



Shabbat Shalom

Devarim

Deuteronomy 1:1 – 3:22

As God's promise of exile as punishment for sin has taken place, so too, His promise of redemption after a lengthy exile will take place.

This portion begins the final book of the Five Books of Moses, the Book of Deuteronomy. The Children of Israel are in the final weeks or months before their entrance into the Land of Israel. Moses is approaching the final days of his life. And he takes the time to address the people of Israel, reviewing their time in the desert, teaching them the messages that they must remember and internalize before they enter the Promised Land.

This Shabbat, though, also marks the final Shabbat before the 9th of Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. On this day, the first temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians some 2,500 years ago. On this same day, the second temple was destroyed by the Romans close to 2,000 years ago. Throughout Jewish history, this day has been marked by suffering and anti-Semitism. The expulsion decree issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain in 1492, which forced all the Jews of Spain to flee or convert to Christianity, took effect on the 9th of Av. Some of the most horrible Crusade massacres of Jewish communities took place on the same day. On this day we fast and pray, we remember our terrible history and ask God to bring the Messiah and rebuild the Temple as quickly as possible.

On the 9th of Av we also read the book of Lamentations, that terribly poignant description of the destruction of the First Temple written by Jeremiah, an eye-witness to the events he describes. The Book of Lamentations begins with the Hebrew word “Eicha” meaning “how?” We chant the Book of Lamentations out loud in the synagogue, sitting on the floor with the lights dimmed, and the tune used is an ancient, mournful one.

In the first verses of the Book of Deuteronomy, the same word “Eicha” appears (Deuteronomy 1:12). Moses is relating to the people how he had struggled against the burden of leadership, how their rebelliousness and lack of cooperation caused him to request assistance. And yet, this word “Eicha”, is so much more than a simple “How can I do this?” It includes a sigh, a feeling of strain, of pain, even.

It always works out that these verses are read the Shabbat before the 9th of Av and our tradition is to read the words of this verse to the same chanting tune of the Book of Lamentations. As if to remind us of the coming fast day.

But, the connection between these verses in Deuteronomy and the Book of Lamentations is far more than the apparently coincidental appearance of the two unique words of “Eicha.” We believe the message is far more profound. Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses tries to inspire the Children of Israel to follow God's word. He tells them that their obedience is essential to their ability to remain in the Land of Israel, to avoid the punishment of exile. From the beginning of the book, Moses emphasizes how hard it has been to keep the people on the right path – his expression of “Eicha” tells us that.

In essence, Moses knows from his personal acquaintance with the people, that they will sin, that they will end up in exile. With this one word, “Eicha,” he already reflects his understanding that the Book of Lamentations will be written. But the message to us, coming as it does after the destructions have already happened, can be an encouraging one. For even as God's promise of exile as punishment for sin has taken place, so too, His promise of redemption after a lengthy exile will take place. In that pain of the word “Eicha” lies the promise of a better time. May we live to see those days come to pass.