

Eikha & Kinnot

Facing God in the Midst of Suffering

We sit on the floor as mourners and we chant Eikha. The words of Yirmiyahu, the great survivor of the first Destruction, 2500 years ago, resonate within us. Eikha is filled with the grief, the shock, the catastrophe of the Churban. It is through its words that we might be able to understand more, to feel, to connect to the essence of the tragedy that is Churban, displacement, estrangement, Exile. In its verses one senses the violence and violation of destruction, the horrors that afflicted the nation during the Churban – we read a list of the indignities, the shame, the suffering, the killing.

But Eikha is not journalism. It is in the Tanakh because it is a religious book. It talks from a vantage point of faith. And how exactly do we as Jews relate to God in the midst of our suffering? In this shiur, we shall see how the Book of Eikha transcribes, between the lines, how one might talk to God in the thick of the Churban. These are poems written by the witness of destruction¹. These are the words of the victims, the survivors. What do these people say to God? How do they view Him? We shall see that each chapter has its own tone, its own theological timbre with which to talk to God..

Chavruta:

1. The most simple thing to do is to read through Megillat Eikha, a chapter at a time.

For each Chapter:

- Gain a general impression of the mood of the Chapter.
- Then, filter out the verses that deal directly with God. What statements are made here? What do they say about God? To God? What is NOT said?
- Do the comments in a particular chapter present a uniform theology, or are the statements at variance with one another?

Shiur:

A word of Introduction. Chazal call this book Sefer Kinnot² or Megillat Kinnot³ – the Scroll of Laments. This indicates

¹ Chazal in Bava Batra 15a tell us that Yirmiyahu wrote Eicha. Yirmiyahu lived in the period of the Churban, warning the people that if they did not repent, Jerusalem would be destroyed, however his words were not heeded by the nation.

² Chagiga 5b

that this is a **collection** of lament poems. The poems are each carefully structured (note the aleph-bet theme throughout) and beautifully composed. However, it is unclear whether they are written as a book or independently. It is even unknown as to whether they are all written at the same time. I mention this because in this shiur, we shall suggest that each chapter of Eikha has an independent character, with different philosophic underpinnings. We shall study each of these chapters/kinnot independently⁴ – almost as if they exist in a different world. I believe that this is a correct reading and certainly a viable one. After all Yirmiyahu could have responded to the Churban in a different manner at different times. One poem may be a response to seeing the awful scenes of the siege, another may have been written after witnessing scores of the dead, and yet another might be his response and reflections upon the loss of Jewish independence, another to the burning of the Mikdash. If that is the case, then there is no obstruction to the suggestion that each chapter will reflect a different mood.

Chapter 1 – The Just God.

"Her (Jerusalem's) enemies are now the masters, her enemies are at ease;
Because God has afflicted her for her many transgressions;
Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy. (1:6)

Jerusalem has greatly sinned,
Therefore she has become unclean.
... her defilement clings to her skirts. (1:8-9)

The yoke of my sins is bound fast,
Tight in His hand, imposed upon my neck. (1:14)

The Lord is just,
For I have disobeyed Him" (1:18)

In Chapter 1 God functions as the Judge of Israel; He practices Justice. And yet, it is God who is punishing Jerusalem. How does God's Justice fit with the destruction of Jerusalem? In this Perek, the humiliation and helplessness, the suffering of Jerusalem, is a punishment for sin. The line linking sin and punishment is the backbone of Chapter 1. And Israel fully understands that it deserves the punishment! The religious waywardness of the nation and its unwillingness to follow God are the cause of its downfall. And hence, in place of of God's yoke – the Ol Malchut Shamayim – on our shoulders, we now experience the "yoke of sin" that crushes us.

In Chapter 1 there are calls for God's sympathy (v.11), mercy (passuk 20) and also vengeance against our

³ Yerushalmi Shabbat ch.16

⁴ In the space we have for this shiur, we shall have time to examine only the first 3 chapters.

adversaries⁵ (v.22.) And yet the dominant tone and atmosphere and is one that justifies God. This is a chapter animated by the theme of Justice and Judgement – Din. In a world of Justice, the criminal receives his just desserts, and likewise here, The Jewish People are sentenced on the basis of their actions. They deserve their awful punishment! God, like the judge, expresses little emotion. And like the accused in a courtroom Am Yisrael may request mercy (v.20.) In addition, if Justice is the primary force here, we can legitimately request that others are treated with the same strict Justice that we are (v.22.) But in the final analysis Jerusalem suffers because she has sinned.

Chapter 2 – God As Enemy

"God has laid waste without pity all the habitations of Yaakov;
In his anger he has destroyed the castles of Yehudah;

...In His blazing anger He has cut down all the might of Israel

... He bent his bow like the enemy,
Poised His right hand like a foe;
He slew all who He saw;
Poured out his anger like fire
In the Tent of Zion.
God has acted like an enemy..." (2:2-5)

Probably the most dominant feature of Chapter 2 is the personification of God as the enemy. Whereas in Chapter 1 there were human enemies who exiled, chased, looted and the like, here it is God Himself who burns and kills the people of Yehudah. And there is the pathos, the tone, the mood of the perek. The imagery is furious as one vividly senses God's devastating anger, His power unleashed.

In the pesukim, God is explicitly mentioned as the enemy - see passuk 4 and 5. The metaphors for God's anger are numerous: Af (1,2,6,21,22), Evra (2), Zaam (6), Cheima (4). God is depicted as devoid of mercy or pity (2,17, 21), God consumes Israel like blazing fire (3,4) He destroys fortifications and palaces (2,5-9.)

We are left with the intense feeling of God's fury, his impassioned hunting of Am Yisrael and his devastating power unleashed across the country destroying and razing everything. It is a terrifying image.

Such is the portrayal of God in this Perek. But what of the victims? How do they respond to their furious God? Indeed, what can one say to God in the face of such fury? Can anything have effect? Here we do not call for mercy. Here we do not appeal to the Judge. After all, we are

facing an adversary, a furious enemy, not a jurist. What do we say to God?

First we say nothing. Broken and on the verge of death, we simply cry:

"Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord;
lift up your hands toward Him,
for the life of your young children,
that faint for hunger at every street corner" (2:19)

But then we talk to God.

"See, God, and consider, to who have you done this?
Shall the women eat their own fruit, their newborn babes?
Shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?
The youth and the old man lie on the ground in the streets;
my maidens and young men are fallen by the sword;
You killed them in the day of your anger!
You have slaughtered unsparingly." (2:20-21)

This is not a call for mercy. It is an outburst; an accusation! Is it a rational argument? I think not. Here, Yehuda merely presents God with the desperate scenes of deprivation and horror and says: Look what you have done!

How can we be so brazen, so irreverent, so outspoken and arrogant to address God in this manner? I do not know. Maybe extreme actions provoke an equally forceful response. In Chapter 1, where God's acts are measured and controlled, the response is one of acceptance. However here, where forces of fury are unleashed, where God turns into the enemy, we present God with the suffering and death and we force Him to take a good look. It's almost as if we ask God: Did you really intend to take things THIS far? It is as if we are challenging God: Is this a proportional response? Did we deserve this? We get the sense, that here we are telling God that He is unjust, unfair. This is a protest!

Chapter 3 – God helping Man

Chapter 3 has an unusual tempo, and also unique content. The Perek is a monologue, and is narrated by an individual – "I am the man who has known affliction" – rather than Jerusalem herself. In addition, this Perek is animated by a deep faith in God, and an ongoing conversation, a dialogue with Him.

The Chapter opens with the sense of God's alienation and hostility. In chilling imagery, God is depicted as positioning the victim "as a target for the arrow" as he draws his bow. God breaks his bones (4) and surrounds him (5) and will not listen to his prayers, his screams (8).

⁵ Every chapter in Eicha ends with a call for vengeance against those who massacred and destroyed us, or an appeal for national restoration.

However, despite everything, this individual expresses faith in God, in the light at the end of the tunnel:

"My life was bereft of peace'
I forgot what happiness was;
I thought my strength and hope
Had perished before the Lord

...But this I recall. Therefore I have hope:
The kindness of the Lord has not ended,
His mercies are not spent.
They are renewed every morning –
Ample is Your grace!
The Lord is my portion - my soul said,
Therefore I will hope in Him
The Lord is good to those who trust in Him,
To the one who seeks Him.
It is good to wait patiently,
Till rescue comes from the Lord" (3:17-26)

Here is a person who emerges with his faith intact. In fact it is more than that – this chapter narrates the story of the man whose faith carries him through the inferno! His belief in the goodness of God is the central factor in his survival, in his ability to overcome the crushing events through which he lives.

And lest we might imagine that this person lacks the outrage, the rebelliousness of Chapter 2, or the religious understanding of Chapter 1, the pesukim here make it clear that he is aware of all that:

Of what shall a man complain?
If he has sinned?
Let us search and examine our ways
And turn back to God
Let us lift up our hearts in our hands
To God in heaven
WE HAVE TRANSGRESSED AND REBELLED
And YOU HAVE NOT FORGIVEN
You have clothed yourself in ANGER and pursued us
YOU HAVE SLAIN WITHOUT PITY
You have screened yourself off with a cloud
That no prayer may pass through." (3:39-44)

...
I have called on your name , O Lord
From the depths of the Pit
Hear my plea!
Do not shut your ear to my groan, to my cry!
You approached the moment I called
You said, Do not fear
You championed my cause , O Lord
You have redeemed my life." (3:55-58)

Our friend is aware that God is killing the Jewish people indiscriminately. He is also aware that the people have somehow brought these troubles upon themselves, that they deserve punishment for their transgressions.

And yet, despite the gates of heaven being closed shut, locked and bolted, this man continues to believe. He

refuses to let the gates of prayer be closed. He cried to God - and somehow God listens. For him, despite the pain and suffering, God has been there for him all along, God has saved him, redeemed him! The incredible word in this chapter is the word, "good"⁶. God – despite all the pain and affliction, is good.

This is the story of the believer. Maybe this is the story in our times of the people who survived the Concentration Camps with their faith intact, strengthened, for God was with them throughout their troubles. For us who have never experienced such intense suffering, it might seem impossible, but we know people who have lived their lives in this manner.

Interim Summary

If we can summarise at this point, we have charted three chapters and three very different theological models. Here is a concise summary:

1. God as Judge. Man justifies God
2. God as enemy. Man accuses God
3. God's affliction and salvation⁷. Man expresses his faith in God!.

One wonders how a single book can contain three messages so at dissonance with each other, how a single scroll may contain such contradictions. How might we be accepting of our fate one minute, and outraged the next? How may God be perceived as good one minute after he is portrayed as a furious killer?

And yet, Eikha offers us this varied tapestry of perceptions of suffering, of responses to devastation. Apparently, they each have a place, an address, an appropriate time.

In Kinot

There is a similar range of responses to God in the Kinnot that we recite on Tish BeAv. The Kinna that is traditionally recited following Eikha⁸ – "Zecor Hashem me haya Lanu" – is based absolutely in the principle that God is just and that we are guilty:

"We were pursued by our necks - Woe
For we pursued brotherly hatred
Woe, what has become of us!

...We search for bread at risk of our lives - Woe
For we closed our hands to the needy
Woe, what has become of us!

...Women were raped in Zion – Woe

⁶ Verses 17,25,26,27,38.

⁷ See 3:32

⁸ It is based on the text of ch.5 of Eicha.

For men were promiscuous with their neighbours wife.

Woe, what has become of us!"

There is a perfect symmetry between crime and punishment, and theologically, a justification for all the punishment.

And then, there are Kinnot that express outrage and accusation. For example, there is R. Eliezer HaKalir's "VeAtta Amarta."

"YOU said – 'I will be abundantly good to you'⁹
'And I and your people will be exceptional'¹⁰
SO WHY do criminals defile your name;
And you did not pour your anger upon them?

...YOU abandoned and rejected every nation
To take one nation from amongst the nations¹¹;
SO WHY did you swiftly send a nations to my land¹²;
Who said: Let us destroy them so that they cease to be a nation.¹³

...YOU fixed a place for your Presence to dwell
This mountain that your hands established,
SO WHY have you thrown aside the place of Your splendour,
And have defiled the throne of your glory."

This Kinna expresses shock at God's actions that go against all logic, all promise. In fact, this chapter goes as far as accusing God of renegeing on promises to the Jewish people. Essentially we are questioning God on the basis of his covenant with the Jewish people, how can he let the nations prevail over the Jews? God is being accused!

[Interestingly, the very next Kinna (Lecha Hashem Hatzedaka) – also by Rabbi eliezer HaKalir - restores the balance by unequivocally stating God's righteousness and Am Yisrael's blame]

The Gift of Time

Earlier in this shiur, we suggested that the contradictions between the chapters of Eikha reflect different conflicting responses to disaster and suffering.

I would like to suggest that maybe, they are not reflective only of different modes of thought, but quite possibly, of different historical realities. The Gemara in Yoma 69b tells a fascinating episode relating to the (first) Churban.

"Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi, asks: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? - Because they restored the crown of the Divine Attributes to its former glory. Moses said, 'The great G-d, the Mighty, and the Awesome.' (Appellations which we use in the first blessing of the Amidah: HAGADOL, HAGIBOR V'HA NORA.) Then Jeremiah came and said, 'Gentiles are destroying His Temple. Where is His Awesomeness?' Hence he omitted the term 'Awesome.' Daniel came and said, 'Gentiles are enslaving His sons. Where is His Mightiness?' Hence he omitted the term Mighty. But they (the Great Assembly) came and said, 'On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds: that He suppresses His wrath, that He extends His patience to the wicked. Therein lie His awesome powers: but for the awe of Him, how could one nation (Israel) persist among the (many) nations.' (B.T. Yoma 69b)"

This beautiful Gemara, tells us that Yirmiyahu and Daniel, two figures who personally experienced the terror of Churban, were traumatised and forever changed by the tragedy of Churban. Throughout the rest of their lives, they failed to relate to God in the innocent, positive manner in which they had been accustomed before the Churban. Now, after the death and destruction, they could not see God as "Great" and "Mighty." They saw the helplessness of the nation as the weakness of God! In exile, they could not sense God's power.

However, in another generation, after the restoration of Temple and Jewish autonomy, the Anshei Knesset Haedola could indeed restore the honour of God's attributes, albeit with some adjustment. In new circumstances, they could once again utter God's praises.

There are different theological realities for different ages, for different moments. Are the various chapters of Eikha reflective of different religious philosophies, or possibly alternative stages of the Churban? Chapter 3 is retrospective, some time after, when we can make sense from the calamity. Chapter 2 is in the thick of the fray, when bewilderment, confusion, anger, outrage, take the centre stage. Maybe Chapter 1 is the prophet talking who has been warning for years that sin will precipitate destruction, and he cries as he watches the prescribed scenario transpiring before his very eyes. Maybe each lament of Eikha represents a different moment of Churban.

May you have an easy and meaningful fast.

With prayers for the healing of our nation and a Geula Shelema.

⁹ Quote from Bereshit 32:13

¹⁰ Shemot 33:16

¹¹ Devarim 4:34

¹² Yoel 1:6

¹³ see Tehillim 83:5