

*The Three Weeks and Preparing for Tisha b’Av*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of the soldiers of Tzahal in their holy mission to protect the Jewish people.

The beginning of *Midrash Eichah* analyzes a verse from our *parasha* that connects it forevermore to *Megillat Eichah* (Lamentations), the *sefer* of Tisha b’Av:

Three prophesized using the word “*eichah*.” [They were] Moshe, Yeshayahu, and Yirmiyahu. Moshe (*Sefer Devarim* 1:12) said: “How (*eichah*) can I bear alone.” Yeshayahu (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 1:21) said: “How (*eichah*) the faithful city has become a harlot!” Yirmiyahu (*Sefer Eichah* 1:1) said: “How (*eichah*) she sits alone! The city that had a multitude of people has become like a widow.”

While the usual translation of “*eichah*” is “how,” it is clear in these three instances that contextually it can be translated as “alas,” or perhaps most properly with the Yiddish word “*Oy!*” It connotes misery, grief, depth-being sadness, and dark depression. Little wonder then that it has become an Ashkenazi custom to read the “*eichah*” verse from this week’s *parasha* with the same exact musical notation (*trop*) and intonation as we read *Megillat Eichah*. For a brief and bitter moment, even the beauty and peace of Shabbat is placed squarely in the context of the Three Weeks and Tisha b’Av.

The Three Weeks and Tisha b’Av in a “normal” year are challenging and difficult. National mourning for the loss of the *Beit HaMikdash*, and for all for which it stood, is always heartrending. It is a time of despondency and despair. This year, however, we are living in the giant shadow of the barbaric kidnapping and murder of Gilad Shaar, Naftali

Frenkel and Eyal Yifrah - *t'hah nafshoteyem tzururot b'tzrur hachayim* (may their souls be bound in the bonds of eternal life). In addition, our brothers and sisters in Israel are living under the constant threat of war, terror and misery, enduring some of the greatest challenges they have faced since the founding of the State. Indeed, the major population centers of Israel have not suffered ongoing and relentless attacks of this nature since 1948. As a result, our soldiers, in the flower of their youth, are continually and heroically putting their lives at risk in defense of our country. Surely, if there ever was a time to utter "*eichah*," it is now.

Yet, in the midst of all of this trial and tribulation, in the midst of all this sorrow and unmitigated misery, *Megillat Eichah* offers us a ray of hope. In the immortal words found in the penultimate verse of the *megillah* we find: "*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v'nashuvah, chadash yemeinu k'kedem.*" ("Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we shall return, renew our days as of old." Artscroll *Tanach* translation) Once again, *Midrash Eichah* (5:22) gives us clear guidance as to how we can properly interpret Yermiyahu's famous words:

*Knesset Israel* [the grand trans-historical entity of the Jewish People] spoke before *HaKodesh Baruch Hu* and said: "Master of the Universe, it is up to You to bring us back to You!" He responded to them: "It is up to you! [After all] it is said: 'Return unto Me and I will return unto You says Hashem' (Malachi 3:7)." *Knesset Israel* once again spoke before Him and said: "Master of the Universe, it is up to You [to bring us back to You!] [After all] it is said: 'Return us, G-d of our salvation...(Tehillim 55: 5)'" Therefore the verse states: "**Bring** us back to You, Hashem, and **we shall return**..."

Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1942), known as the *Torah Temimah* after the name of his monumental work, explains that the *Midrash* is teaching us that we need both *Hashiveinu Hashem alecha* and *v'nashuvah*, since one of them alone is necessary but not sufficient. In other words, even Hashem bringing us back to Him will fail unless we, too,

make the effort to do heartfelt *teshuvah* (repentance). As a result he writes, “Therefore it says ‘*Hashiveinu*’ from Your efforts and ‘*v’nashuvah*’ from our efforts.” In sum, we are partners with Hashem in the *teshuvah* (repentance) process. He is ready to help us when we are ready to help ourselves. Man is not alone. Hashem is constantly ready to assist us. No matter how dark and dismal the hour may be, we believe that salvation will come. These, indeed, are comforting thoughts as we journey through the Three Weeks and prepare ourselves for Tisha b’Av.

May Hashem guard our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world. May He bring *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the righteous Messiah) and redemption to our people soon and in our days, and bring true and everlasting peace to our world. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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