

Tisha b'Av 5779, 2019:

How Can We Ask "Eikha?"

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Like the *Shoah* (Holocaust), Tisha b'Av brings us face to face with the problem of evil (theodicy), namely, "If G-d is truly good, why does He allow evil to exist?" In his celebrated essay, "*Sacred and Profane, Kodesh and Chol in World Perspective*," my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, asserts that this question remains forever unanswered, even though it:

...has tantalized the inquiring mind from time immemorial till the last tragic decade. The acuteness of this problem has grown for the religious person in essence and dimensions. When a minister, rabbi or priest attempt to solve the ancient question of Job's suffering, through a sermon or lecture, he does not promote religious ends, but on the contrary, does them a disservice. (*Gesher*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1966, page 7)

He further underscores the nature of the unsolvable problem of theodicy by noting: "The grandeur of religion lies in its *mysterium tremendum* [great mystery], its magnitude and its ultimate incomprehensibility." Little wonder, then, that for the Rav, "The beauty of religion with its grandiose vistas reveals itself to men, not in solutions but in problems, not in harmony but in the constant conflict of diversified forces and trends."

If there is ultimately no answer to the question, "If G-d is truly good, why does He allow evil to exist?," why does Rabbi Elazar HaKalir ask this question in his introductory words to the second

kinah (elegy) that we recite on Tisha b'Av morning?: “How (*Eikha*) could You rush Your wrath, ruining Your loyal people at the hand of Rome?...” As the Rav notes:

One could ask what right [do] we have to pose such a question to the Almighty. Normally, the *halakha* does not permit us to ask this type of question; rather it prescribes that we unquestioningly accept the judgement of G-d. We are guided by the concept that a person is required to bless G-d for bad times, for tragedy and misfortune, just as he blesses G-d for good times (*Talmud Bavli, Berakhot* 54a). When confronted with tragedy, we do not argue with G-d; rather we say, “Blessed is the true Judge.” We do not understand misfortune... we have no right to expect that we will understand.” (This and the following quotation, *The Koren Mesoret HaRav Kinot: With Commentary on the Kinot Based Upon the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, page 220)

The Rav teaches us that Tish b'Av is unique in that it is an exception to this overarching rule:

The case of *kinot* on Tisha b'Av, however, is an exception to the general rule. We are permitted to ask *eikha*, because we are following the precedent of Jeremiah the Prophet who posed the question *eikha* in the book of Lamentations. And Jeremiah posed this question only because he was given a *heter*, special permission, by G-d Himself...Thus, Rabbi Elazar HaKalir is permitted to address the question *eikha* to G-d, only because that question was already posed to G-d by Jeremiah in Lamentations.

The Rav's explanation is based upon straightforward logic: Hashem gave the prophet Yirmiyahu a *heter* (permissibility) to ask “*eikha*,” and in so doing, we, as his heirs, were given the same right on Tisha b'Av to pose this question. In his posthumous work, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinot*, Rav Soloveitchik offers a different, yet complementary, response to his query, “What right [do] we have to pose such a question [*eikha*] to the Almighty?”

The closeness between *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* [the Holy One blessed be He] and the Jewish people is also strongly reflected in the second *kinah* we recite on Tish'ah be-Av, “*Eikhah atzta ve-appekha*” [“How could You rush Your wrath...]. One basic question is asked throughout this *kinah*, and it is based on one premise, that the relationship between *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* and Yisrael is the closest that can ever be. It is not that *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* likes Yisrael, or even loves Yisrael. It is more than that; theirs is a deep, intense relationship that no human being can destroy or even weaken. (This and the following quotation, page 51)

At this juncture, the Rav briefly analyzes the essential nature of the relationship that obtains between *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* and the Jewish people:

...the relationship between *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* and Yisrael is all-embracing, all-inclusive, endless, and without limitation. There is an absolute relationship of love between the Jew and *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*. Nothing can spoil it, nothing can cool it off, nothing can change it. And if it is between the Jew and *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, it is certainly between *Keneset Yisrael* [the transhistorical corporate entity of the Jewish people] and *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

Tisha b'Av is the saddest day of the year. It gives voice to our deepest existential despair and fear as we recount, and re-encounter, the innumerable tragedies that have befallen our people. In the midst of this abject misery, the Rav reminds us that there is always hope for both the individual Jew and *Keneset Yisrael* — *yaish tikvah l'Yisrael!* — for even on this day, all is not lost. Even on this day, when we find ourselves in the throes of national mourning, we can surely rely on the “absolute relationship of love between the Jew and *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*,” that the Rav describes as “all-embracing, all-inclusive, endless, and without limitation.” These are comforting words indeed — words that we surely need to hear.

May Hashem, in His boundless love and mercy for the Jewish people, end the *Galut* (Exile), bring the *Mashiach* (Messiah) and rebuild the *Beit HaMikdash* soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org> They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.