

Devarim 2016

Evil – Only You Can Fix It!

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia

The practice of completing the Torah reading every year has evolved in post-Talmudic times, and gained prominence at around the 7th century. Besides the beginning and the ending points of the reading cycle, the sages who refined the system created several anchors which tied the Torah portion of the week to the calendar. One of these encounter points in time will occur this Shabbat, as Parashat Devarim is always read on the Shabbat prior to Tisha Be'Av. This Shabbat is also known as Shabbat Hazon, which means prophetic vision, after the first word of the Haftara of the week.

Why did the authors of the Torah reading cycle want to have this Parasha and this Haftarah just before Tisha Be'Av? The answer is found in Midrash Eicha, the rabbinic homilies on the Book of Lamentations:

איכה רבה, א: שלשה נתנבאו בלשון איכה, משה ישעיה וירמיה, משה אמר איכה אשא לבדי, ישעיה אמר איכה היתה לזונה, ירמיה אמר איכה ישבה בדד

Three prophets used the word Eicha, a word which connotes a state of being perplexed and pained:

Moshe said: Eicha, how will I manage the burden of the whole nation by myself?

Isaiah said: Eicha, how did the glorious city become a harlot, turning from a seat of justice to a murderers' den?

Jeremiah said: Eicha, how did the magnificent city of Jerusalem become desolate and lonely?

The Midrash is not only playing on words, but rather points out a process of spiritual decline. At the time of Moshe, people were quarreling and fighting each other, requiring constant attention by the court system. Ideally, they should have treated each other with respect and avoid litigations and disputes. The full system of Torah laws and values is not only about rituals and worship, but also about interactions between people, most succinctly described in the phrase “love your brethren as you love yourself.” Had they followed it, they would have been able to live harmoniously and limit the involvement of the judicial system in their lives.

In the days of Isaiah, the reliance on the judicial system created a situation where corrupt judges took over, using extortion and bribery to replace justice with injustice. The judges would not have been able to amass such power and promote their agenda without the corruption spreading among the people as a result of their own cantankerous nature.

All that led, in the days of Jeremiah, to the utter destruction of the Temple.

In the spirit of this Midrash I would like to suggest that reading the Book of Lamentations, or Eicha, on Tisha Be'Av, is something more than mourning the destruction and praying for redemption.

One can say that of all biblical books, Eicha's structure is the most cohesive and systematic, since all chapters, except for the fifth, are written in an alphabetic order. There is however, several deviations, which I believe were planted by the author as a device to pique the reader's interest and lead him to a deeper analysis of the text. One of those is the reversed order of the letters ו and פ in chapters 2 and 4, which has been extensively discussed by scholars and commentators. The other is the unique structure of chapter 3, which is significantly different than that of 1,2, and 4 (I'm not counting here chapter 5 because it is the epilogue of the book):

Chapters 1,2, and 4 open with the word Eicha, but not chapter 3.

Chapters 1,2, and 4 have one verse per letter, chapter 3 has three verses per letter.

The verse in chapters 1,2, and 4 have an average of ten words per verse, while chapter 3 consists of short verses, 5-6 words each.

Most importantly, chapters 1,2, and 4 focus on the destruction, while chapter 3 focuses on the personal suffering of the author.

I believe that the explanation to all these differences is that Jeremiah, the author of Eicha, added chapter 3 towards the end of his life, lodging it in the middle of the book in order to send an encoded message, which he hoped will be understood with time.

Immediately after the destruction, Jeremiah wrote chapters 1,2,4, and 5. In chapter 1, the protagonist is the city of Jerusalem or Zion, her suffering described in great detail. In chapter 2 the focus shifts to God as the executor of the nation's punishment, with 44 verbs describing His actions. Chapter 4 focuses on the suffering of the people of Jerusalem, and chapter 5, as mentioned above, is the conclusion. This structure fits the mindset of the immediate survivors of the tragedy. They oscillate between thoughts of the devastation, their previous state of glory, and disbelief at what God did to them. Only years later, in retrospect, is Jeremiah able to reflect and understand that the root of the problem lies with the people. He then composes chapter 3 and plants it in the middle of the book, seemingly lamenting his own suffering, but in the middle of that chapter he posits his revolutionary message.

In the center of the central chapter of Eicha, in verses 37-39, we read:

לֹא מִי זָה אָמַר וַתְּהִי אֲדֹנָי לֹא צָנָה. (לח) מִפִּי עֲלִיּוֹן לֹא תֵצֵא הַרְעוֹת וְהַטּוֹב. (לט) מִהֲיִתְאוּנֶן אֲדָם חַי גָּבֵר עַל־הַטָּאִי

Traditionally, these verses are translated as a series of questions: can one make something happen if God did not order it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good is decreed?

I think that we should read these sentences not as questions, but as statements:

Who declared it to be? God has not commanded it! From the mouth of the Most High it will not come, evil or good! How can a living man complain? To each his own sins!

The message of Jeremiah to himself and to his listeners is that we must not blame God for the evil which befalls us. God is not a micromanager who is out there to get us for our faults. God created the world and gave us a guide in the form of the Torah to direct our life towards perfection. As the midrash cited above demonstrates, failure to adhere to all the Torah laws, including those governing personal interactions, leads to a deterioration of society and to its eventual demise.

The author of Eicha conveys the message that evil is a natural result of our misdeeds. It is not an arbitrary punishment, such as parking tickets, but rather more like a crash as a result of DIU. Jeremiah tells the people to direct their efforts of reconstruction and rehabilitation after the destruction to themselves.

This message reverberates perfectly with us. Being "observant" in the traditional sense of the word, which tends to focus on ritual, supervision, and dress code, is not enough. In order to mend our ways and reverse evil, we must strive to do good, because just as evil is a natural result of our actions, so is good. On this coming Tisha Be'Av, and as a matter of fact on every day of our life, we should think of what we can do in order to help others. The ancient message, encoded and hidden under layers of verbiage, urges us to realize our potential and use our talents to help those who are less fortunate than us.

And one day, when mankind will do whatever is within its power to eliminate evil in the world, it will be able to turn to God and say “this is where You come into the picture, please take care of those things which are beyond our reach.”

Wishing us all Shabbat Shalom and a meaningful fast,

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

Bonus: Riddle for Parashat Devarim

Those who refused the abundance of the seven were beaten by those compared to the makers of the sweetest of the seven!

Answer to the riddle for Matot:

1. What are the six, surrounded by 2,000, supplemented by 42? Six cities of refuge, each with a perimeter of 2,000 cubits. To the main six, 42 were added.
2. Some of the favorite sites of Naomi Shemer and the poet Rachel are in the Parasha. Where? In the description of the boundaries of Israel: ים המלח, ירדן, ים כנרת, ים התימן