As we proceed day-by-day through the Three Weeks (Bein HaMeTzarim), the sense of gloom and despondency over the loss of the Beit HaMikdash steadily intensifies. As Rav Soloveitchik points out, the various phases of the Three Weeks are likened – in inverse order – to the three-tiered structure of Jewish mourning. The year of mourning approximates the start of the period on 17 Tammuz, when (in Ashkenazic practice) we avoid all occasions of festivity. The 30 days of Shloshim are akin to the Nine Days when we do not take haircuts, eat meat or drink wine. Tisha B’Av, the “Black Fast” itself, mimics the Shiva, when we sit sullenly upon the floor, without shoes, awash in tears, not even greeting one another. Perhaps the ultimate depth of our despair is embodied in the reading of Megillat Eicha on Tisha B’Av night. Eicha (איכה) written by the Navi Yirmiyahu – eye witness to the destruction of the First Beit HaMikdash by the Babylonians – is the only one of the Megillot read solely at night. Ruth, Kohelet and Shir HaShirim are read in the morning hours, offering messages of love, light and optimism. Megillat Esther is recited both morning and evening, leading us in a path from impending doom and destruction to salvation and joyous celebration. But Eicha remains cloaked throughout in darkness – the seemingly endless darkness of the Exile.

Three references to איכה encapsulate both the emotions of this night as well as the underlying causes of the Churban.

First, Moshe Rabbeinu laments: איכה – “How can I bear your struggles alone?” (Devarim 1:12). Moshe was never one to shirk from work or challenge, but he recognizes that in the final analysis, it is the nation that must carry the burden and not the individual. While we are fond of saying “great leaders make great nations,” Moshe, in his unparalleled wisdom, knew the truth is quite the opposite: A great people will invariably cause great leaders to emerge.

As the Gemara points out, we failed as a nation when we dismissed the Sages and neglected to properly educate our children, when we failed to call out the evil-doers, when we engaged in the widespread desecration of the Shabbat (Shabbat 119b), when we practiced rigidity rather than flexibility in the Law (Bava Metzia 30b) and, of course, when we engaged in cynical, baseless hatred (Yoma 9b). Only when the nation as a whole fails so miserably can a disaster as great as the Churban occur.

Then Yeshayahu wails (1:21), איכה – “How has this faithful city become like a prostitute!” Lusting after the practices of the nations, she sells out her principles to the lover who offers the highest bid. A harlot has no intrinsic identity, no unique character. She is a body (politic) for hire; her passions are directed solely by those who pay her fee. In spurning our true benefactor, our eternal soulmate, Israel forfeited G-d’s loyalty to us, leading to our destruction.

Finally, Yirmiyahu cries out in Eicha’s opening verse: איכה – “How did Yerushalayim become so alone, so like a widow?” Just as a woman who has lost her husband feels abandoned, deserted, defenseless, we left ourselves vulnerable to the insidious nations surrounding us. With the demise of our relationship with G-d – and our unwillingness to repent and rekindle that holy union – we became prey to our enemies. They sensed we no longer had our partner to guard and protect us, and so we were decimated.

Using the same letters of איכה (Bereishit 3:9), G-d calls out to Adam – איכה – Ayeka, where are you?! That first Adam replied, ואехא – And I hid. But we know we cannot escape, or hide, or avoid facing G-d. We must confront our actions, recognize our failings, and commit to correcting the national sins which resulted in our dispersion and degradation. Only then will Tisha B’Av truly become a Moed, and its dark countenance turned into a great and shining light.