

Eikha: A Verbal Capsule of Jewish History

By Rav Moshe Taragin

[Please note: Several ideas in the following article reflect themes which Rav Amital has spoken about in the past (see especially Rav Amital's Yom Ha-atzmaut shiurim.) –MT]

The concluding gemara in Makkot narrates the popular story of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues visiting the wrecked Temple Mount. Witnessing the rubble, almost all the Chakhamim break into tears. A place so sacred, a site so unapproachable, is now the haunt of foxes - "shualim hilku vo." While his colleagues wept, Rabbi Akiva - an outsider - in possession of unique historical perspective, exults. Inquired of his reason for joy in the face of unbearable sorrow, he replies with the following formula. An enigmatic verse in Sefer Yeshayahu (chapter 8) juxtaposes references to two prophets who lived in different eras – Urya Ha-kohen, who lived during the destruction of the first Temple, and Zekharya, who lived during the return to the second Temple. The association drawn between these two prophets suggests the mutual dependence of their respective prophecies. Urya had prophesized of foxes trampling the hills of Zion, whereas Zekharya prophesized about our ultimate redemption and return to Yerushalayim. Upon witnessing the fulfillment of Urya's prophecy, Rabbi Akiva determined that Zekharya's prophecy would also unfold.

Upon closer inspection, Rabbi Akiva's analysis seems a bit questionable. Should the mere juxtaposition of two non-contemporaneous prophets assure mutual dependence? If the two prophecies possess little or no substantive similarity, why should the fulfillment of one guarantee the realization of the

other? Presumably, Rabbi Akiva perceived a more inherent correspondence between the gloomy notes of Urya and the redemptive vision of Zekharya.

A more thorough understanding of this vision might be established by examining a different, well-known Midrash about the most important word of Tisha B'av - "eikha." Introducing this word is indeed a thought-provoking manner with which to begin a book of lamentations. The word "eikha" contains multiple layers of meaning (see the Midrash to Eikha, chapter 1 section 1), but at a literal level, it is clearly to be interpreted quite simply as: "How." Of course, the word "how" can be employed in both an inquisitive and declarative sense. Generally, with that term we inquire in pursuit of some reply: "How do I improve my middot"; "How do I get to the next town". In other instances, however, we simply exhale and reply with the term, "How" in face of unexplainable phenomena. Often, the term captures the manner by which certain experiences defy our comprehension. Certainly, the term employed in this context of Megilat Eikha reflects the latter connotation. Unable to account for the utter devastation, the precipitous decline of a once populous city into a desolate ruin, Yirmiyahu can only announce his wonderment. It is perhaps the best and only way to capture the depth of the suffering and scope of the tragedy. Any other response would belittle the events and misapproximate the consequences.

Yet, the Midrash informs us that this term was employed by two other prophets - under very different conditions. Moshe declared, "How ('Eikha') can I sustain the burden of leading such an overwhelming nation, and for his part, Yeshayahu scolded the nation by remarking, "How ('Eikha') could a city of honesty and integrity deteriorate into a center of prostitution and deceit. To underscore the succession between these three occurrences of the term "eikha," the Midrash comments that Moshe witnessed the Jews during their triumphant moments

and recited, 'Eikha'; Yeshayahu saw them during their degenerate period and recited, 'Eikha'; and Yirmiyahu encountered them during their tragic torment and recited the same term.

By building this sequencing, Chazal establish more than just historical or prophetic symmetry. Their message is that Jewish history – at every stage - can only be described with the term "eikha." As a nation of Hashem, we are not subject to the conventional terms and conditions of nature and history. Our development does not adhere to classic national patterns – "ein mazal le-Yisrael." Unlike other nations, whose new year begins in Tishrei, we are not mere fixtures of a natural universe. We launch our year in Nissan, for we are, ultimately, authors of history and architects of redemption. Our national trajectory cannot be graphed alongside the curve of typical nations. Consequentially, when we prosper we thrive beyond predictable expectations, when we disobey we commit unthinkable atrocities, and when we suffer we are targeted with nightmarish misery. Each of these national modes stems from the same seminal reality, that as Jews, our history does not conform to the conditions of ration. Moshe, Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu each grasped this condition, at various, distinct stages of Jewish history. They each responded with the only word capable of capturing this phenomenon – "Eikha," the declaration of stupefaction. By sequencing them, Chazal simply remind us that, though different in texture, our marvelous achievements, our embarrassing betrayal and our disproportionate persecution, all stem from the same inalienable reality - our status as a chosen people bound to Hashem, warriors of history.

This subtle, but seminal, truth, was best appreciated by Rabbi Akiva. He pondered Urya's prophecy – the annihilation of the Jews, the dismantling of Jerusalem, the savage despoliation of the Mikdash – and recognized glaring incongruities. Ancient Rome conquered the entire Mediterranean basin while stretching its influence northward to Europe and southward into Africa. Its success was due to an indomitable army and an

unprecedented accumulation of wealth. Each of these strengths was augmented by the subjugation of empires, conscription of their children and extortion of oppressive tribute. By sparing their conquered foes, they sustained their own empire. It was a policy of great genius and one which preserved the vitality of this empire.

There was, of course, one exception, one nation pursued to the death, one nation evicted from its natural surrounding and one temple brutally vandalized. Why did the Romans pursue a policy in Jerusalem which seemed so merciless and in some ways so counterproductive? Why not simply capture the Jews, maintain their society and siphon their resources? Upon witnessing the devastated fields of Har Ha-moriah, Rabbi Akiva sensed the same reality observed by Moshe, Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu, respectively: Jewish history cannot be understood along rational lines. We were targeted by Titus precisely because we were the proud bearers of a monotheistic message, and that message elicited seething hostility. We were exposed to such torture by Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu because we had so brazenly corrupted His treaty. The degree of anguish which his colleagues sensed at this abysmal site merely reinforced, to Rabbi Akiva, the unusual status of the Jewish people.

Having determined this status, Rabbi Akiva could better distill Zekharya's imagery. Surprisingly, Zekharya speaks of eschatology in very common language and depicts very ordinary scenes. The eighth chapter of Sefer Zekharya, which Rabbi Akiva here invokes, contains very little classic apocalyptic imagery. We are not witness to the demolition of planets, natural cataclysms or other extraordinary events typically associated with apocalypse. Instead, we are given prophetic images of elderly people pacing the lanes of Jerusalem supported by canes and walkers. We gaze upon children scurrying across the roads amusing themselves in childhood reverie. These are the truly 'unexpected' images of the Messianic era?? Even more surprising is the dual response to these events – one on the part of the people who survive to live

in this era, and the other on the part of Hashem Himself. The ensuing pasuk claims, "So says Hashem: If these scenes are astonishing to the remanation, they are also astonishing to My eyes." What is so astounding about these events, that even Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu expresses personal amazement?

Ultimately, Rabbi Akiva comprehended Zekharya's profound message: events which are normal for other nations are messianic for Jews. Indeed, it is only natural to expect people to gracefully grow old while watching their grandchildren playing giddily. Unfortunately, as Jews, we have had scant opportunity for what have become, for us, elusive luxuries. HaRav Amital once remarked that immediately upon escaping the Holocaust and settling in Israel, he would take great joy in watching children in the playgrounds of Jerusalem as he made his way each morning to Yeshivas Chevron. He would recall how those 'same' children were, just a few years earlier, ruthlessly murdered in the cities of Europe. The prophecies of Zekharya were being realized – but sadly it had taken 2000 years of persecution for those images to be fulfilled. How miraculous did such normal and routine events seem to the Jewish people for so many centuries!

The ninth verse of Megilat Eikha captures this theme by employing a different term of astonishment: "va'tereid pela'im" - we plunged startlingly. Just as Zekharya was amazed at the 'pele' of our salvation, so was Yirmiyahu shocked at the degree of our plummet. Whether in the recurring "how" of "eikha" or the characterizing term of "pele," our prophets and visionaries have always appreciated the great mystery of Jewish history.

Ultimately, Rabbi Akiva was dealt a tragic and heroic lesson about this mystery. On Tisha B'av we recite "Arzei Halevanon" a kina detailing the horrifying deaths of the ten great martyrs, including Rabbi Akiva. Indeed, their stories are dreadful and they certainly personalize the suffering of this day. But in addition, these episodes marked a turning point in the Jewish attitude to the Roman conquest. Beyond even the flattening of Jerusalem, the bloodthirsty hunt after the esteemed Jewish

sages and the sadistic forms of administered death demonstrated the particularly ferocious hatred the Romans felt towards the Jews. It signaled that these events were not merely isolated pogroms, and that the ensuing exile would stretch over millennia, rather than a mere seventy years. If Yosef's sale was invoked as motive for these punishments, it was quite evident that Esav had returned, and with a vengeance. It was clear that the mystery of Jewish history was still active. This story encapsulates the pivotal theme of Tisha B'av; it is one which leaves us all gasping one word: How!!!

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