



READING BETWEEN THE LINES: FINDING MEANING IN EICHAH

One of the central motifs in the Tisha B'Av liturgy is that of challenging G-d. The rabbis who compiled the kinot audaciously ask G-d how He could have allowed such terrible events to befall the Jewish people. Specifically, Rabbi Elazar HaKalir and other *paytanim* begin a number of their kinot with the word “*eicha* (how),” a stinging and emotionally laden word that captures our feelings of betrayal. How, G-d, could You have let this happen?

The *paytanim*, of course, did not originate this concept. Megilat Eichah evokes the same themes of betrayal and dismay. In fact, in three of the five chapters of the Megilah, Yirmiyahu himself begins with the word, “*eicha*.”

In chapter 1:

אֵיכָה יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד

Oh, how has the city sits alone!

In chapter 2:

אֵיכָה יַעֲיֵב בְּאַפוֹ אֲדֹנָי אֶת בֵּית צִיּוֹן

How has the Lord in His anger brought darkness upon the daughter of Zion!

In chapter 4:

אֵיכָה יוֹעַם זָהָב

How dim the gold has become!

In fact, throughout the five chapters of Megilat Eichah, Yirmiyahu focuses almost entirely on bemoaning the fate of Jerusalem and her beloved people. Curiously, the Megilah places little emphasis on the guilt and culpability of the Jewish People.

There are, of course, a few exceptions. For example, in chapter 1, verse 8, Yirmiyahu declares:

חָטְאָה חָטְאָה יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל כֵּן לְנִידָה הָיְתָהּ

Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore, she became impure.

However, even this verse could be read as a challenge to G-d. In this interpretation, Yirmiyahu is asking, incredulously, “Did Jerusalem sin so

egregiously that it must be treated as an impure woman?”

Rabbi Avraham Rivlin, Mashgiach Ruchani at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, notes that while the Biblical text is largely silent on the issue of Israel's guilt, the Midrashic literature is replete with accusations, guilt, and culpability. The rabbis clearly understood that it is the Jewish people who are to blame for Jerusalem's destruction. We are to blame for all our ills, not G-d!

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 104a) illustrates this point by explaining that the fact that 4 out of the 5 chapters of Eichah are written as an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet reflects the totality of the people's guilt.

אמר ר' יוחנן, מפני מה לקו ישראל באל"ף
בי"ת, מפני שעברו על התורה שנחנה באל"ף
בי"ת.

Rebbe Yochanan said: “Why were the

Jews stricken with aleph-bet? Because they violated the Torah, which was given through aleph-bet."

Chazal are sensitive to every textual nuance — both explicit and implicit. Even the format of the Biblical text has a message to teach. In this case, the aleph-bet format alludes to the gamut of our sins.

Other Midrashic sources are even more specific with regard to the Jewish people's responsibility for the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash. For example, the *Yalkut Shimoni* (Eicha no. 1003) records the following exposition of an exchange between Yirmiyahu and G-d:

דרש ר' אלעזר בנו של ר' יוסי הגלילי וכן דרש ר' חנינא אחריו. איכה ישבה בדד, אמר ירמיה לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע ער ששמך ושבחך בתוכה ורוב עמה בתוכה בשלשה רגלים תשב בדד. אמר ליה לירמיה עד שאתה דורש את שלהם. דרש את שלי איכה היתה לזונה קריה נאמנה. *Rebbe Elazar, the son of Rebbe Yose HaGalili, expounded, as did Rebbe Chanina afterward: "O how the city sits alone (Eichah 1:1)!" Yirmiyahu said in front of G-d, "Master of the Universe! The city that contains your name and praise, and the majority of your people, who dwell within it during three festivals, is now alone!" G-d responds to Yirmiyahu, "Until you seek out for them, seek out for me! How has she become a harlot, a faithful city (Isaiah 1:21)!"*

In the Midrash, Yirmiyahu's "eicha" challenge to G-d is rebuffed by G-d with another reference to the word *eicha*. The Midrash draws upon Yeshayahu's blistering criticism of the Jewish people as they allowed Jerusalem to deteriorate from a city of righteousness to a city of moral depravity.

The Midrash is not simply making a play on the word *eicha*. By

employing another verse that begins with the same word, the Midrash is fundamentally shifting the guilt from G-d's actions to man's actions. It is our moral decay that caused the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash.

The *Yalkut Shimoni* (ibid) continues its analysis with the second verse in Megilat Eichah:

וירמיה אמר בכי תבכה בלילה ודמעתה, ורוח הקודש אמרה לו והנה שם הנשים מבכות את התמוז.

And Yirmiyahu said, "She weeps in the night, and her tears are on her cheek" (Eichah 1:2). To this G-d responds, "And behold, there the women were sitting, making the Tammuz weep (Ezekiel 8:14)."

Here too, the Midrash is placing responsibility on the Jewish people. Yirmiyahu laments Jerusalem's destruction, describing the city's tears. G-d responds by quoting from a verse in Yechezkel in which Jewish women are worshipping an idol, a worship that involved tears. The message is clear — the Jewish people deserve the punishment that they are receiving.

Ultimately, the Midrash concludes:

וכן כל דבר ודבר.

And so it was for each and every matter. Each verse of Eichah that seems to blame G-d is replaced by G-d's response in which He highlights the corresponding sins of the Jewish people.

An important message emerges from this view in the Midrash.

Chazal understood that difficult times beckon us to be introspective. As the Gemara (*Brachos* 5a) teaches:

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא: אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו - יפשפש במעשיו.

Rava (and some said Rav Chisda) said, "If someone experiences suffering coming

upon them, that person should look carefully at his deeds."

In other words, while we must never have the arrogance to state with certitude why G-d is acting in a certain fashion, that does not minimize our responsibility to look inward and ask, "What does G-d want me to learn? How can I become a better person under my current circumstances?"

Chazal's insistence to peer deeper than the explicit text of Megilat Eichah underscores the need to grow from our collective trials and tribulations.

Rabbi Soloveitchik articulates this point in his well-known essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek*. He writes:

The question of questions is: What does suffering obligate man to do? This problem was important to Judaism, which placed it at the center of its Weltanschauung... We do not wonder about the ineffable ways of the Holy One, but instead ponder the paths man must take when evil leaps up at him... How should a man react in a time of distress? What should a person do so as not to rot in his affliction?

While the need to look inward is relevant throughout the year, it is particularly meaningful on Tisha B'Av. The overall somber experience of Tisha B'Av has the potential to be demoralizing. Focusing on all the calamities that have befallen the Jewish People over the many centuries of the exile is painful. We run the risk of wallowing in our sorrows. By acknowledging that G-d's punishments are a call for us to reflect inwards, we can strive to be better Jews and, ultimately, be the recipients of G-d's blessing and reward.