

*Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter*

# *Haftarah of Tishah Be-Av Morning: Themes of Destruction and Exile*

**O**n a day designated to commemorate the destruction of the two Temples and the exile of the Jewish people from their land, it is most appropriate to act in a way that will bring redemption. In keeping with the rabbinic teaching that "One who reports something in the name of the person who said it brings redemption to the world" (Megillah 15a), I want to acknowledge my debt in some of what follows to R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (The Rav) zt"l whose all day presentations on Tishah Be-Av I was privileged to attend for many years and later publish.<sup>1</sup>

There is a disagreement in the Talmud (Megillah 31b) as to the choice of the Biblical passage for the *haftarah* reading on Tishah Be-Av

<sup>1</sup> Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kina*, by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Toras HoRav Foundation: Jersey City, 2006).

morning. The first opinion, cited in the name of Rav, is to read the verses surrounding “*eikhah haytah lezonah kiryah ne’omanah*” – “alas, the faithful city has become a harlot” (*Yeshayahu* 1:21), but the accepted practice is to follow Abaye, who rules that the reading begins with “*asof asifem ne’um Hashem*” – “I shall utterly destroy them, declares the Lord” (*Yirmiyahu* 8:13).<sup>2</sup> This choice is a very appropriate one, for this prophetic passage reflects a number of themes central to the day of *Tishah Be-Av*.

1) “Oh, that my head were water, my eyes a spring of tears! Then I would weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people” (*Yirmiyahu* 8:23).

The simple interpretation of this verse is that *Yirmiyahu* here is self-referential; that the “I” refers to the prophet himself. However, the Rabbis (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yirmiyahu* #279) interpret this “I” to refer to God, that God is the One Who is crying. “Said the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘the Jewish people cry at night, *Yirmiyahu* cries in the day, I will cry by day and by night,’ as it says, ‘I would weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.’”

The notion that God cries in pain and mourning for the destruction of the Temples and for the subsequent exiles of His people, is a central motif in rabbinic literature. One of its most famous formulations appropriates yet another expression of crying by *Yirmiyahu* as reflecting an act done by God Himself. The prophet states, “For these do I weep, my eyes continuously run with water” (*Yirmiyahu* 1:16), once again appearing to refer to himself. But here, too, the Rabbis have a different idea. One example among many is their tradition that, after the destruction of the Second Temple, *Vespasian* filled three ships with leaders from Jerusalem in order to bring them to houses of ill repute in Rome. Knowing to what end they were being transported, those on board – both the men and the women – decided to commit suicide, and they won the support of God for their behavior. Each boatload of people threw themselves into the sea, at which point the *Midrash* concludes, making reference to this verse, “and the Holy Spirit cried out and said, ‘For these do I weep.’”<sup>3</sup>

2. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Tefillah* 13:18; Rama, *Orach Chaim* 559:4.

3. *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah* 1:49. For a similar story, see *Gittin* 57b. See also Abraham

Another example is a rabbinic comment on the verse, "My Lord, the God of Hosts, called that day to weeping and to lamentation" (*Yishayahu 22:12*):

At the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to destroy the Temple, He said, "As long as I am in its midst, the nations of the world will not touch it. But I will close my eyes from it and I will swear that I will not attach myself to it until the time that the [messianic] end arrives, and let the enemies come and destroy it." Fortwith the Holy One, blessed be He, swore by His right hand and placed it behind Him... At that time, the enemy entered the Temple and burned it. When it was burned, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Ino longer have a dwelling place in the Earth. I will withdraw my *Shekhinah* from it and I will ascend to My former habitation"... At that time, the Holy One, blessed be He, was weeping and saying, "Woe is to me! What have I done! I caused my *Shekhinah* to dwell below for the sake of Israel but now that they have sinned I have returned to My former habitation."<sup>4</sup>

The Rabbis go to great lengths to suggest that God not only cries, but acts in other very human ways, as well, to indicate how He Himself is adversely affected, as it were, by the destruction of the Temples: He is no longer happy (*Avodah Zarah 3b*; *Yalkut Shimoni, Eikhah #1009*, end); He mourns (*Berakhot 3a*; *Eliyahu Rabbah #30*); He adopts the behavior patterns of a mourner (*Midrash Eikhah Rabbah 1:1*); He is in pain (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah 2:5*; *Ta'anit 16a*; *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer #40*; *Midrash Tehillim 20:1*); He goes into exile together with His people (*Megillah 29a*; *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Masekhta De-Shirata #3*; *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 32:8*; *Midrash Devarim Rabbah 2:16*); and He,

Rosenfeld, ed., *The Authorised Kinot for the Ninth of Av* (London, 1965), 91. Note also other passages in the *Midrash*, ad. loc., which conclude with God stating that He is crying.

4. *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah, Petichita # 24*. See also *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah 1:1*; *Berakhot 29a*.



too, requires comfort (*Yalkut Shimon, Yeshayahu #443; Pesikta De-Rabbi Kahane, Nachamu #9*).

On the one hand, the Jewish people are “sad” that God, also, is “suffering,” and this is expressed in a beautiful chasidic thought. The verse states: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear evil (*lo ira ra*), for You are with me (*ki atah imadi*)” (*Tehillim 23:4*). My father, R. Herschel Schacter, shared with me many years ago a chasidic interpretation which places the comma in a different place. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear (*lo ira*), “*ra, ki atah imadi*” – “what is bad for me is that You are with me [in Exile].” But, in fact, this central theme reflected here, among other places throughout rabbinic literature, actually served as a tremendous source of comfort for the Jews. It helped the victims of the destruction – and their descendants down through the ages – not to despair, not to feel forsaken or rejected by God; after all, He too is suffering as a result of this tragic event, He too is adversely affected by this catastrophe.

The issue was particularly painful for *Benei Yisrael* not only for obvious reasons, but also because a central feature of the Christian challenge to the Jews was that God had clearly abandoned them because of their rejection of Jesus. In response, Jews believed that, on the contrary, God was also actively sharing in their pain. Their burden was made lighter by their firm belief that God was also sharing in their destiny.<sup>5</sup> This, itself, was for them a great source of consolation.

5. For more on this theme, and for many more examples of its formulations, see A. Marmorstein, *Essays in Anthropomorphism* (London, 1937), 68–76; Norman J. Cohen, “Shekhinta ha-Galuta: A Midrashic Response to Destruction and Persecution,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 13: 1–2 (1982), 147–59; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1979), 54–59; Melvin Jay Glatt, “God the Mourner – Israel’s Companion in Tragedy,” *Judaism* 28 (1979), 72–79; Alan Mintz, *Herban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York, 1984), 57–61; David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, 1984), 32–33; Nehemia Polen, “Divine Weeping: Rabbi Kalonymos Shapiro’s Theology of Catastrophe in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Modern Judaism* 7:3 (1987), 253–69; David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge and London, 1991), 27, 32, 79, 124–30, 148–51, 161–66; David William Nelson, “Responses to the Destruction of the Second Temple in the Tannaitic Midrashim” (doctoral dissertation: New York University, 1991), 92–96,

2) "Behold the sound of the cry of the daughter of my people from a distant land: Is the Lord not in Zion? Is its king not within it? (*Yirmiyahu* 8:19).

According to Rashi (s.v. *hinei kol*; and see *Me'atdat David*, ad. loc.), the prophet is criticizing the people by wondering why they waited to call out to God from distant lands if, after all, He is found in Zion as well? Had they returned to Him there, before going into exile, He surely would have been responsive to their cries. But Radak (s.v. *hinei kol*) interprets this as a challenge that the prophet has the Jewish people level against God, saying to Him, "How could You have allowed the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to take place? After all, are You, our God and King, not in Zion? How could you have let this happen?"

R. Soloveitchik pointed out often that Judaism is fundamentally opposed to Jews challenging God when catastrophe – whether personal or national – occurs, and he quoted several sources to support this contention: the rabbinic injunction that one is obligated to bless God for bad just as one blesses God for good (*Berakhot* 54a); the requirement to recite the blessing of "Blessed be... the righteous judge" when hearing the most horrible news imaginable (*ibid.*); the *teidduk ha-din* prayer recited at the open grave of the closest of relatives; the verse in *Ashrei*, "God is righteous in all his ways and magnanimous in all his deeds" (*Tehillim* 145:17); the silence of Aaron when confronted by the sudden death of two of his sons (*Vayikra* 10:3); and the response of God, "Be quiet! This is My will," to the famous cry of Moshe when he beheld the

174–89, 308–17; Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, 2000), 20–22, 62–63, 119, 132–39, 142–45.

Norman Cohen, "Shekhinta ba-Galuta," p. 148, n. 6, cites Peter Kahn, *Gottes Trauer und Klage in der rabbinischen Überlieferung* (Leiden, 1978), 351, who estimates that there are some seventy-five different rabbinic text traditions that mention God's mourning for the destruction of the Temples and the suffering of the Jewish people in exile.

For the Christian argument that the destruction of the Temple and exile of the Jews proves that God abandoned them, see, for example, David Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 39, 103, 116, 157, 164, 181.



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torturous death of R. Akiva and called out, "This is Torah and this is its reward?" (*Menachot* 29b).

Yet, pointed out the Rav, *Tishah Be-Av* is different. On this day, and only on this day, a special license or permission is granted Jews to challenge, to cry "Eikhah." For an additional example, the verse states, "Willful sinners have dug pits for me which is not in accordance with Your Torah – *asher lo ke-Toratekha*" (*Tehillim* 119:85). The Rabbis here (*Midrash Eikhah Rabbah* 1:37) place into the mouths of the Jews a clearly articulated complaint against God, that by allowing the Gentiles to act in particular ways against His people, He was not abiding by the rules that He Himself had established in His own Torah. After all, the Torah prohibits one from taking the mother with the child (*Devarim* 22:6), it teaches that one may not slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day (*Vayikra* 22:28), and it requires that blood that is shed needs to be covered with earth (*Vayikra* 17:13). Yet, charge the Jews, all of these rules were blatantly violated when the Temple was destroyed and they were sent into exile: parents and children were killed together on the same day and dead bodies were not buried, their blood not being covered. "Behold! This is not in keeping with Your Torah! – *hevei, asher lo ke-Toratekha*," the *midrash* has the Jews cry out. "You have transgressed against Your own Torah," charge the Jews! And, continues the *midrash*, "R. Berekhiah said: 'The Community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, to donkeys You gave burial but to Your children You did not give burial!"'"<sup>6</sup>

In another striking passage, the Rabbis have the Jewish people blame God for the isolation they experienced among the nations of the world when they sought to live among them after the destruction of the Temple; they charge that it was His fault. Commenting on the verse, "*ki atah asita*" – "for it was You who did it" (*Eikhah* 1:21), they teach:

It may be likened to a king who married a matron. He said to her, "Do not converse with your friends, do not borrow from them nor lend them." After some time the king became angry with her and drove her out of the palace. She went about to all her neighbors

6. See Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, 77–78.

but none would receive her and she returned to the palace. The king said to her, "You have acted impudently [by coming back]." Said the matron to the king, "My master, if I had lent them or borrowed an article from them, if I had done something with her or if she had done something with me, would they not have accepted me?" So did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to the Jewish people, "You have acted impudently." Said they to Him, "Master of the Universe, did You not write in Your Torah, 'You shall not intermarry with them; do not give your daughter to their son and you shall not take his daughter for your son' (*Devarim* 7:3)? If we had been lending to them or marrying with them, if his daughter was with me or my daughter with him, would they not have accepted me?" Hence, "For it was You who did it."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, challenging God is, indeed, contrary to Jewish tradition with one exception – on the day of *Tishah Be-Av*. And, in fact, it is a theme that recurs in a number of the *Kinot* we recite on that day.<sup>8</sup>

But what is the basis for this clear departure from normative Jewish practice and behavior? What gives Jews a right to do something on *Tishah Be-Av* which they are clearly enjoined from doing all year round? Once again, the central significance of this day's *haftarah* is highlighted and underscored. R. Soloveitchik suggested that the right to challenge on this day was made possible only because the prophet Yirmiyahu challenged on this day, because he composed a book (see *Bava Batra* 16a) that begins with the word "*eikhah*" – "why." The Rav said,

*Eikhah* is read in order to obtain a *heter*, a permission, to say *Kinot*, to allow us to mourn and grieve over the *hurban ha-Mikdash ve-Yerushalayim*. We could not say *Kinot* without *Eikhah*, because doing so would be an act of arrogance or blasphemy on our

7. *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah* 1:56.

8. See, for example, the *Kinot* beginning "*Eikhah azta beapka*," "*Eiy kof omer*" and "*Atah amarta*" in Abraham Rosenfeld, ed., *The Authorised Kinot*, pp. 93-94, 109-10, 122. See too David Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, pp. 79-82, 86, 99-101, 130-45; Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 65-66.



part. In a word, *Eikhah* is a *matir* for *Kinot*... The mourning for the destruction of the *Beit ha-Mikdash* was considered to be so overwhelming that the prophet, or any other human being, for that matter, was given unlimited freedom to ask, even though the question would be inappropriate, and highly so, in the context of any other event.<sup>9</sup>

And, continued the Rav, while *Megillat Eikhah* is the *matir* for *Kinot* at night, the *haftarah* with its themes of despair, distress, mourning, and challenge is the *matir* for *Kinot* during the day. In both cases, it is the precedent of the *navi Yirmiyahu* that allows the unthinkable to take place, even if only one day a year.<sup>10</sup>

3) "For what reason did the land perish and become parched like the desert, without a passerby? And the Lord replied, 'Because of their forsaking My Torah that I set before them. They did not heed my voice nor follow it. They followed their own willful heart and followed the Ba'alim as their fathers had taught them.' Therefore, thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel... 'I shall scatter them among the nations that neither they nor their fathers have known'" (*Yirmiyahu* 9:11-15).

At the end of the day, in spite of all our questioning and challenge, we take full responsibility for what happened, and acknowledge that "*mi pnei chata'enu gainu mei-artzeinu*," we were exiled from the land because we deserved to be exiled. We recognize that we were guilty of "forsaking [God's] Torah" and therefore we deserve to have been punished. In the words of *Yirmiyahu*, "The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against His word" (*Eikhah* 1:18).

A number of rabbinic passages contain lists of sins felt to be responsible for causing the destruction of the Temples. Perhaps the most famous passage (*Yoma* 9b) attributes the destruction of the First Temple to the sins of adultery, idolatry, and murder and the second one to "baseless hatred (*sinat chinam*)." But there are more. In one passage, the Talmud and *Midrash* list some seven transgressions violated by the

9. Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, 90.

10. *Ibid.*, 92-93.



Jews to account for the destruction: they desecrated the *Shabbat*, they neglected to recite the *Shema*, they caused schoolchildren to neglect Torah studies, they had no shame for one another, they considered great and small to be equal, they did not admonish one another, and they demeaned Torah scholars.<sup>11</sup> There are also other lists pointing to yet additional sins the Jews are said to have committed: they ate leavened bread on Passover, they seized the pledge of the poor in their houses, they dealt oppressively in the matter of the wages of a hired laborer, they robbed the destitute, they ate the tithe that belonged to the poor, and they worshipped idols.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that these lists of sins presented in rabbinic literature, some quite extensive, were not meant to damn the Jewish people, nor to show how terrible they were. On the contrary, they were designed to show how special the Jews still were, to salvage the closeness between God and His people out of a desire to wrest some kind of assurance that God did not abandon them by allowing these extraordinary catastrophes to take place. These lists of sins suggest that there is a certain logic to the unfolding of Jewish history, and that the world proceeds in accordance with some set of established rules that can be explained and accepted. The Jews sinned and therefore the Jews were punished. But such a massive punishment by God needs to be justified, and that can only happen by positing massive wrongdoing on the part of the Jewish people. The goal here is "to shore up the battered paradigm of the covenant" by insisting that the Jews got what they deserved, rather than having to conclude that God, God forbid, capriciously and recklessly abandoned His people, a conclusion that the Jewish people found untenable and simply could not abide.<sup>13</sup>

4) "Thus said the Lord of Hosts: 'Contemplate, summon the dirge-women and they should come; send for the wise-women and they

11. *Shabbat* 119b; *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah*, Salomon Buber ed. (Vilna, 1899), 46b-47a.

12. *Midrash Eikhah Rabbah* 1:28. See too *Bava Me'zia* 30b for yet another example of a sin committed.

13. See Alan Mintz, *Hurban*, 52-57 (for the quote, see p. 57). See too David Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, 173; Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 13, 45, 58, 62, 135.

should come. Let them come quickly and raise up a lament for us, that our eyes may run with tears and our eyelids flow with water” (Yirmiyahu 9:16-17).

R. Soloveitchik pointed out that *Tishah Be-Av* has two separate characters or identities, one as a day of fasting (*yom ta’anit*), the other as a day of mourning (*yom aveilut*). It is a fast day like *Yom Kippur*; in that it begins at night and also does not allow the same five activities prohibited on *Yom Kippur*. However, unlike *Yom Kippur*, it is also a day set aside to mourn for Jewish tragedies, focusing on, but not limited to, the destruction of the Temples and the subsequent exiles of the Jewish people.

There is, however, he said, a major difference between an individual mourner faced directly with the death of a close relative and the entire Jewish people mourning for an event that occurred almost two thousand years ago. The former experiences *aveilut chadashah*, or “new mourning.” The experience is very real, very immediate; the death just took place. The latter, by contrast, is called *aveilut yeshanah*; it is an old, familiar mourning, almost two millennia old.<sup>14</sup> Whereas in the first case, mourning is immediate, instinctive, and spontaneous, in the second case it is removed, far, distant, and remote; there is no immediate sense of pain, grief, or loss. For this reason, suggested the Rav, the prophet here calls upon trained professionals to teach us how to mourn. *Aveilut chadashah* does not require instruction on how to weep; an individual mourner need not be taught to cry or inspired to mourn. Such a reaction is natural, instinctive, and obvious. Only because we are removed and distant, engaged in *aveilut yeshanah*, do we need such instruction, and we summon “dirge-women” to guide us.<sup>15</sup>

14. For this distinction, see *Yevamot* 43b. The Ramban entitles his treatment of *Tishah Be-Av* in his *Sefer Toledot Adam* as “*Biyan Aveilut Yeshanah Ve-Hi Tishah Be-Av*.” See Hayyim Dov Chavel, ed., *Kitvei Rabbanu Moshe ben Nahman*, vol. 2 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1964), 241. For a very interesting analysis of some possible ramifications of this issue, see *She’elot U-Teshuvot Shevet Yaakov* 1:26.

15. For the role of women, in particular, as instruments of heightening lamentation in this and other contexts, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 108-14. The *Mishnah* (*Mo’ed Katan* 28b) describes this type of lamentation (*kinah*) as being conducted by one woman leading and other women responding.



And, indeed, such instruction is crucial. R. Yosef Karo writes at the very beginning of his *Shulchan Arukh* (*Orach Chaim* 1:3) that it is fitting for all pious Jews to be pained and upset by the destruction of the Temple, and, in his commentary, R. Avraham Gombiner underscores the importance of proper intention and sincerity in the fulfillment of this obligation, “*ve-achar kavanat ha-lev hein hein ha-devarim*” (*Magen Avraham*, loc. cit. 1:5). R. Soloveitchik repeatedly stressed that it is not enough for one simply to say the words of *Eikhah* or *Kinot*, to go through the motions and to recite the texts. *Kinot* recitation, said the Rav, is like prayer and the rituals of mourning. Like them, it is *avodah she-be-lev* (service of the heart), requiring an emotional, personal experiential feeling.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the *haftarah* for *Tishah Be-Av* morning serves two functions. One, that it shares with all other *haftarot*, is to express themes relevant to that particular day's Torah reading. The other, unique to it, is to elicit feelings and emotions, to help us be sad and thus mourn for a set of events that have deeply and profoundly defined our lives as a people for the last almost two thousand years.

16. Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, 1-6, and elsewhere.

From Within the Tent: The Haftarah

מִתּוֹכַח  
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Essays on the Weekly Haftarah Reading from the  
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Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

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