

"Shall Kohen and Prophet be Slain in the Sanctuary?"

(Eikha 2:20)

By Rav Moshe Taragin

Translated by Kaeren Fish

In addition to the Midrash Rabba on the Five Books of the Torah, the Sages also compiled midrashim on each of the five Megillot. What is common to Megillat Eikha, Megillat Ruth and Megillat Esther is that the respective "Midrash Rabba" of each is accompanied by an introductory section. Each of these introductions provides background to the events described in the Megilla itself and to the Sages' lessons on it. The introduction to Megillat Eikha is much longer than that of the other megillot (34 chapters); the enormity of the tragic destruction and the complete national collapse apparently demanded greater study and analysis. The question, "Why did it happen," with regard to Megillat Eikha, is a complicated one and requires extensive elaboration.

Among all the stories of the destruction of the Mikdash brought in the Introduction to Eikha Rabbati, only one appears twice. This is the story of the murder of the prophet Zekharia in the Mikdash by his fellow Jews, and Nevuzaradan's revenge in the form of a massacre of certain groups (the Sanhedrin, young men, young kohanim, etc.). This story has become one of the central narratives related to Tisha be-Av, and a special song of lamentation is devoted to it.

What is so special about this story, and why is it so dominant in the midrashim and in the prayers of Tisha be-Av? The connection between him and the tragedy of Tisha be-Av is quite indirect; why, then, is his murder presented as such a fundamental and important event?

The readiness of the thugs of the time to murder a prophet in the Mikdash itself points to a complete collapse of society and of the spiritual and national hierarchy. This terrible crime represents a total disintegration of the authority of the prophets and the kohanim. If our Sages warn, "Woe to the generation that judges its judges," what would they say about a generation that assassinates its leaders and spills their blood before God?

In addition, the fact that he was killed in the courtyard of the Temple reflects a lack of spiritual sensitivity on the most basic level. Chazal express this lack of sensitivity in the continuation of the Midrash:

"Rabbi Yudan asked Rabbi Acha: Where did the Israelites kill Zekharia - in the women's section or in the Israelites' section? He answered him: Neither in the women's section nor in the Israelites' section, but in the kohanim's section." (Introduction to Eikha Rabbati, chapter 5)

This shocking story, then, highlights a most wretched spiritual and national state. But there are apparently other messages contained in the story, justifying its strong emphasis by Chazal. In chapter 23 of the Introduction, we find the continuation of this story: the killing of the Sanhedrin, the young men, virgins, and eighty thousand young kohanim, to avenge the death of Zekharia. There can be no doubt that within this story there is a most fundamental message concerning the destruction of the Mikdash.

At the beginning of chapter 1 of Eikha Rabbati, we learn:

"R. Yehuda said: The word 'eikha' is always used as a term of rebuke, as it says (Yirmiyahu 8:8), 'How (eikha) can you say: We are wise, and the Torah of God is with us?'"

According to R. Yehuda, Yirmiyahu's intention in using the word "eikha" was not only to bemoan the state of affairs that he witnessed ("eikha" being a term of lamentation, in accordance with R. Nechemia's opinion), but also to continue with his mission as the rebuker of Am Yisrael. In general, the function of the prophet is to rebuke the nation, to expose its negative traits and to help the people improve their behavior. As the

Rambam teaches (Hilkhot Teshuva 4:2): "Thus, all the prophets rebuked Israel so that they would repent."

Beyond the task of the prophet in a regular situation, there is special significance to the rebuke of Yirmiyahu specifically within the context of the destruction of the Temple. The Sages pinpoint several sins that were themselves the cause of the destruction (sexual immorality, murder, idolatry, disregard for the Torah, etc.). But aside from these specific sins, Chazal regarded the nation's refusal to accept rebuke from the prophets in general, and to obey the warnings of Yirmiyahu in particular, as a fundamental factor leading to the great tragedy.

In chapter 12 of the Introduction, R. Chagai - quoting R. Yitzchak - interprets the verses, "They mocked the messengers of God" (II Divrei Ha-yamim 36:16) and "They sang songs with an evil heart" (Mishlei 25:20), as referring to the laughter of the sinners in response to the rebuke by God's messengers, the prophets.

"R. Chagai said, in the name of R. Yitzchak: These verses refer to the fact that the scoffers of the generation would mutter with their mouths and hint with their eyes and point with their fingers, saying: The vision that he [the prophet] is seeing refers to the End of Days; he is prophesying about a distant time.

Therefore, the Holy One said to them: By your lives; 'in your days, O rebellious house' (Yechezkel 12:25) [will the prophecies of destruction come true]."

The people would ignore the prophets of God and wave off their warnings with stubbornness and a complacency born of illusion. They convinced themselves that God would not destroy His own Temple, and that all the prophecies concerning destruction referred to the End of Days. They wished to continue making merry and living their worry-free lives, rejecting out of hand the concept of reward and punishment.

In another section (Introduction, chapter 24), we find a different reason for the rejection of the rebuke:

*"R. Yochanan taught: 'The burden of the valley of vision' ([Yishayahu 22:1](#))... for they cast the words of the seers to the earth. 'What, then, has happened to you, that you have gone up altogether to the rooftops' (*ibid.*) – that you have removed yourself to a high place. R. Levi taught: These were they of vulgar spirit."*

In contrast to the scoffers of the time who, upon hearing the rebuke, would "sing songs with an evil heart," there were people of vulgar spirit who were unwilling and unable to examine their shortcomings and to accept help from the prophet. People who were living successful lives and had built houses filled with all kinds of good things were incapable of accepting advice from dusty, wandering moralizers. They went up to the rooftops, fortified themselves within their personal success, and cast the words of the prophets to the ground. Unfortunately, there are people who reject rebuke because they are caught up in the ecstasy of life; they have no interest in someone who speaks about responsibility, idealism and self-sacrifice. On the other hand, there are others who are so completely sure of themselves and confident in their achievements that they have nothing but scorn for people of spirit, and ignore the spiritual challenges that such people present to them.

For this reason Yirmiyahu begins his lamentation with the word, "eikha" - to mourn for the destruction, which came about mostly because of the nation's inability to listen to the prophets and their messages. Every individual always has the ability to repent, thereby avoiding punishment and destruction. But the moment he shuts himself off and blocks his ears, the road to repentance is closed. As the Rambam teaches ([Hilkhos Teshuva 4:2](#)):

"[There are] things that block the ways of repentance before those who engage in them... [Such people include] one who hates rebuke, for he leaves himself no path to repent. For rebuke brings about repentance, since when a person is told his sins and is reproached, he repents... Therefore every Jewish community must have a great and wise elder, who has been God-fearing since his youth, and who is beloved by them, to rebuke the masses and to bring them to penitence. But one who hates rebuke will not come to the rebuker and will not hear his words, and so he will continue with his sins, which appear good in his eyes."

After the fact, with Jerusalem in ruins and foxes running about upon the Temple Mount, perhaps the survivors will finally internalize Yirmiyahu's rebuke and arrive at the declaration, "Let us search our deeds and examine them, and let us return to God" (Eikha 3:40).

From this perspective, we can understand why Chazal focused on the story of Zekharia's murder. Zekharia was killed because he attempted to rebuke a rebellious nation. The easiest way to silence the voice of this "annoying" and "irritating" prophet was to get rid of him. The same midrash (Introduction, chapter 5) recounts:

"What they did with his blood was not what is done with the blood of a ram, nor with the blood of a deer. For concerning the blood of a deer and the blood of a ram, we are told: 'Its blood shall be poured out, and it shall be covered with the dust' ([Vayikra 17:13](#)). But here we are told: 'For the blood within him was upon the barren rock, for those who killed him did not pour it upon the earth, to cover it with dust' ([Yechezkel 24:7](#))."

This vulgar disdain, leaving the blood of the prophet exposed upon the stones of the Beit Ha-Mikdash, expresses more than just a lack of humanistic feeling. His murderers wished to rid themselves of him, to silence this disturbing messenger as quickly as possible. They simply abandoned God's prophet and his heavy moralizing; they were incapable of tending to his body and his blood; they wanted to sever themselves altogether from this "headache."

The midrash (Introduction, chapter 23) describes how the evil Nevuzaradan inquired after this blood, which was boiling in the courtyard of the Mikdash, and threatened the people that he would comb their flesh from upon them if they refused to explain the phenomenon:

"They said to him: What shall we tell you? There was a prophet who would rebuke us, so we rose upon him and killed him, but his blood has not been still for several years already."

The people of the generation murdered their source of morality and truth, who was interfering with their lives and causing them discomfort. But the voice of the blood of the prophet continued to call out, until Nevuzaradan silenced it by killing masses of Jews.

In light of this explanation, we can understand why Nevuzaradan's reaction, and the end of the story, are of such importance. The midrash (Introduction, chapter 23) continues to narrate what happened when the blood was stilled:

"At that moment, Nevuzaradan thought about repenting. He said, 'If this is what happens when one soul is killed, then what will be with a person who killed so many!' He ran away, sent farewell gifts and converted."

In this story we see a complete contrast between Nevuzaradan and the hard-hearted nation. For many years they had ignored their prophets and rejected their rebuke, but this gentile - Nevuzaradan - saw the bubbling blood of the prophet and quickly confessed his sins and returned to the path of goodness. What all the nation of Israel had failed to achieve for years, this cruel officer achieved in a single day. The Midrash presents the story of Nevuzaradan in order to teach Israel a lesson about man's ability to admit to the truth and to return to God.

"Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: 'Woe to the filthy, polluted city of oppression (ha-ir ha-yona)' (Tzefania 3:1) – [Why is it called] 'ha-ir ha-yona'? They should have learned from the city of Yona, Ninveh. One single prophet I sent to Ninveh and they repented; how many prophets did I send to Israel, in Jerusalem? ... Since they did not listen, they were exiled, and when they were exiled, Yirmiyahu began to lament over them: 'How the city dwells alone.'" (Introduction, chapter 31)

According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, this verse refers to the stubbornness of Am Yisrael and their refusal to accept rebuke, in contrast to the city of Ninveh, which serves as a model of man's ability to listen and to change his ways. This is also the message of the story of Nevuzaradan, who avenged the blood of a prophet murdered for daring to rebuke a stubborn nation, and who eventually "rebuked" himself and brought himself back to the path of life.