

The Four Questions of Eicha: Turning Texts of Terror into Blessings

Rabbi Laura Geller | Tisha B'Av 2015 | Bronfman Torah

Greetings from Jerusalem, where the 2015 Bronfman Fellows are discovering the community, learning and experiences of a BYFI summer. [Rabbi Laura Geller](#), BYFI 2015 Faculty member and Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, reflects on Tisha B'Av, which commences this Saturday night, in light of the Morning Shiur she is teaching this summer on the Fellowship.

The Book of Lamentations is a “text of terror.” The story is devastating, and the ugly gendered metaphor of Jerusalem as a whore is painful to encounter.

The shiur I am teaching this summer for the Bronfman Youth Fellowship is called "*Texts of Terror: What We Never Taught You in Sunday School*." In this shiur we ask: What do we do with sacred texts that break our heart? We want to believe that Torah teaches us that every human being is created in the image of God. And so often it does. But what do we do with texts that seem to suggest otherwise, texts that appear to countenance homophobic, misogynistic, xenophobic actions or support genocide? In 1994 feminist scholar Phyllis Trible called these “texts of terror.” Do we ignore them, reinterpret them, or confront them with the question of what they can teach us?

Though in the shiur, we don't study Eicha, the book of Lamentations which Jewish communities will read this Saturday night as Tisha b'Av commences, we do look at other challenging stories and traditions – the ordeal of the sotah (adulterous woman), the rape of Dinah, the Shfoch Hamatcha (Pour Out Your Wrath) text from the Passover seder, and the daughter of Yiftach. Conversation in the shiur about the texts is so passionate and intense that we never even got to the daughter of Yiftach! The students come from a variety of backgrounds, but for all of them I try to bring texts that challenge conceptions and make the students think.

Challenging conceptions doesn't just happen in this shiur. I overheard one of the fellows leaving the class say to his new friend who comes from a totally different Jewish background “Everything we are learning at Bronfman is a text of terror!”

He meant it as a complaint, but, like Bilaam whom we met in the Torah portion on the first week of the Fellowship, it has become a compliment.

The texts that the students are studying this summer include narratives beyond the written and oral Torah. They encounter the narratives of Yad Vashem and Mount Herzl, of Zionism and counter-Zionism, of East Jerusalem, and settlements, and the beautiful structures in the Goldstein Youth Village that once were Arab homes. These are also texts of terror for many of the fellows – do they ignore them, reinterpret them or welcome them as invitations to learn?

In addition to those texts, there is the Torah of the lives of the many different people they are meeting. Each experience we have, each speaker we meet, seems to be pushing boundaries and challenging assumptions. Slowly, and powerfully, what might have been understood as texts of terror become blessings... and model a new way for the fellows to share the stories of their own lives.

In a few days it will be Tisha B'av. And many of us will hear the words of *Eicha*, the Book of Lamentations. With it comes the question "*Eicha*", which could be translated into "How could this be!", or perhaps "Woe!". But there are in fact not one, **but four questions of *Eicha***. The word "*eicha*" appears three times in connection to Tisha B'av. First we hear it in this week's Torah portion, Devarim, which is always read on the Shabbat before Tisha B'av. The parasha begins the final address of Moses to the Israelites. In it he remembers how hard it was to manage the responsibilities of a leader.

"*Eicha* can I bear unaided the trouble of you, and the burden, and the bickering!" (Deut. 1:12).

אֵיכָה אֶשָׂא לְבַדִּי טְרַחְתְּכֶם וּמִשְׁאַכְכֶם וְרִיבְכֶם:

Here *eicha* seems to be a question that has an answer. Second, we hear it in the haftarah for this Shabbat, which comes from Isaiah who also cries out "*eicha*":

Eicha she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt ---but now murderers. (Isaiah 1:21)

אֵיכָה הִיטָה לְזוֹנָה קַרְיָה נְאֻמָּנָה מִלְאֲתֵי מִשְׁפָּט צָדִק יָלִין בָּהּ וְעַתָּה מְרֻצָּחִים:

Here the word seems to suggest that we should notice how things change... when people are not attentive to what really matters. Third, is the *Eicha* that begins the Book of Lamentations:

"How does the city sit solitary that was full of people?" Lamentations 1:1

אֵיכָה יִשְׁבָּה בְּדוֹד הָעִיר רַבְתִּי עַם

Just in case we miss the connection, the mournful chant for the Book of Lamentations is echoed in the word *Eicha* in the Torah portion and the melody for the haftara. That third *Eicha* seems to be a simple cry of pain.

As we prepare to acknowledge Tisha B'Av, I am struck by the most powerful challenge of the word for the Bronfman Fellows at this moment in their lives. It appears in the story of creation:

“And YHVH called to the human and said to him: *Ayecha* (spelled the same as *Eicha*) (Gen 2:9) Where are you?”

וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָאָדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה:

Where are you?

They are answering this question as they confront texts of terror , and together, by sharing the Torah of their own lives, turn them into blessings.

Rabbi Laura Geller came to Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills in 1994. She was the first Reform woman rabbi to be selected as the Senior Rabbi of a major metropolitan congregation. Rabbi Geller has been recognized with numerous awards and honors, including being named one of Newsweek's 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America for two years in a row, and receiving the California State Legislature's Woman of the Year Award. In 2015 she was named one of the 33 most inspiring rabbis by Forward Magazine.

Featured in the PBS Documentary called Jewish Americans, she is the author of many articles in journals and books, is a frequent contributor to the Huffington Post, and served on the Editorial Board of The Torah: A Woman's Commentary, in which she has two published essays. Most recently, she has spearheaded a groundbreaking new project called Next Stage: Temple Emanuel's Boomer and Beyond Initiative.

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