YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Eikha - The Password of Tisha Be-Av**

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The prophet Yirmiyahu was tasked with an impossible mission- to decry the fallen religious state of the Jewish nation and to predict its downfall. His unpopular message ultimately lands him in jail fearing for his life; no one likes a whistle-blower. It took great personal courage to oppose the bands of false prophets who reassured the nation that their merry party could continue. Yirmayahu was a different breed and he faced constant hostility from people blinded by selfishness and poisoned by corruption. Sadly, Yirmiyahu also personally witnesses the ultimate obliteration of Yerushalayim and he documents and laments the unbearable nightmare he experiences. *Sefer Eikha* oozes with the pain of abandonment and the darkness of a world beyond hope.

Yirmiyahu selects a very odd word to begin his lament; the term “*eikha*” loosely translates as “how.” Typically, books of Tanakh begin in a more descriptive fashion: for example, Esther begins by providing the timeline of the narrative. *Kohelet* is launched by attributing the messages to Shlomo – whose nickname was *Kohelet*. Oftentimes, a *sefer* begins by providing a general biography of the prophet. The book of *Eikha* begins abruptly with a bizarre word which implies a question!?

Evidently, the word *Eikha* is iconic and possesses some deeper meaning. Aside from launching the *sefer* with this term, Yirmiyahu also prefaces additional sections (later to become chapters) with this symbolic word. Intriguingly, two additional prophets – Moshe and Yeshaya - preface their own statements with the term “*Eikha*.” Observing the rapid growth of the Jewish population and their ever-increasing socio-political needs, Moshe exclaims the word “*Eikha*” (in a section of *parashat Devarim* typically read the Shabbat before *Tisha Be-av*). Likewise, Yeshayahu (in a section read as the Haftorah on *Shabbat Chazon*) witnesses the moral breakdown and prostitution of Yerushalayim and reprimands the Jews with the very same term of *Eikha*: “how could the city of justice have degenerated into prostitution and murder.” If three different prophets exercised the exact same terminology of *Eikha*, it obviously echoes with historical resonance. Decoding the significance of “*Eikha*” demands a better understanding of its meaning. The term *Eikha* or “how” is typically employed in an inquisitive fashion to acquire some previously unknown information. For example, a person would typically inquire for travel directions with the word “how.” However, the term “how” or Eikha may also be used rhetorically- when witnessing something which baffles the imagination or an event which leaves a person flabbergasted and searching for meaning. For example, when hearing about a crushing tragedy, a person is overwhelmed with disbelief and can only verbally “grasp for air” by exclaiming the term “how.” By exclaiming “how” a person isn’t expecting a response or information but is trying to process something baffling and unimaginable.

Jewish history is baffling and unimaginable. We are unlike any other nation as we aren’t governed by the national and historical laws and trends which steer every other nation. Our history is perplexing and our national arc is irrational. The puzzling nature of our history defines moments of triumph as well as bleak moments of national trauma. Each of the three aforementioned prophets beholds a very different stage of this national trajectory but each walks away with the same conclusion: “*Eikha*”- how can the human imagination begin to capture the story of the Jews.

Moshe witnesses the Jewish people during triumph and victory. A few weeks after departing Egypt, Moshe couldn’t help but wonder at the meteoric growth of this nation of former slaves. In Egypt, the Jewish imagination had been crushed by centuries of horrific slavery and yet this very band of slaves was now primed to introduce monotheism into this world. For centuries, Jews had barely lived in survival mode and yet here they were constructing a just and ethical society and craving moral guidance from Moshe. This rapid turnaround was mystifying, and Moshe could only exhale the term *Eikha* conveying his great “confusion” at this accelerated development.

Yeshaya stood among the moral trash of Yerushalayim and wondered how a nation gifted with supernatural experience and direct prophecy could possibly sink into such severe sexual decadence and brutal murder. We were chosen by God precisely because of our national obstinacy and our ability to challenge “reality.” However, this level of intransigence and this level of detachment from reality was stunning. Other typical nations gifted with prophecy and Mikdash would surely have avoided this moral abyss. Yet the Jews are different and, when we fall, we fall precipitously. Yeshaya could only wonder at this grotesque carnival and how disproportionate Jewish history was; he could only breath the word *Eikha*!

Finally, Yirmiyahu witnesses the nightmare of the ransacking of Yerushalayim and he too can only shriek “*Eikha*.” Though he stands amidst the ruins of the First Temple he envisions future Jewish suffering and he is aghast at the nightmare he beholds. He is shaken by how disproportionately Jews will suffer over the ensuing 2500 years. Rome conquered many cultures, but they displayed unparalleled mercilessness in hunting Jewish sages and butchering them in public. Throughout history many religious and ethnic minorities were discriminated against, but the hostility and consistency of anti-Semitism is singular and lopsided. Acknowledging the disproportionate suffering of Jews throughout history, Yirmiyahu screeches “*Eikha*”!

The term *Eikha* becomes the password to Jewish history and, by extension, the keyword of *Tisha Be-av*. On this day we lament the great “detour” of Jewish history. We are saddened at the prospect that our people 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 was rerouted for thousands of years across millions of miles of wandering. As we recount that terrible journey over *Tisha Be-av*, we mustn’t forget our Divine mission and how disproportionate we are with history.

Eighty years ago, our nation suffered the greatest horror in our history. 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 *Eikha* and the sequel to the script which Moshe and Yirmiyahu witnessed. Once again, in history we are left breathless at the irrationality of Jewish history and once again the word “Eikha” lingers on our lips.