

Three Eicha's — Pick Your Choice

Category: Devarim,Devarim

The key-word of Lamentations, Eicha, is said in several places in Tanach. What does it teach us about our choices?

The Conversos

Today is Tisha B'Av, but since it is forbidden to fast on Shabbat, the fast has been postponed to Saturday evening and Sunday.

Tisha B'Av is not only about the destruction of the Temple; many of the calamities that have befallen the Jewish people over the generations have occurred on Tisha B'av as well.

Perhaps the most famous such case was the Spanish Expulsion. In 1492, Tisha B'av was the last day for the Jews who did not want to convert to Christianity to leave Spain. Most historians estimate their number to be between 40,000 and 100,000, but an even larger number remained in Spain and had no choice but to convert to Christianity.

After their mass conversion, Spain had hundreds of thousands of people known as "New Christians," or with the more derogatory name, "Maranos." Among the Jewish people, they were called, "Anusim" ("those who live under compulsion").

As you can imagine, life for the conversos changed immeasurably. For centuries, dating back to the destruction of the second Temple and even before, Jewish life has revolved around the synagogue and the Jewish community. It is that "togetherness," that cohesion, that kept the Jewish people going.

Suddenly, everything moved underground. No more services in the synagogue, no more weddings, bar mitzvahs, brisses, etc. It was all done privately, in secret.

Being Jewish now became a focus mainly on the mitzvot you *don't* do. Open Jewish observances were dangerous; eating matzah on Passover or lighting Chanukah candles could bring someone to receive the death penalty and be burned publicly in the city square. Therefore, they concentrated on what not to do

— not to eat pork, not to mix meat with milk, not to eat chametz on Passover, and so on. After all, it is difficult to catch a person and punish him for what he did *not* do.

Fasting, for example, is something that the Conversos were careful to observe, because, again, it was relatively easy to accomplish in their circumstances, especially as it could be interpreted as pious Catholic behavior.

Now, we all know that Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year, and it is also the most important fast in the Jewish calendar. Afterwards, on the list of priorities, comes the fast of Tisha B'Av.

But which fast was the most important for the Conversos? (Question to the audience).

The answer is, interestingly, the Fast of Esther. According to some scholars, the Fast of Esther was considered as important as Yom Kippur, and perhaps even more so. Why? Because Esther was a role model of a Converso!

The scroll of Esther says that Mordechai commanded Esther not to reveal “her people and her homeland.” During all those years that Esther lived in the king’s palace until the story of Purim, she lived as a Converso. She kept kosher by being a “vegetarian,” she avoided drinking their wine, and so on and so forth. She held her own as a Jew, and in the end, she was the one who saved the entire Jewish people.

For the Conversos, she became a figure of inspiration. Her image gave them the strength to survive the terrible struggles of their day to day life, where on the one hand, they had to attend church every Sunday, and on the other hand, keep their Judaism alive in their hearts.

In fact, they became so attached to this fast that there were Conversos who fasted not only for one day but for three days and three nights, like the original fast that Esther fasted with the Jews of Shushan. There is even evidence that one young Converso woman from a well-known family died as a result of strictly observing the three-day fast.

There is another reason that they connected with Queen Esther. In public Jewish life, and in particular in the synagogue, men are more dominant. But when

Judaism moved into the home, the women became the leaders.

Among Conversos, it was the mother or the grandmother who kept the Jewish spark alive. She was the one who kept the kitchen kosher without anyone realizing, and she was the one who taught the children to recite “Shema Yisrael” — the secret Jewish ‘identifier’ among Conversos. She was the one who maintained family purity. The home is women’s territory; the men were pushed aside to a certain extent, and the women were the ones who demonstrated true self-sacrifice to preserve what little they could of Jewish tradition.

To this day, there are all kinds of tribes in South American countries that have a custom on Friday before sunset to go down to the basement and light two candles and then cover them. In other words, it is specifically the women’s customs that have survived.

Reintegrating

The admiration for Queen Esther was so great, they would call her “Santa Esther”!

That brings us to the more tragic part of the Conversos’ story:

How many generations can preserve their identity in such a situation? The first generation still remembered the synagogue, the prayers, the dancing on Simchat Torah, and so on. But in the second or third generation — a three-year-old boy who goes to church with his parents every week, learns about Christianity in school, and that’s the only world he knows — even when they reveal to him at an older age that he’s Jewish, and even if he tries to connect with his Judaism, his frame of reference is Christianity. When he wants to live with Queen Esther, he uses the terminology he knows best, “Saint Esther.”

After three or four generations, many Conversos managed to escape Spain. Some of them immigrated to the Netherlands, a country that maintained religious freedom and allowed Jews to live as they wished.

But when they arrived there, it was very difficult for them to become accustomed to normative Jewish life. All their knowledge about Judaism came from reading the Bible. But the Bible doesn’t say anything about tefillin, it just says “And you

shall tie it to your hand....” Black boxes with straps hanging from both sides was something they had never seen before. And what is that sheet that you are wrapping around your body?

You see, they got used to being Jews “at heart” and focusing on interpersonal mitzvot, like being a good person. Mitzvot between man and G-d, rituals, like a mezuzah, a lulav, and so on, were totally foreign to them.

This resulted in separate communities. In the Netherlands, there was an Ashkenazi community and a separate, Portuguese community which was made up entirely of Converso Jews who fled the terror of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. To this day, there is a famous “Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue” in Amsterdam which belongs to that community. In that synagogue, the floor is made of sand, to remind themselves of the time they had to gather quietly in basements and cellars in Spain. Likewise, there is no electricity and the lighting is only with candles; hundreds and perhaps thousands of candles illuminate the synagogue — which is still active to this day.

The Three Eicha’s

Tonight, we open the fast of Tisha B’Av by reading the scroll of Lamentations. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah, and it describes the destruction of the first Temple. It is called Eicha (“How can it be”) because it is the first word in the scroll; the prophet laments, “Oh how can it be that the city once teeming with people sits in isolation...”

Now, this is not the first time that the word Eicha appears in the Bible; Jeremiah is not the first to use this word.

Today, we read Parshat Devarim. Close to the beginning, Moses says, “Eicha—O how shall I carry by myself, your difficulties...”

Moses, five weeks before his death, recounts what happened almost forty years earlier to the generation about to enter the land of Israel. He tells them that he said to G-d, “Since the Jewish people are a massive nation, great both in quantity and spiritual quality, how can I — even a holy man like Moses — lead such a great and vast nation?” (3 Av 5741).

We read the word “Eicha” not only in the Torah but also in the haftarah:

The haftarah is chapter 1 in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah, who lived about a hundred years before the destruction of the First Temple, sees the decline of the Kingdom of Judah as a result of the spiritual degeneration of the people, and he reproves them for their behavior. He uses the word Eicha too: “Eicha—How can it be that the faithful woman has become a harlot?” He reproves the people of Israel, saying that Jerusalem, once filled with the righteous judgment, was now rife with murderers and so on and so forth (Isaiah 1:22-23). He warns them of the future to come, if they continue down this path.

The Midrash says: “Three prophesied with the term Eicha: Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah... Rabbi Levi said a parable: A noblewoman had three assistants. One witnessed her during her time of tranquility, and one saw her in her vanity, and one saw her in her wretched state. Similarly, Moses saw Israel in their dignity and peace, but he said, ‘Eicha— How can I do it by myself?’ Isaiah saw them in their vanity, and said, ‘Eicha—How can it be that the faithful woman has become a harlot?’ Jeremiah saw them in their wretchedness, and said, ‘Eicha—Oh how can it be that the city once teeming with people sits in isolation...?’”

Today, we will read all three Eichas, the one in this week’s parshah, the one in the Haftarah, and the one of Jeremiah.

These three situations do not have to be in different generations; it can also happen at the same time, in different places throughout the world. There are Jewish communities today in a situation like the one Moses saw, “in dignity and peace,” like the Jews in Israel, the USA, and so on. There are places which are “vain,” as Isaiah saw. And unfortunately, there are Jewish communities in Ukraine that are half-destroyed; “Eicha—Oh how can it be that the city once teeming with people sits in isolation...?”

The Rebbe once said that the question of Moses could be the question of every Jewish child. Every person might ask himself, “Eicha—How will I bear it alone?” How will I draw the strength to fulfill G-d’s mission in the world? The answer, the Rebbe says, is that just as G-d gave Moses the strength to fulfill his mission, He gives every Jewish child the power to fulfill his mission — as a shliach of Moses — as well.

Then the Rebbe quotes the midrash which says: “If you had been worthy, you

would read the Torah portion of Eicha. But now that you have not been worthy, you will read the Eicha of Lamentations.”

“This is the Torah’s message,” the Rebbe said, “in order to eliminate the reason that leads to the Eicha of Lamentations, we need to observe the Eicha of Moses — we must lead ourselves and those around us in the spirit of Moses, the spirit of the Torah” (3 Av 5741, Sichos Kodesh vol. 4 pg. 325).