with *avelut d'yachid*, individual mourning) and *avelut yeshanah* (which he also terms *avelut d'rabim*, communal mourning). While the individual, in the wake of personal loss, becomes completely subsumed by his grief, the community never reaches the same state of total despair. As the Rav eloquently explains, "the covenantal community... must never lose hope or faith. No matter how difficult times are, no matter how great the loss is, however dreary and bleak the present seems, the future shines with a brilliant glow full of promise. The messianic hope has never vanished; the people have never been enveloped by the dark night of despair."

Accordingly, as modern readers of *Eicha* we catch the droplets of hope that glisten softly alongside Yirmiyahu's tears. Over the course of the sefer, Yirmiyahu's emotions move from unbridled sorrow and anger and toward acceptance and catharsis. For him, the shift had to come with time and expression, but we are given the text in its entirety, a whole that encompasses both aspects at once. Therefore, as observers of *avelut d'rabim*, when we read the text we are never swallowed by the all-consuming grief that Yirmiyahu first experienced. We are given, within the text, the catharsis that he ultimately discovers, the spark of hope for us as a nation.

Masechet Sofrim presents two differing customs regarding the proper time to read *Megillat Eicha*: some read it on the night of Tisha B'Av, while others read it in the daytime.¹⁴⁷ Taking this into account, the *Mishna Berurah* comments that although the prevalent tradition nowadays is to read *Eicha* at night, it is recommended to read it individually during the day as well.¹⁴⁸ This daytime reading, perhaps, highlights *Eicha*'s dual role. As Tisha B'Av begins, we sit in darkness and hear Yirmiyahu's elegy for the first time. Our grief reaches a fever pitch, the hope of the later chapters is latent. But hours later, by the light of the summer sun, we read *Eicha* again. This time the move toward catharsis takes precedence over the distress, progressing toward the *nechama* of *chatzot*, when our mourning practices are reduced.¹⁴⁹ *Megillat Eicha*, the book of lamentations, though intrinsically connected to the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, nonetheless contains an important connection to recovery, both for its author at the time of its composition and for modern Jews in exile today. By allowing for the experience and expression of sorrow, it ultimately pushes us toward the moment in which we will rise up from the scene of destruction to greet a brighter future.

¹⁴⁷ *Masechet Sofrim* 18:5

¹⁴⁸ *Mishna Berurah* 559:2

¹⁴⁹ See *Shulchan Aruch/Rama, Orach Chaim* 554:22; 559:1, 3, 10