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OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

# Today's Torah

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### Shabbat Devarim Shabbat Hazon

(Tish'ah Be'av fast begins at sundown)



**August 10, 2019, 9 Av 5779**

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### Eichah: Praise, Rebuke, or Lament?

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 1:1-27

It is noted in Midrash Rabbah to Eichah, the Book of Lamentations, that three prophets each made a statement to Israel that begins with the word "Eichah," "how." What is more, we will encounter each of those verses this week:

- Moses: "How can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!" (Deut. 1:12, Parashat Devarim)
- Isaiah: "How is the faithful city become a harlot!" (Isaiah 1:21, which is read as part of this week's *haftarah*, the last of the 3 *haftarot* of rebuke that lead from the 17th of Tammuz to the 9th of Av)

- Jeremiah: “How does the city sit solitary, that was so full of people!” (Lamentations 1:1 – attributed by the rabbis to the authorship of Jeremiah – which will be read after Shabbat, as the fast and commemoration are deferred to the 10th as it always is when the 9th falls on Shabbat)

Not only are these three verses read each year in the same week, it is also traditional to read the first two in the distinctive trop (style of cantillation) used for reading the Book of Lamentations on Tisha B’Av. So it would seem that the three are connected, that they carry some similar message, right?

Well, maybe – or maybe not.

The midrash that links these three verses goes on to suggest that they form a progression charting the fall of Israel:

- Moses sees the people at a time of honor, or perhaps ease (there are multiple versions of the midrash). Look up a few verses, and one can see why: “Thereupon I said to you, ‘I cannot bear the burden of you by myself. The Lord your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky...’” (1:9-10). Bickering? Sure, but what’s also going on here is that the people, blessed by God, have simply grown beyond Moses’ capacity to administer their judicial system by himself.
- Isaiah, on the other hand, sees the people at a time when they have grown haughty and reckless. Where once justice and righteousness dwelt, now there are murderers, as the verse goes on to say.
- And Jeremiah addresses the people at a time when they are frightened and anxious, and when they have been disgraced.

Another midrash in Eichah Rabbah further contrasts Moses’s statement and the first verse of Lamentations. If we had been worthy, we could have continued to say about ourselves as the Torah does, “How can I bear unaided” the great number of you? Instead, when we forget our principles and act without justice, then what is said of us is “How does she sit alone.” “Eichah” is a blessing when we act as a community should, and a lament when we do not.

Ah, but there’s more. You thought we were considering the word “eichah”? Well, what about “aiyecah,” which means “Where are you,” and is spelled exactly the same as “eichah” in unvocalized Hebrew? In Gen. 3:9, God directs this question to Adam after he and Eve have committed the first sin in human history by eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. We’ll come back to that in a moment.

In the meantime, the midrash in Eichah Rabbah goes further, breaking the word “aiyecah” down into its two parts “where” (aiyei) and “cah,” but once again substitutes another word with the same letters, “coh,” “thus.” The implication is that when we read “Eichah,” we are in fact asking what has become of the promise inherent in statements that God made on behalf of the Jewish people which begin with the word “Thus”:

Gen. 15:5, God speaking to Abraham: “[Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...] *Thus* shall your offspring be.”

Ex. 19:4, God giving Moses instructions to prepare the people for the revelation at Sinai: “*Thus* shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel...”

That is, aiyecah/eichah implies: what will become of (“where is”) God’s statement of “Thus,” now at this time of national degradation? What has become of our promise, the promise(s) God made to and about us, and the promise we once had to be God’s faithful people?

But we're still not quite done. Two rabbis each think that "Eichah" (and also "Aiyecah") has a consistent meaning, but they dispute what it is:

Rabbi Nechemiah said the word "eichah" means only lamentation. That's what it means by "And the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Gen. 3:9)

Rabbi Yehudah said the word "eichah" means only rebuke. That's what it means by "How can you say, 'We are wise...'" (Jer. 8:8)

The choice of text cited by each rabbi is rather intriguing. Rabbi Nehemiah turns to Gen. 3:9, which he reads, it seems, as God's lament for the entry of sin into human beings and the world. But it's also a bit strange for the rabbi to turn to Adam and to a text that a) is not actually using the word "eichah" but the identically spelled "aiyecah," and b) could as easily be read as a rebuke as a lamentation? Why not cite Lamentations 1:1, for example? Rav Yehudah's text supports his point a bit better, but he too had other choices, Isaiah 1:21 to name an example. These two views and the prooftexts that are meant to support them are each somewhat less stable (I think) than perhaps they were meant to be.

"Eichah" – praise, rebuke, or lament? Let me propose that it depends on answering the Divine call/question "Aiyecah," "where are you?" Are you in community, or alone? Are you in a place where justice is done, or a place where people think and act as if they are above the law? Will you turn to the person next to you and say "It's her fault!," or are you seeking to be a rightful descendant of Abraham and disciple of Moses, trying to be worthy of the blessings and Torah foretold by the word "Thus" (aiyeh coh)?

Eichah – Aiyecah. We have three goes at it in the days coming up, three chances to answer. May we all be worthy to answer God's call as did Abraham (Gen. 22:1 and 11), Jacob (Gen. 31:11 and 46:2), and Moses (Ex. 3:4): "Hineni," "here I am."

Shabbat shalom.

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**Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD**, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.

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