

מאמרי תורה – Torah Talk



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Parashat Devarim
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פרשת דברים
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Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 1:1-3:22

In this *parasha*, Moshe recounts to the Bnei Yisrael episodes from the 40 years in the wilderness; he gives the Bnei Yisrael encouragement regarding their upcoming conquest of the land of Cana'an.

During the retelling of the history, Moshe reminds the Bnei Yisrael of one of many times he turned to God, saying (1:12): “אֵיכָה אֶשָׂא, לְבַדִּי, טְרַחְתְּכֶם וּמִשְׁאָלְכֶם, וְרִיבְכֶם. – How can I alone bear your burdens, and your encumbrances, and your strife?”

I believe that the use of the first word in this verse, אֵיכָה – *eichah* (which I translate above as “how”), is no coincidence. This is the Shabbat immediately preceding *Tisha B'Av*, when we mourn the destruction of our בתי מקדש – *Batei Mikdash* (Temples) and read the Book of Lamentations, which is known in Hebrew as אֵיכָה – *Eichah*.

The word אֵיכָה evokes images of the Jewish nation lying in ruins not once, but twice. The Talmud explicitly states that one of the reasons for the destruction of the second Temple was שנאת חנם – *Sinat Chinam* (baseless hatred); “our burdens, encumbrances, and strife” with one another. Would we have behaved differently all of the years between the Exodus from Egypt and the Babylonian exile had we been able to foresee the eventual destruction of our holy house of worship and the dispersion of our people? Probably not, given that we were granted a reprieve, being allowed to return to the Land and rebuild the Temple, only to repeat our same mistakes and witness the second destruction and exile a mere 600 years later. And here we are 2000 years later, waiting for a second reprieve. Perhaps as we encounter this verse in the year 5777, we can take to heart the results of continued strife within the Jewish ranks and take steps to minimize or eliminate it.

Further, the word *eichah* as it appears in this week's *parasha* is incompletely translated above. The implication of the word is that of an expression of emotion rather than a

question: “how can it possibly be!” A better translation for the verse above might be: “How can I possibly bear your burdens, and your encumbrances, and your strife all on my own?”

Likewise, the beginning of the very first verse of מגילת איכה – *Megilat Eichah* (the Book of Lamentations), “איכה ישבה בדד, העיר רבתי עם”, would be translated: “How can it possibly be that the city that was full of people sits solitary?” The biblical word *eichah* consistently indicates shock and horrified amazement at a situation.

The word איכה also transmits to us some hidden comfort from two other biblical uses of similar words. In מגילת אסתר – *Megilat Esther* (the Book of Esther), when Esther is throwing herself on the mercy of the king to save her people, she says, “כי איכָּךָ אויבִּל, וְרֵאִיתִי, בְּרָעָה, אֲשֶׁר-יִמָּצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי; וְאִיכָּכָה אויבִּל וְרֵאִיתִי, בְּאַבְדֹן מוֹלַדְתִּי – for how can I possibly endure seeing the evil that will shall come to my people? And how can I possibly endure seeing the destruction of my kin?” The use of the emotion-laden word איכָּכָה – *eichachah* (“how can I possibly”) could conceivably have helped sway the king’s feelings in her favor and ultimately have saved the Jews of Shushan and of Persia.

Finally, in the first human story of the Torah, that of Adam and Chava eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad, Hashem opens the dialogue with them by asking איִכָּה – *aiyeka* (“Where are you?”). Although envoweled differently, yielding a different word, in the unvoweled Torah, this word is written precisely the same as the word איִכָּה, again, I believe, not coincidentally. God, on a regular basis, either asks us or wants us to ask ourselves “Where are you?” Are we contributing to strife and burden in the world or are we looking around and alleviating it where possible?

As we read or hear the word *eichah* this Shabbat, or on Monday night in synagogue during *Tisha B’Av* services, let us all remember to ask ourselves, איִכָּה – where are we?

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What kinds of burdens did the Bnei Yisrael place on Moshe in the wilderness? If you were Moshe, how might you have felt about this?
- What kinds of strife exist today among the Jewish people? What might you be able to do to alleviate some of that strife?