

## The *Fourth* Eichah

Moshe Taragin

Yirmiyahu was tasked with the impossible mission of denouncing the fallen religious first Temple era, and predicting its downfall. His unpopular message landed him in jail, fearing for his life. No one likes a whistleblower. It took great courage to oppose squads of false prophets who falsely reassured a sinful nation that their rollicking party would last forever. Sadly, Yirmiyahu wasn't just a *prophet* of doom. He personally witnessed the obliteration of Yerushalayim, documented the horror and authored five chapters of lamentations and dirges. Sefer Eichah oozes with pain, abandonment and the swirling darkness of a world beyond hope.

Yirmiyahu begins his sorrowful chants with the word "איכה", which loosely translates as "how". Typically, sections of Tanach begin in a more *descriptive* fashion. For example, the book of Esther commences by providing the timeline of the Shushan narrative. The book of Kohelet is launched by attributing moral wisdoms to Shlomo, whose nickname happens to be Kohelet. Other times, a book of Tanach starts with the biography and genealogy of the prophet. The book of Eichah however, begins enigmatically, with a bizarre and interrogative word, asking "how"!

### The Three "Eichahs"

Evidently, this iconic word "eichah" possesses deeper meaning. In addition to Yirmiyahu, two other prophets – Moshe and Yeshayahu - prefaced their own declarations with the term "eichah". Observing rapid Jewish population growth, coupled with ever-increasing national needs, Moshe exclaims "eichah"- how can I bear the mushrooming demands of a booming nation? Likewise, Yeshayahu witnessed the moral breakdown of Yerushalayim and reprimanded the Jews with the term of "eichah"- how could a city of justice have degenerated into a den of prostitution and of murder? Juxtaposing this series of three, we read Moshe and Yeshayahu's "eichahs" on Shabbat Chazon, immediately prior to Yirmiyahu's eichah on Tisha b'av proper. If three different prophets all employed the same iconic term, it obviously evokes larger historical resonance.

### A Term of Bafflement

Decoding the symbolism of eichah demands a better understanding of its meaning. The term “how” is typically employed as an inquisitive request seeking information. For example, a person would solicit travel instructions with the word “how”. However, the term “how” may also be spoken rhetorically, when witnessing something baffling. When we face the incomprehensible, and are overwhelmed with bewilderment, we often ‘gasp’ for air and utter a “how” of disbelief. We don’t expect a response to our query, but are merely trying to process the unimaginable.

Jewish history is puzzling and mystifying. We are an atypical nation, ungoverned by the historical patterns and national trends which shape every other nation. Our history is perplexing, and our national arc is irrational. The irrationality of Jewish history is apparent both in moments of triumph and in grim moments of national tragedy.

Each of the three prophets observed a different stage of our trajectory, but each walked away with the same conclusion: “eichah”- how can human logic capture the story of the Jews. It lies beyond human computation. All these three wise prophets can do is wonder at the mystery of it all.

Moshe, the first to employ “eichah”, witnessed our triumphant growth. A few weeks after departing Egypt, he couldn’t help but marvel at the meteoric growth of his nation of former slaves. Two centuries of horrific persecution had crushed our national spirit, yet, despite this trauma we were prepared to embrace the divine command and introduce the world to monotheism. We barely survived Egyptian bigotry and yet, we were busily constructing a desert society of ethics and compassion, looking to Moshe for moral guidance. This rapid turnaround mystified Moshe, who could only *exhale* with admiration and wonder at our accelerated development. “How” could these slaves transform into children of Hashem so quickly? Eichah.

Centuries later, Yeshayahu stood among the moral debris of Yerushalayim and wondered how a nation gifted with supernaturalism and direct prophecy, could sink into sexual decadence and ruthless murder. Our national intransigence and delusional detachment from reality was stunning. Surely, he reasoned, a nation blessed with prophecy and with a divine Mikdash would avoid a moral freefall. Yet, we Jews are different and, when we unravel, we spiral uncontrollably, and when we fall, we fall precipitously. Yeshayahu could only stand and wonder about the grotesque

carnival unfolding in Yerushalayim and how disproportionate Jewish experience was compared to other nations. “How” could they be so foolhardy and so debauched? Eichah.

Finally, Yirmiyahu witnesses the nightmarish ransacking of Yerushalayim, and he too can only shriek “Eichah”. Standing amidst the smoldering ruins of the First Temple, he also casts his vision toward future Jewish suffering, and is aghast by the nightmarish scenes he beholds. He is shaken by how disproportionately Jews will suffer over the ensuing 2500 years, beginning with the Roman conquest of Yerushalayim. Rome conquered many cultures, but they displayed unparalleled mercilessness in hunting our sages and butchering them in public. Throughout history, many religious minorities were discriminated against, but the hostility and consistency of anti-Semitism has been singular and lopsided. Acknowledging the disproportionate suffering of Jews throughout history, Yirmiyahu screeches “How can this people be subjected to such disproportionate persecution”? Eichah.

The term eichah is the password to Jewish history and, the keyword of Tisha Bav. On this day we lament the heartbreaking “detour” of Jewish history, remembering that, before we ruined our relationship with Hashem we stood at Sinai, eleven days away from utopia. Had we boldly marched into Israel we would have ‘ended’ history and ushered in a Messianic era of universal welfare. Instead, we flinched, and history never forgave us. We were condemned to wander for thousands of years across millions of miles. No nation has ever suffered as we did. Eichah.

### The *Fourth* Eichah

Eighty years ago, our nation suffered the greatest horror since the destruction of the First Mikdash. At the tail end of history, we were victimized by a brutal genocidal assault, the likes of which no nation had ever faced. Spectacularly, we have arisen from that horror to rebuild our people, resettle our land and restore our international relevancy. We are witnessing the “sequel” to eichah and the sequel to the script which the three prophets wrote. Once again, we are left breathless at the irrationality of Jewish history and once again the word “eichah” lingers on our lips. How

spectacular is Jewish history! How quickly have we reconstituted our people and how defiantly have we rebuilt our Homeland. How? Eichah.