

THE THREE WEEKS: INTRODUCTION TO MEGILLAT EIKHAH (II)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

INTRODUCTION

In the previous issue, I outlined some of the structural features of Megillat Eikhah which highlight the literary elegance and grandeur of this collection of Lamentations. As noted, some of the abecedarian characteristics, so prominent in Eikhah, may represent a state of flux in the formation of the alphabetic sequence. Nonetheless, the overall structure of Eikhah, including five chapters of 22 verses each (except the third, which has 3*22) and each forming an acrostic (except the fifth), invites us to view this collection of dirges on two levels: each chapter can be analyzed independently, but concomitantly we must view the entire collection, both sequentially and thematically, as an integrated whole.

Due to space limitations, we will focus the lion's share of this essay on the third chapter, since it seems to be the axle upon which the entire book turns. In order to properly engage in this analysis, however, we must first pose one critical question which we will revisit throughout the essay: What is the purpose of the inclusion of Megillat Eikhah in the canon? Alternatively, what is the aim of the Meqonen (author of the dirges)? What is he attempting to elicit in his audience and how does that attempt justify the presence of this beautiful work in the T'nakh?

Parenthetically, we must note that not every work that was produced under the guidance of Ruach haKodesh or through prophecy was preserved. Haza"l note that there were hundreds of thousands of prophets operating in Israel; only those prophecies that had eternal significance were preserved. (BT Megillah 14a) Our question, reconsidered, is what eternal significance is found in Megillat Eikhah that makes it worthy of canonization?

Although our questions may seem distinct, the resolution of one will surely be the solution to the other. Once we identify the purpose of the Meqonen, the ongoing value of the Megillah should become apparent. It is strongly suggested that the reader keep the text of Eikhah at the ready.

II

CHAPTER 2: GOD AGAINST HIS PEOPLE

Like the first chapter, the second opens with "Eikhah" - we will discuss the implications and meaning of this word in our analysis of the fourth chapter. Unlike the first dirge, however, this second section presents a wholly different approach to the disaster of destruction.

First of all, the dialogic symmetry, so clear in the first chapter, is lost here. The first 19 verses represent the voice of the Meqonen and the final three are the words of the city.

In addition, and much more significantly, the theological statement of the chapter is one with which we are generally unfamiliar.

When reading about a person, group or nation suffering in T'nakh, we expect the sufferer to recognize his/their own culpability and the causal relationship between wrongdoing and affliction. This perspective is the one adopted throughout Rabbinic literature (e.g. "because of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza was Yerushalayim destroyed" [BT Gittin 55b], "Yerushalayim was destroyed because the people insisted on their rights in court" [BT Bava Metzia 30b] or "on account of the neglect of hallah there is no blessing in what is stored, a curse is sent upon prices,¹⁶ and seed is sown and others consume it" [BT Shabbat 32b]) and our liturgy (e.g. Mip'nei Hata'einu Galinu me'Artzenu - on account of our sins were we exiled from our Land. [Holiday Mussaf]).

The second chapter of Eikhah presents a wholly different picture. Throughout the chapter, replete with descriptions of God as the active destroyer and enemy of His own people, there is nary a mention of the sin of the people. This phenomenon, found in many of the monologues of Iyyov and in several chapters of T'hilim (e.g. 80, 44), is worthy of its own analysis; even though a complete treatment of it is beyond the scope of this shiur, it is important within the "global" view of the book to note this theme - or lack thereof - in this chapter.

The chapter is easily divided into three sections, the first and last neatly taking up the first and last ten verses, respectively, and the middle section, of two verses, representing a transitional passage.

SECTION A: vv. 1-10

In the first ten verses, the Meqonen describes the plight of the city and, in a very different tenor from the first chapter, the anger and enmity of God felt throughout the terrible siege of Yerushalayim and up to and including the breaching of her walls (v. 8-9).

Throughout this section, the Meqonen speaks quite dispassionately, describing the horrors experienced by the city from the perspective of the Attacker.

SECTION B: vv. 11-12:

The chapter turns in its two middle verses:

My eyes are spent with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth, because of the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the babies faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, "Where is grain and wine?" when they faint like wounded men in the streets of the city, when their soul was poured out on their mothers' bosom.

Suddenly, the Meqonen is struck by the overwhelming grief of the city and describes his own outpouring of sadness. His objective observation is replaced with an empathy and identification with the suffering city and her children.

SECTION C: vv. 13-22:

Until this point, the Meqonen has spoken of the city. At this point, he turns and faces the city, speaking to her:

What shall I take to witness for you?...

In this section, he continues to describe the horrors experienced by the city (to what end?) and then provokes the city to take up her weeping:

Arise, cry out in the night; in the beginning of the watches pour out your heart like water before the face of Hashem; lift up your hands toward him for the life of your young children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street. (v. 19)

The function of the two transition verses is now clear. The Meqonen has shared his own expressions of sadness - which stand in stark contrast to the numb silence of the city:

The elders of the daughter of Zion sit upon the ground, and keep silence (v. 10)

Now, he tries to induce the city to follow suit; to shake off the silence born of shock and to cry out to God.

In the end, he seems to have accomplished his goal. The city cries out to God, describing the awful sense of God having not only turned His back on His people, but actively participated in their decimation.

At this point, although no sense of accountability is felt on the part of the city, the Meqonen has accomplished the first part of his goal. The city has woken up and shaken off the silence that enveloped her terror- stricken streets.

III

CHAPTER 3: THE "FULCRUM" OF EIKHAH

The first two chapters, although different in tone, internal development and focus, share the opening word - Eikhah. The third chapter departs immediately from the patterns established in the first two, in several ways:

- 1) It contains 66 verses, three times the 22 of the earlier chapters. The verses are arranged in triplets, such that the first three verses are headed with Aleph, the next three with Bet, etc. In most cases, the triplets represent one thought; indeed, it is possible to describe this chapter as being 22 verses long.
- 2) The verses are inordinately small, such that the total length of the chapter is about equal to each of the first two;
- 3) Although following the abecedarian pattern (again including the Peh-'Ayin switch), the Meqonen ignores the opportunity to begin the chapter with Eikhah.

It is this final point which will launch our analysis of the third chapter, its structure, theme and purpose.

IV

THE STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 3

As we found in the second chapter, the third chapter has three, easily distinguishable sections.

- 1) The first section (vv. 1-24) has the Meqonen, speaking in first person singular, departing from his description of the afflictions of the city and focusing on his own troubled life - that which he has seen and that to which he has been subjected. It also includes his initial response to tragedy.
- 2) The middle section (vv. 25-41) seems to be a theological lesson, describing the way a person ought to respond to affliction.
- 3) The final section (vv. 42-66) includes the reaction of his audience, his own response to their reaction and his own supplication to God.

Note that the first section (24 verses) and the final section (25 verses) are nearly equal in length, suggesting that the middle section serves as the fulcrum of the chapter and that there may be an "echo" relationship between the first and last sections.

V.

THE THEMES OF EACH SECTION

SECTION A: vv. 1-24

1. vv. 1-18: THE TRAVAILS OF THE MEQONEN

As mentioned, the Meqonen studiously avoids the use of the opening Eikhah here; more on that later. Some of the experiences bemoaned here point to the identification of Yirmiyahu as the Meqonen; for instance, v. 6:

He has set me in dark places, like the long ago dead

alludes to Yirmiyahu's being cast into a pit, an idea which is more fully developed towards the end of the chapter (e.g. v. 55 - compare Yirmiyahu 38:6, v. 61-63 - compare Yirmiyahu 20:7)

Why does the Meqonen suddenly begin to publicly express his sorrow over personal suffering?

I'd like to suggest that the Meqonen is charged with one mission - whether by his own aching heart or by Divine caveat - to teach the people how to cry. In the first chapter, he gave voice to the city (after - or before - his own description of the isolation of Yerushalayim). That voice was his own, but by personalizing the pain of the city, he hoped to elicit the desired reaction among her sons and daughters. Instead, as we find in chapter 2, they remained silent, numbed by the shock of desolation and destruction.

Towards the end of the previous dirge, he was successful in getting the people to cry out, but their wails echoed the fatalistic description provided by the Meqonen, seeing God as the enemy who has rallied the enemy around her.

The Meqonen is aware that he must take a different approach to bringing the people out of their spiritual paralysis.

One of the obstacles found in "teaching the Holocaust" is the sheer magnanimity of the destruction defies description and understanding. The number of Jewish children brutally murdered, communities decimated, synagogues defiled, mothers butchered is beyond counting. Reciting statistics runs the risk of turning the victims into numbers - and of making the impact on the uninitiated student inaccessible.

Professor Yaffa Eliach, in this regard, has done us a wonderful service with her "Eishyshok Project", encompassing both a display at the US Holocaust Museum and her recently published book "There

Once Was A Town". The goal of her project is two-fold:

To bring alive the wonderful culture of 900 years of Jewish residence in Eishyshok until World War II; to make the impact of the Holocaust accessible by having the observer/reader identify with individual characters (this may also account for the powerful impact of "The Diary of Anne Frank").

The Meqonen has found that the city is too numb, her children too traumatized, to begin to relate to their own pain and to cry out to God for help. As such, he begins to tell his own story - which is easier for them to hear (and perhaps somewhat comforting, a la "Tzarat Aherim Hatzi Nechamah" [when another person suffers along with you that is a minor source of consolation]), as well as personalized and individualized. Instead of telling the story of an entire city rendered desolate, her children begging for food and God ambushing her as a brutal enemy, he tells his own story of God chasing him, felling him and causing him to fall to the utmost depths. This may be a message that they can more easily hear - and which they may be able to associate, by analogy, with their own sorry plight. Note how many of the phrases he uses in describing his own tragedies are "borrowed" from the descriptions of national disaster in the first two chapters (compare, e.g. Evrato [v. 1 - 2:2], Shibar [v. 4 - 2:9], Darakh Kashto [v. 12 - 2:4]; there are at least 18 words or phrases in ch. 3 also found in the first two chapters).

Although the entire section is devoted to a description of the affliction brought on the Meqonen by God, His Name is omitted until the very last word of the passage - perhaps signifying the sense of Hester Panim (hidden countenance of God) that informs the entire experience.

2. vv. 19-24 SUPPLICATION

In this section, the Meqonen turns to God, asking Him to be cognizant of his pain. He concludes his prayer with a bit of reflection -

The Hessed of Hashem has not ceased, and His compassion does not fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. Hashem is my portion, says my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. (vv. 22-24)

Why is the Meqonen praying aloud, sharing his innermost thoughts with his audience? Again, we must return to his aim in this section. He is trying to get his audience to turn to God, both pouring out their hearts with their pain and reaching out to God as their source of consolation and salvation. Instead of instructing them to cry out and pour out their hearts before God (which he already attempted in ch. 2), he prefers to model this response. As such, he not only prays - aloud, for his audience to hear - but also reflects upon God's everlasting goodness, the foundation of his faith that failure is fleeting, tragedy temporary but Hessed Hashem will outlast them all.

Two notes of liturgical significance: There are quite a few verses and phrases in Eikhah that are used in our regular T'fillot. The "Het-verses" include two:

Has'dei Hashem Ki Lo Tam'nu (=Tamu) [end of "Modim"]

and Rabbah Emunatekhah [Modeh Ani]

SECTION B: vv. 25-41

This entire section - the fulcrum of the chapter, (remember its centralized location, as regards the number of verses, within the chapter) represents a sequential lesson on how a person should respond to affliction. Rav Elhanan Samet of Machon Herzog suggests that this passage is a "memory-jog" on the part of the Meqonen, reminding himself of his "Theology 101" which he learned as a youth and has temporarily forgotten amidst the tragedies surrounding him.

Each of the triplets represents one step in the sequence, as follows:

9. Tet (vv. 25-27): The value of constantly seeking out God;

10. Yod (vv. 28-30): Accepting the afflictions...

11. Kaf (vv. 31-33): ...which leads to God's (everlasting) compassion...

12. Lamed (vv. 34-36): ...since the afflictions have a purpose (to reprove and instruct Man and return him from his errant path)...

13. Mem (vv. 37-39): ...therefore, a person should not bemoan his pain but look inwards for the cause - and justification - of his suffering...

14. Nun (vv. 40-41): ...so, we should all pray to God while engaging in serious introspection.

Note the grammatical shifts in this section. During the first 15 verses, representing the theoretical lesson, no one is addressed and the entire discourse is presented in the third person. Suddenly, in vv. 40-41, the Meqonen uses the jussive tense, exhorting the people to engage in introspection and pray to God:

Let us search and try our ways, and turn back to Hashem.

Let us lift up our heart with our hands to God in the heavens.

SECTION C: vv. 42-66

1. vv. 42-47: THE PEOPLE'S REACTION

It is clear that all six of these verses, although not alphabetically aligned to perfection (the first verse is the end of the Nun-triplet and the final two are the first two of the Peh-triplet), are the voice of the people - all in the first person plural. They represent the people's response to the exhortation of the Meqonen - but his instruction has either fallen on deaf ears or has been horribly misunderstood. Whereas he implored them to look inward, identifying and acknowledging their own culpability, they heed his words in form but not in substance. They cry out to God, fatalistically instead of productively, resigning rather than engaging, pointing an accusing finger to Heaven in place of the self-search of the penitent.

It should be noted that these six verses parallel - both in length and in theme - the end of Section A (vv. 19-24). In those verses, the Meqonen turns to God in response to his afflictions; in these verses the people also turn to God - but fail to do so appropriately, as per his teaching.

2. vv. 48-51: THE MEQONEN

These four verses find the Meqonen returning to his isolated role, evoking the spirit of the second chapter. Indeed, these four verses echo the sentiments of 2:11-12. As noted above, these two verses are the transitional phase of chapter 2, wherein the Meqonen begins to identify and empathize with the pain of the city and her children.

3. vv. 52-66: PRAYER AND SALVATION

These final 15 verses, arranged in five triplets, correspond in apposition to the first section in the chapter (vv. 1-18). The first section details the Meqonen's pain and suffering, mourning for the destruction (albeit in individual terms) and this final section represents his own prayer, anticipating salvation from that selfsame desolation and ruin.

As was the case in the middle section (vv. 25-41), each of the triplets represents a distinct stage. In this case, each "letter" is a step towards God's response to the prayer of the Meqonen, as follows:

- 18. Tzadi (vv. 52-54): Becoming ensnared in the enemy's trap
- 19. Quph (vv. 55-57): Calling out to God
- 20. Resh (vv. 58-60): God's seeing his plight
- 21. Shin (vv. 61-63): God's hearing the sneers of the enemy
- 22. Tav (vv. 64-66): Expectation of God's vengeance and justice

Note how in this section (and, indeed, throughout the Megillah), letters are almost "anticipated" by the text; to wit, the last phrase before the Resh-triplet is *al tiRa*. The last phrase before the Shin-

triplet is kol mah'SH'votam alai. The final phrase before the Tav-triplet is ani manginaTam. It is almost as if the letters are eagerly anticipating their role in the dirge, anxious to play their own role. This may represent the cathartic nature of mourning, in which the entire being is anxious to express all of his feelings about the terrible loss.

VI

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 3

This chapter represents a new attempt by the Meqonen to encourage the people to properly mourn the destruction - with all that is implied by that, emotionally, spiritually and theologically. The chapter is arranged in a semi-chiastic fashion; the first passage mirrored by the final one and the second mirrored by the fourth (vv. 42-47). Having abandoned the Eikhah-opening in favor of an autobiographical dirge, the Meqonen attempts to coax the people to follow his example, to cry out to God while looking inwards for the just cause of the catastrophe. Upon sensing his failure, he returns to the model of empathetic observer and then turns to God in prayer, standing in, as it were, for the people.

VII

CHAPTER 4: THE BEGINNING OF CONSOLATION

Although the fourth chapter looks familiar - again, 22 verses, following the same acrostic pattern and beginning with Eikah, there are some significant distinctions which mark this chapter as unique and will serve to explain the "interjection" of chapter 3.

First of all, this chapter, unlike the first two, is graphic and historic - it doesn't speak of general isolation (as in the first chapter) or God's arrows aimed at the city (ch. 2), rather it describes the ravages of the siege, the breaching of the walls of the city and the destruction of the Temple. The verses here are also shorter than those of the first two chapters, making the more point more powerfully than the earlier descriptions.

Structurally, the critical difference is that the "turning point" in this chapter, unlike the first three - is at the end. The chapter is again divisible into three sections:

1st) vv. 1-10: The overwhelming hunger and suffering caused by the siege of Yerushalayim (winter of 588 BCE -> summer of 586 BCE)

2nd) vv. 11-20: The destruction of the city and the entrance of the enemies (summer of 586 BCE)

3rd) vv. 21-22: Consolation and vengeance.

Again, as in the first three chapters, there are two "figures" engaged in the dirge here: the Meqonen and the city. Unlike the first two, however, the Meqonen does not directly address the city until the very end.

Note that the first section of the chapter is arranged in five passages, each of which consists of two verses:

One) vv. 1-2: "Cheapening" of the "gold" of Tziyyon

Two) vv. 3-4: Overwhelming Starvation of the infants

Three) vv. 5-6: Comparison with the punishment of S'dom

Four) vv. 7-8: Degradation of the leaders

Five) vv. 9-10: The awful consequences of the famine

The second section is made up of three parts - the third of which is the voice of the city:

One) vv. 11-13: God's anger in response to the sin of the leaders

Two) vv. 14-16: Isolation, as a result of the people's sin (note the "poetic justice" in v. 16)

Three) vv. 17-20: The city acknowledges its wrongdoing, in relying on foreign nations and on its human leaders to save it.

At this point, the Meqonen is finally able to begin consoling the people, allowing that while the daughter of Edom may rejoice now, her time will come and the pain of daughter of Tziyyon will end.

What has allowed for this sudden outburst of hope and consolation? It seems that there is only one answer - the readiness on the part of the people to own up to their role in their own downfall. It is only with acceptance of responsibility that introspection can begin - and therein lies the key to consolation and salvation.

This chapter, like the first two, begins with Eikhah. Eikhah literally means "how?", but the rhetorical implication is "how could this be so?" It is generally used to compare a previously glorious situation with a presently dismal one - e.g. Yeshayah 1: 21. That is why there is no room for Eikhah in the third chapter - only an observer can utter Eikhah, not the subject of the dirge himself.

Why, then, did Yirmiyah interpose the third, non-Eikhah chapter, between the first two and the fourth?

VIII

THE STRUCTURE OF MEGILLAT EIKHAH

I believe that the entire structure reflects an educational program.

At first, the Meqonen, as a dispassionate observer, compares (thus Eikhah) the formerly bustling metropolis with the widowed city in isolation. He then gives voice for the city to say, pretty much the same, in her own words. This has not effectively woken the people up, as his words contain nothing to move them beyond self-pity.

In the second chapter, he compares (again Eikhah) the formerly close relationship with God to the present enmity felt by the people - and now he implores them to cry out to God. All that they can do is give voice to their own pain, but without seeking God.

In the third chapter, he abandons the Eikhah model, preferring to personalize the description (as above) - which makes the Eikhah-opening inappropriate. Once the people do not take to his "theodicy" lesson, he turns back to the role of empathetic observer, but gives hope through his own prayer.

The only solution is to, once again, compare the glorious past with the awful present. Instead of comparing Yerushalayim's esteem among the nations with her present isolation (ch. 1) or Yerushalayim's loving relationship with God with the present (sensed) enmity, he compares Yerushalayim with itself. Note that each comparison in the chapter is internal - holy stones are cast out, pampered youth are starving etc. This comparison, artfully aimed at the heart of the people, stirs them to note their own deficiencies that led to this disastrous turn of events. It is only at this point that consolation can even be glimpsed, along with a healthy dose of righteous anger aimed at the enemy (compare 4:22 with T'hilim 137:8-9)

IX

SUMMARY

The question with which we opened this analysis can now be addressed, nonetheless. Eikhah is part of the canon because it walks us, slowly and deliberately, through the stages in our own awakening to disaster, allowing us to proceed through the various obstinate stages of denial and anger before we can open up our hearts to look inside and accept our own responsibility. We learn many things from this elegantly structured, beautifully written collection of dirges. We learn to be patient with one who is suffering, not to abandon our job of consolation - to always maintain our hope in God and

to be ever-conscious of His everlasting Hessed, which outlives any and all suffering and affliction.

Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and **Torah.org**. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.