Confronting Tragedy: Thoughts on Eikha

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and he teaches advanced Tanakh classes at Yeshiva University. He serves as Tanakh Scholar at Ben Porat Yosef Yeshiva Day School. A prolific author and lecturer, he, his wife and children live in Teaneck, New Jersey. This article appeared in his book Vision from the Prophet, Counsel from the Elders, published by the Orthodox Union in 2013.

LAMENTATIONS

PUTTING THE MOUTH BEFORE THE EYE

INTRODUCTION

For over forty years preceding the destruction of the first Temple (627-586 B.C.E.), Jeremiah incessantly warned his people that Jerusalem, the Temple, and their lives were in the gravest jeopardy. The people mocked, threatened, and physically mistreated the prophet. Most scorned his message, thereby sealing their own doom.

Finally, Jeremiah's nightmarish visions became a reality. The Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem, killing and plundering, and burning the city to the ground. Other nations, including spurious allies, mocked Israel, looted her wealth, and even turned Jewish captives over to the Babylonians. The Temple was destroyed, and most of the humiliated survivors were dragged into captivity, wondering if they would ever see their homeland again.

The Book of Lamentations describes this calamity from the perspective of an eyewitness. It contains five chapters. Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 contain

twenty-two verses each, and chapter 3 contains sixty-six verses (three verses per letter). Chapters 1-4 are arranged in *aleph-bet* acrostics. There is meaning in the content of Lamentations, and in its structure. Both make the book particularly poignant.

Chapter 1 casts the destroyed Jerusalem as a woman whose husband has abandoned her. While this initial imagery evokes pity, the chapter then adds that she took lovers and therefore deserved this abandonment. Israel admits that she has sinned and asks for mercy and for God to punish her enemies.

Chapter 2 asks: how could God be so harsh? The tone shifts from one of shame and despair to one of anger. There also is a shift of emphasis from Jerusalem as a victim to God as the Aggressor. At the end of the chapter, there is another plea for God to help.

Chapter 3 presents the voice of the individual who begins in a state of despair but who then regains hope. He expresses a desire to restore order and return to the pre-destruction state.

Chapter 4 is a painful step-by-step reliving of the destruction. It also contains lamenting over how the destruction could have happened, and it curses Israel's enemies.

Chapter 5 depicts the people left behind as looking at the ruins, absolutely miserable. They call on God for help, but conclude with disappointment and uncertainty as to what the future will bring.

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAGEDY[1]

Chapter 1 acknowledges that the destruction of Jerusalem is God's work (1:12-15). While the main theme of chapter 1 is mourning, the author repeatedly vindicates God for the disaster, blaming it squarely on Israel's sins (see 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22).

Throughout chapter 1, the author adopts a rational, transcendent perspective. Reflecting an ordered sense of the world, the *aleph-bet* order is intact, poetically showing a calculated sense of misery.[2]

While chapter 1 acquits God, chapter 2 adopts a different outlook. Suddenly, the author lashes out at God:

How has the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not His footstool in the day of his anger!...He has bent His bow like an enemy...He has poured out His fury like fire... (Lam. 2:1-4)

Chapter 1 gave the author a chance to reflect on the magnitude of this tragedy: death, isolation, exile, desolation, humiliation. In this context, the point of chapter 2 is clear: although Israel may be guilty of sin, the punishment seems disproportionate to the crimes. *Nobody* should have to suffer the way Israel has. The deeper emotions of the author have shattered his initial theological and philosophical serenity.

This emotional shift is reflected in the *aleph-bet* order of chapter 2. While the chapter maintains the poetic acrostic order, the verse beginning with the letter *peh* precedes the verse beginning with *ayin.* Why would Lamentations deviate from the usual alphabetical order? At the level of *peshat*, one might appeal to the fluidity of the ancient Hebrew *aleph-bet*, where the order of *ayin* and *peh* was not yet fixed in the biblical period. If this is the case, then there is nothing unusual or meaningful about having different orders since each reflects a legitimate order at that time.[3]

On a more homiletical level, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 104b) offers a penetrating insight. The Hebrew word *peh* means “mouth,” and *ayin* means “eye.” The author here put his mouth, that is, words, before what he saw. In chapter 1, the author evaluates the crisis with his eyes, in that he reflects silently, and then calculates his words of response. But in chapter 2, the author responds first with words (*peh*) that emerge spontaneously and reflect his raw emotions.

In the first section of chapter 3, the author sinks further into his sorrow and despairs of his relationship with God (verses 1-20). However, in the midst of his deepest sorrow, he suddenly fills with hope in God’s ultimate fairness (3:21-41). The sudden switch in tone is fascinating:

And I said, My strength and my hope are perished from the Lord; Remembering my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul remembers them, and is bowed down inside me. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. The grace of the Lord has not ceased, and His compassion does not fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. (Lam. 3:18-24)

The final section of chapter 3 then vacillates between despair, hope in God, and a call to repentance:

Let him sit alone and be patient, when He has laid it upon him. Let him put his mouth to the dust—there may yet be hope. Let him offer his cheek to the smiter; let him be surfeited with mockery. For the Lord does not reject forever, but first afflicts, then pardons in His abundant kindness. For He does not willfully bring grief or affliction to man…Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord; Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in heaven: We have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not forgiven. You have clothed Yourself in anger and pursued us, You have slain without pity. (Lam. 3:28-43)

In chapter 4, there are further details of the destruction. Horrors are described in starker terms, climaxing with a description of compassionate mothers who ate their own children because of the dreadful famine preceding the destruction (4:9-10). The author blames God for the destruction (4:11), blames Israel for her sins (4:13), and expresses anger at Israel's enemies (4:21-22). In both chapters 3 and 4, the poetic order remains with the *peh* before the *ayin*, reflecting the author's unprocessed painful feelings. The author's conflicting emotions create choppiness in the thematic order and logic:

Those who were slain with the sword are better than those who are slain with hunger; for these pine away, stricken by want of the fruits of the field. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they were their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people. The Lord has accomplished His fury; He has poured out His fierce anger, and has kindled a fire in Zion, which has devoured its foundations...It was for the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, who have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her. (Lam. 4:9-13)

Chapter 5 opens with a desperate appeal to God, a profound hope that He will restore His relationship with Israel. After further descriptions of the sufferings, the book ends wondering whether the Israelites would ever renew their relationship with God:

You, O Lord, are enthroned forever; Your throne is from generation to generation. Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long? Turn us to You, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old. But You have utterly rejected us; You are very angry against us. (Lam. 5:19-22)

Such a painful confusion leaves the reader uneasy. The author does not propose any solutions or resolution to the state of destruction. Reflecting this passionate plea, chapter 5 has no *aleph-bet* acrostic at all. With no clear end of the exile in sight, the

author loses all sense of order. Perhaps the fact that chapter 5 still contains 22 verses suggests a vestige of hope and order amidst the breakdown of the destruction and exile.

To review: the *aleph-bet* pattern goes from being completely ordered in chapter 1, to a break in that order for three chapters. The last chapter does not follow the controlled *aleph-bet* order at all, signifying a complete emotional outburst by the community. The book ends on a troubling note, questioning whether or not it is too late for Israel to renew her relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

Although Lamentations attempts to make sense of the catastrophe of the destruction, powerful and often conflicting emotions break the ordered poetic patterns. This sacred work captures the religious struggle to make sense of the world in a time of tragedy and God's ways and the effort to rebuild damaged relationships with God following a crisis.

Our emotional state in the aftermath of tragedy often follows the pattern of Lamentations—we begin with an effort to make sense of the misfortune, but then our mouths come before what we see—that is, our deeper turbulent emotions express themselves. Ideally, we come full circle until we again turn to God. Our expression of persistent hope has kept us alive as a people.

In the wake of catastrophe, people have the choice to abandon faith, or hide behind shallow expressions of faith, but even while emotionally understandable, both are incomplete responses. We must maturely accept that we do not understand everything about how God operates. At the same time, we must not negate our human perspective. We must not ignore our emotions and anxieties. In the end, we are humbled by our smallness and helplessness—and our lack of understanding of the larger picture. Through this process, the painful realities of life should lead to a higher love and awe of God.

[1] The remainder of this chapter was adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Confronting Tragedy: A Perspective from Jewish Tradition," in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (NY: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 279-295. This chapter is predicated on the assumption that the

Book of Lamentations is a unified poem that should be treated as a literary unit. For a scholarly defense of this position, see Elie Assis, “The Unity of the Book of Lamentations,” *CBQ* 71 (2009), pp. 306-329.

[2] Walter Bruggemann observes that Psalms 37 and 145 also are arranged according to the *aleph-bet* sequence and similarly display orderliness (*Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* [Oregon: Cascade Books, 2007], p. 3).

[3] See Aaron Demsky, “A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and its Implications for the History of the Alphabet,” *Tel Aviv* 4:1-2 (1977), pp. 14-27; Mitchell First, “Using the *Pe-Ayin* Order of the Abecedaries of Ancient Israel to Date the Book of Psalms,” *JSOT* 38:4 (2014), pp. 471-485. First notes that in the Dead Sea text of Lamentations, the *peh* verse precedes the *ayin* verse in chapter 1, as well. For an attempt to explain the intentional deviation of the acrostics based on word patterns, see Ronald Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in Ekha,” at http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_55.pdf.