Channeling Loneliness

Eicha Yashva Badad

Megillat Eicha opens by expressing surprise at Yerushalayim’s and the Jewish people’s loneliness and isolation. This loneliness is the central theme of the entire first perek, which describes how the city once full of people has become like a widow (1:1), all her friends have betrayed her and become her enemies (1:2, 19), and she has become like a nida (1:8). The perek emphasizes four times (1:2, 9, 16, 21) that no one cares enough to even offer consolation. It is this that Yirmiya cries for – לע אחל וברוכה עד כי, which describes how the city once full of people has become like a widow (1:1), all her friends have betrayed her and become her enemies (1:2, 19), and she has become like a nida (1:8). The perek emphasizes four times (1:2, 9, 16, 21) that no one cares enough to even offer consolation. It is this that Yirmiya cries for – לע אחל וברוכה עד כי.

Loneliness in the Torah

The difficulty of loneliness is already described by the Torah. Moshe references it in the words אְנָהָ אֶשָּׂא לְבַדִּי (Devarim 1:12). The burden of Jewish leadership is difficult; carrying it alone is unbearable. In fact, Hashem identifies loneliness as what makes Man incomplete as single – אל תבהר את הדבר לוך ויאת איהו לוך (Bereishit 2:18). When we are alone is also when we are most vulnerable. The Torah emphasizes that Ya’akov Avinu was attacked when he was alone – וַיִּבָּדָד יְהֹוָה תְּאַחֲמוּ בַּאֲחֵז בִּי (Bereishit Rabbah 3:9).

Am Levadad Yishkon

All this having been said, being alone is not always a bad thing. Bilam’s blessings include a description of the Jewish People asDam לְבַדּוֹ מֵאֲחֵז בִּי – a blessing because our separation from other nations helps us focus on our relationship with Hashem. Loneliness makes real relationships possible. Love builds off two people’s loneliness and crystallizes into marriage when the two commit to one another to the exclusion of all others. Similarly, a meaningful relationship with Hashem hinges on people feeling lonely without Him. Dveikut with another is only possible when one feels for no one else.

These kinds of relationships help people find true and meaningful support and strength. Ya’akov Avinu’s relationship with Hashem helped him vanquish the mysterious יֹרְדָה מַּיִם כִּי רָחַק מִמֶּנִּי מְנַחֵם מֵשִׁיב נַפְשִׁי and we – his descendants – learn from him how to find similar celestial-inspired strength When we live this way, we and Hashem share a mutually exclusive relationship – alone with each other. This relationship, described in Shirat Ha’azinu as יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּטַח כֹּלְדָו, allows for true security with another is only possible when one feels for no one else.

The Eicha Call to Hashem

Appreciating this, Megillat Eicha channels its sense of loneliness towards a relationship with Hashem. Perek Aleph ends with a call to Hashem – “I called for my lovers but they deceived me... See Hashem for I am in distress... There is none to comfort me” (1:19-21). Perek Bet emphasizes that Hashem is the One who has brought the suffering. It is His way of calling us to turn to Him. “Hashem has done that which He devised. He has fulfilled His word that He commanded in days of old. Arise, cry out in the night: in the beginning of the watches pour out your heart like water opposite Hashem’s face...” (2:17-19).

The pivotal, personal Perek Gimel recognizes that Hashem has isolated us from the rest of the world to focus us on our relationship with Him. Suffering can sometimes be good and helpful for one who needs to be alone to reflect and appreciate the relationships he or she has abused (3:27-28). This reflection leads to a return to Hashem later in the perek – “Let us search and try our ways and turn back to Hashem. Let us lift up our heart with our hands to G-d in the heavens. We have transgressed and have rebelled...” (3:40-42)

Am Yisrael has gotten the message. Hashem orchestrated the mass betrayal and isolation so we would appreciate the need to turn and return to Him.

Tisha B’Av 5780

Even with our return to Israel and the building of our own State, we remain isolated and lonely. This year, that loneliness is reinforced by the Corona-forced separation from one another. May we learn to internalize the message of this loneliness and channel it towards a turn and return to Hashem asking Him to return us to Him. May our doing so merit His response.

2. Ibid 32:25.
4. See HaEmek Davar about the importance of Jews retaining their unique distinct identity and not assimilating.
7. See Bereishit Rabbah 77:1.
10. With the relationship with Hashem available to all of us at all times, no Jew is ever alone.

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