

## **Parsha Devarim - Shabbat Chazon**

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*Parsha D'varim* is always read on “*Shabbat Chazon*,” the Shabbat that precedes *Tisha B'Av*. There is not, of course, any direct connection between *D'varim* and *Tisha B'Av*. There are hints, however, within the parsha which our commentaries use to form a connection. And one of the sources making this connection is *Midrash Eicha Rabbah*, a collection of *midrashim* composed in order to bring deeper meaning and insight to the reading and understanding of the Book of Lamentations/Megillat Eicha, which we read on *Tisha B'Av*.

At the beginning of this collection of *midrashim*, the *midrash* points out the fact that the word “eicha,” with which the Book of Lamentations begins, is a very unusual word and a word that is hard to translate. The word, you see, is an exclamation suggesting the pain, or the anguish created by a particular situation: Oy/Alas/How can this be?! And, this exclamation is found only three times in the entire Bible. *Midrash Eicha Rabbah* points out those three instances.

“*Eicha*” is a word used by three prophets: by Moses,  
by Isaiah and by Jeremiah (*Eicha Rabbah* 1:1).

Each prophet uses the word in response to a different situation. Each use is similar, but there is a nuance to each. For Moses, the word suggests abandonment, for Isaiah the word echoes the feeling of disbelief, and for Jeremiah, there is a sense of existential loneliness. In reading through this *midrash*, in considering those situations that “*eicha*” is used, I find, as well, some parallels between the uses of “*eicha*” and my experiences in Israel over the past month.

In this week’s *parsha*, *Devarim*, Moses speaks to the Israelites, reviewing events and recounting important incidents and obstacles he faced during the years of wondering in the desert. And in that context, he painfully recalls how, following the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the people rejected their responsibilities. God asked them to obey, to listen to Moses. Their answer: No. And, in exasperation Moses recalls his frustration and anger in these words (1:12)

*Eicha esah livadi* – How can I bear the weight of the burdens and bickering of this nation?!

The first *eicha* is the *eicha* of abandonment, when Moses feels alone as he must shoulder the entire burden on his own. This sense of abandonment was something I felt this summer in Israel.

What is it like to know that, at any given moment, something might fall on you from the sky?

What is it like to live your life in 15 second intervals? To think, at every step you take, every place you drive, of the location of the nearest shelter so that I can get there in 15 seconds? That is how a third of Israel lives. And if you live farther away from Gaza, such as in Jerusalem, you might have a minute or two to find safe haven, but the principle is the same. One lives life from siren to siren, from bomb shelter to bomb shelter, and the world stands by and says nothing.

What is it like for a country to deal with domestic, economic and business concerns when people, whose only goal is to kill Jews, are crouched and ready to pounce at your doorstep? On your borders are people,

states and dictators who, if given the means and opportunity, would kill you. What is it like to live in that environment?

In Israel during this past month, there was a very painful awareness of the abandonment of Israel by almost every country. What I found remarkable, however, was that in response to that sense of abandonment, there has grown, within Israeli society, a unique sense of camaraderie. There was awareness that, since no one is there to care for us, we will care for each other. And there was a sense that everyone can do something to support, to encourage and to care for our country and her soldiers during this most difficult time. In Israeli society today there is no *ye'ush* (despair), no sense of *nekama* (revenge), there are no expressions of *sinah* (hatred), of overflowing anger, of the self-righteousness of those you might say "we are right - you are wrong." Rather the overriding concern among Israelis is their sense of resolve not to be dissuaded by a hostile world, their resolve to resist and endure the unjustified criticism of Israel as racist, as tyrannical, as murderous. This is the language of other countries whose goal is not to criticize but to demonize, to de-legitimize, to dismiss and to degrade the Jewish State. And thank God for the U.S., Canada and a handful of others who come to our defense.

Israel appealed to the sense of humanity in the world, to the sense of fairness among people. When rockets began to fall within Israel, unprovoked by any actions of Israel, Israel asked for the support and intervention of others who would want exactly the same kind of support if they were being attacked. Instead, the reaction of the world, with the exception of the U.S., was that Israel must fight alone. For some insisted that these unprovoked attacks were, in fact, Israel's fault.

We have been made a pariah among the nations. Israel has become, for some, a source of embarrassment and a target for derision. Israel, and only Israel, carries the burden of defending itself, protecting its citizens militarily while enduring threats and the condemnations from all sides. We understand Moses' fatigue, the weight he feels, the burden upon him of living without allies on whom he can lean, without friends who can help. Like Moses, Israel wonders as she perseveres, how long can she carry this burden alone? Is there anyone who can help? That is the feeling that accompanies *eicha*/abandonment.

The second "eicha" belongs to the Prophet Isaiah in his vision of what will happen in the future if the people continue their evil ways. He sees the beautiful city of Jerusalem, the place of godliness, holiness and dignity reduced, degraded and defiled. Here are his words (1:21), found in today's *haftara*:

*Eicha hayta le'zona*: How did this faithful city become a harlot? She who was full of justice, she in whom righteousness resided, has now become murderous?

This is the "eicha" of disbelief, an exclamation that comes from a world that does not make sense.

Prior to the beginning of the air attacks by Israel on Gaza, Israel's hope was that the world would act reasonable and justly. As rockets, shot from Gaza, rained down on the areas around Gaza, Israel waited. These shorter range rockets targeted more than a third of Israel's population. Which country in the world would sit idly when rockets flew? But, rather than respond with rockets and air attacks, Israel appealed to the U.N., the international body that was formed for the purpose of stopping the incursions and the aggression between countries. Surely, when a sovereign country is the victim of unprovoked attacks, the world would come to their aid. And so, Israel demanded a halt, hoping for international support. Israel appealed to the U.N. and to countries individually:

- to issue an unambiguous statement of condemnation.
- to warn Hamas that what they are doing is illegal according to the laws of the international community.
- to call upon neighboring countries to urge Hamas to stop the rocket fire.

And what was the response of the U.N.? “We seek a cessation of aggression from both sides.” Israel would not receive the unqualified support she sought and deserved.

And here is the sense of disbelief. Here is Isaiah’s “*eicha*.” It comes from a feeling of incredulousness that what is reasonable, logical and fair is not affirmed, not recognized and not acknowledged. Isaiah had a vision of a Temple destroyed and he wondered: How can this be happening? Israelis have a similar feeling:

How can the world that sees the unprovoked attacks by Hamas, that sees tunnels built with donations of billions of dollars (from the EU, Qatar, Iran), tunnels used for only one purpose: to infiltrate Israel, to kill as many Jews as possible, to terrorize a nation. How can they simply turn a blind eye?

This is the “*eicha*” of Isaiah, the “*eicha*” of disbelief.

And finally Jeremiah, traditionally regarded as the author of the *Megillah of Eicha*. He begins the dirge of Lamentations with “*eicha*.”

*Eicha Yashva Badad*: How is that the city, once filled with people, now sits alone as a widow.

Here, I believe that Jeremiah is not counting how many people remained in Jerusalem after the Temple’s destruction. The Book of Lamentations begins with the prophet asking rhetorically:

Where is God? This was the place where we felt closest to God, the place where God’s presence rested, where we came to celebrate and praise. I no longer feel God’s presence here. I feel as if there is no one who hears. How can God allow this to happen if God does hear our cries?

But this “*eicha*” is not a cry I heard in Israel. Israel and Israelis, they do not feel abandoned by God. Israel takes seriously their obligation to act, as best they can, even in war, in ways that reflect our tradition. But despite the criticism and attacks, Israel does not feel that they have been abandoned by God. Indeed, at every service, at every gathering of people in Israel, there are prayers recited and Psalms read. There is a palpable sense among the people I encountered that we are “*am echad im lev echad*,” one people with one heart and one God.

There is strong support for the army among Israelis, strong support for the government and strong support for the families of the 60-plus soldiers already killed. Israel is a small country, so small that there is not a person who has not been touched, directly or indirectly by the death of a soldier. Even there, mourners do not wonder if God has not abandoned them.

As a visitor, one whose circle of acquaintances is relatively small in Israel, even I had connections to two of the soldiers. I did not know either one personally, but his life and his death interfaced with us and our

children. One 22-year-old soldier grew up in a house around the corner from Tamar. And so in this small community of 400 families, they have been touched by death. And, since I was there, I went to pay a *shiva* call.

As I entered the house, there were all sorts of people there, secular, religious, *Ashkenazim* and *Sefardim*, settlers and others. I know no one there. A seat opened up next to the father and I sat. I explained who I was and my connection to Hoshaya. I told him that I was a rabbi and that his son was being remembered in our community. I asked if he would tell me about his son.

He said: Oren loved life. He was a happy kid with good friends from high school, with a strong *chevre* from the army. He had studied in yeshiva and had friends from there. He continued: Oren was an excellent soldier, but he hated war even though he never hesitated to fight.

Another seat near the wall opened up. So as not to monopolize the father's time, I went to another chair to sit alone. And as I watched, it occurred to me that here I was sitting alone, re-enacting the words of **Eicha**: "eicha yashva badad," in Israel, a nation apart, its kindness overlooked, its character attacked and disparaged. I sat at shiva in disbelief that this scene of pain and anguish was before me. I sat alone thinking of the sacrifices this country makes, not only to survive but to act in ways that reflect the best of our tradition.

We may be alone in the world. The actions of others may be impossible to rationalize. The hatred of Israel and of Jews cannot be explained. But in Israel, in the streets, in the markets and even in houses of shiva, like the house of Oren Noach, z'l, I never once felt as if we were, existentially speaking, alone. I never once sensed that we Jews had abandoned one another. And throughout this entire time, I never once felt that God had abandoned us.

In Israel, life goes on, even during a war. There is a particular quality that Israelis possess that figures into this. In Israel there is neither self-pity nor self-doubt. Instead, there is a quality of unshakable confidence at home, even though everywhere else Israel is maligned. Of course, things do percolate below the surface. Below the surface, there is the hurt of being abandoned by others. There is also a sense of disbelief. That which is so clear to Israel remains invisible to the world. The tunnels are instruments of terrorism and must be destroyed, but the world does not respond. Israel stands alone, without the aid or even the encouragement of others. But in this world, that is part of what it means to be a Jew. And, on the eve of *Tisha B'Av*, despite its suffering and abandonment, Israel never loses touch with our God. And God, I believe, is never far from Israel.