

SUPPLEMENT

מגלת איכה AS THE MODEL FOR THE קינות

While driving through Kew Gardens Hills, New York, last week, I spotted several tables loaded with used Seforim that were for sale, at the corner of 150th Street and 71st Rd. I immediately parked my park and browsed through the selection. For me, used Seforim sales are the rare opportunity to uncover gems that were published in the past but which have gone out-of-print and out-of-mind. Most of the Seforim were the standard selection; one of a set of Chumashim, or Neviim or Gemaras or Rishonim. However, one odd piece caught my eye. It was a book that contained the Five Megilos with a commentary that had been published in 1971 by Yavneh Publishing in Israel. The author of the commentary was A.S. Hartoum who claimed that his commentary was based on the work of M.D. Cassuto. His book was unique in that Hartoum included photographs of archaeological finds that he linked to verses found in the Megilos. He also provided an introduction to each Megilah and to each chapter within each Megilah. Thanks to his introduction to מגלת איכה, I finally became conscious of the fact that מגלת איכה is simply a compilation of five (5) קינות and that the literary style used to write those קינות became the literary style that was followed by all subsequent composers of קינות. For me that was a fresh way to view מגלת איכה. I therefore decided to include a translation of his introduction to מגלת איכה and to each chapter as a supplement to this week's newsletter.

Introduction To מגלת איכה

The book was given the name Megilas Eicha based on the first word within it. It is a small book that contains within it elegies whose themes include the destruction of the Judean Monarchy, the burning of the First Temple and the exile of the Jewish people to Babylonia. Based on its content, the book became known as the book of elegies (Kinot). In the Septuagint and in other translations, the book is referred to by a name that means Lamentations.

The book consists of five elegies with each one designated as a chapter of the book. The first, second and fourth chapters each have twenty two² verses with each line opening with a word whose first letter follows the first letter of the opening word of the previous line in alphabetical order. The third chapter consists of 66 verses with every three lines opening with a word whose first letter follows in alphabetical order the opening letter of the first word of the previous three lines. In that chapter, each verse is short. The fifth chapter

2. The number 22 represents the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

also consists of 22 verses but the opening words of each line do not follow each other in alphabetical order. Each chapter stands on its own and is independent of the chapters that either came before it or after it. Each elegy shares depictions and themes with the other chapters; i.e. desolation, destruction, famine in Judea and in particular in Yerushalayim, captivity, exile, the enemy exerting control over the Jewish people and the joy of the enemy in seeing the misfortune of the Jewish people, acknowledging that the destruction came as a result of the sins of the Jews, a bitter complaint about the treachery demonstrated by the neighboring countries and the cruelty of the enemy and a prayer to G-d that He undertake revenge on behalf of His people. The third elegy has a unique quality; see the introduction to that chapter. The Hebrew language version of the Megilah provides no indication as to who was the author. The Septuagint and the Aramaic translation open with a note that indicates that the author was the prophet Yirmiyahu. Our Sages also attributed the authorship of the Megilah to this Prophet and they found a clue in the book, Divrei Hayamim, 2, 35, 25, see the introduction to the fourth chapter. Recently academic scholars have suggested several additional theories as to who composed the Megilah. Some speculate that the various chapters were not authored by the same author.

It appears that the elegies were authored soon after the destruction of the Temple. The book may represent a collection of elegies that people were accustomed to reciting in Babylonia at gatherings whose purpose it was to commemorate the destruction of the Temple. It is the practice in all corners of the Jewish world to read the Megila on Tisha B'Av night, the day set aside to mourn for the destruction of the Temple.

Introduction to the First Chapter (Kinah)

This elegy portrays the state of Yerushalayim after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and the captivity. The composer of the elegy compares the City to a woman who has been widowed and who has lost her elevated status. He emphasizes the desecration of the Temple and the famine within the City. (The first 11 verses). In the second part of the poem (verses 11-22), the voice we hear is that of Zion itself who asks passersby and the other nations to pay heed to her troubles. She confesses before G-d and asks through prayer that G-d seek revenge for what has happened to her.

Introduction to the Second Chapter (Kinah)

The voice heard in this elegy is the voice of the author himself except that in the last three verses (20-22), the voice is once again that of Zion. The author relates that the calamity came upon Judea as a result of the anger of G-d who no longer had pity on His people and on His temple and who then treated them as His enemy. The elegy depicts in great detail the suffering of the people in the days of the destruction. Particular emphasis is given to the sins of the false prophets. The author calls out to Zion to wail and to recite sad poems and presents Zion's complaints and prayers to G-d. In this elegy and in the two that follow

(Chapters 3 and 4) the lines representing the letters Pey precede the lines that begin with the letter Ayin.

Introduction to the Third Chapter (Kinah)

In this elegy, the author speaks in first person and in most lines in singular number (plural in verses 42-47). He describes his suffering like a simple man who is steeped in troubles and in anguish. The chapter does not refer at all to the destruction of the Temple nor is there any reference to Zion or Yerushalayim. Only in verses 43-48 do we find a reference to a national calamity, the degrading of the nation and the joy expressed by the enemy. The intent of the author appears to have been to express as an ordinary person his individual reaction to the calamity that overcame his people to which he was an eyewitness. The chapter includes a series of verses in which the author fails to express any pain but instead puts forth theories as to why there is evil in the world. He discusses G-d's righteousness, the kindness that G-d demonstrates and the power of repentance (verses 31-41). Concerning the alphabetical order of the verses, see the introduction to the second poem.

Introduction to the Fourth Chapter (Kinah)

The theme of this poem is similar to the theme of the second poem. In it you find a description of the state of Yerushalayim after the siege and the destruction. The author focuses on the responsibility of the unfit Kohanim and the false prophets for the tragedy. At the end of the poem the author includes a prayer that Edom, who rejoiced on the fall of Jerusalem and even lent a hand, be forced to drink a cup of troubles. According to Chazal, this elegy was composed by Yirmiyahu to commemorate the death of Yoshiyahu (Divrei Hayamim 2, 35, 25). In this poem, you will find the same alphabetical order within the lines as you find in poem number 2.

Introduction to the Fifth Chapter (Kinah)

This poem is different than the four preceding poems in two ways: 1) the verses do not follow each other in alphabetical order even though there are 22 verses; 2) its verses are short and are divided into two sections. It consists of a prayer to G-d that He should have pity on those who survived the destruction of the Temple. The author further describes the suffering of the survivors.

Other Texts That Are Similar In Style To מגלת איכה

The style of writing found in **מגלת איכה** appears in other texts. In their book: *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, by Rainer Albertz, David Green; Brill, 2004, at page 141, the authors point to the following texts: Tehillim 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85 and 89 and Yishayahu 63, 7 to 64, 11.