

Background for Leader

KINOT

WHAT ARE KINOT?

Kinot are poems that express mourning, pain and sorrow. In contemporary usage, kinot refer to those dirges recited on the Ninth of Av, but there were other occasions in history on which they were also recited.

Many kinot are in the form of an alphabetic acrostic.

DATING AND AUTHORSHIP

Most kinot were composed during three primary periods of intense anguish in Jewish history:

The destruction of the first Temple in Israel: *Eikhab (Lamentations)*, also called “the scroll [book] of kinot” is a collection of kinot in alphabetical order on the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile.

The Middle Ages: the Crusades and other periods of calamity that befell Jewish communities in Ashkenaz and Sepharad

Post-Holocaust liturgy

While many kinot are anonymous, some authors are known.

The oldest named composer of kinot is **Eleazar HaKalir** whose uncertain dates range anywhere from the 7th to the 10th centuries. His kinot focus on the destruction of the first Temple.

Eleazar b. Judah (*Sefer ha-Roke'ah*) wrote a kinah following the murder of his family during the Crusades.

The kinot of **Judah Halevi**, a poet, scholar and exegete in medieval Islamic Spain, use the poet's arsenal of language and allusion to suggest a Zionist dream. He revisits history and renews memory to suggest a hopeful outcome. Until the inclusion of the Holocaust kinot, most collections ended on Halevi's hopeful note in which he rescues the spiral of descent with the possibility of redemption.

THE CONGREGATION'S RESPONSE

A key element of the kinah is the congregation's rejoinder to the accounts of suffering and destruction. Each verse recited by the reader is punctuated by repetitive and woeful congregational response, pounding and wounding, verse by verse.

- In the first kinah following the reading of *Eikhab*, we respond to each of the 18 verses describing the destruction of the Temple: *Oy, me haya lanu* (O, what has befallen us!)
- *Neishev badad ve nivkah, al aley evkeh* (Let us sit alone and weep, for these I weep) is repeated for each of 22 verses
- Ibn Gavriol, the medieval poet, includes a repeating chorus: *Ad ana bechiyah b'zion*

umispad b'yirushalayim (How much longer shall there be weeping in Zion and mourning in Jerusalem?)

- Eleazar ha-Kalir has us respond *Alala li* (Woe is me) for 21 verses and *Ve-ache anachem* (O, how shall I be comforted) for 23 verses.
- Baruch ben Samuel's (13th century) repeats the chorus 28 times: *Oy, meh haya lanu?* (O, what has befallen us?)
- Menachem Machir (12th century) responds: *Oya li* (Woe is me) 31 times

Sources:

Rosenfeld, Abraham. *Kinot for the Ninth of Av (Tisha b'Av Compendium)* (New York: The Judaica Press), 1989

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Leader's Guide

Ibn Ezra's *Ad ana bechayah b'Tzion*

INTRODUCTION

Leader: *The kinah we are going to study is read twice on Tisha b'Av, once in the evening and then again at the conclusion of the next day. The composer is Abraham Ibn Ezra, a 12th century poet, philosopher and exegete who lived and wrote in Muslim Spain, although he spent the last decades of his life in self-imposed exile.*

It is uncommonly beautiful, filled with linked imagery of Zion's fate and astrology, weaving passages of Eikhah into its text, punctuated with the insistent query "How much longer shall there be weeping in Zion and mourning in Jerusalem?"

Let's locate this kinah in history before we begin. The Spanish Jew Abraham Ibn Ezra presumably writes it during the Middle Ages. What do we know about him and his world?

Abraham Ibn Ezra

Born at the end of the 11th century in Toledo, Ibn Ezra moved to Cordova and lived most of his first 40 years in Spain amidst the poetic, architectural, and philosophical stimulation of the surrounding Islamic culture. He was part of the Spanish Jewish intelligentsia, scholars and exegetes developing their poetry and honing their spiritual ideas, among whom was his friend and fellow writer, Judah HaLevi.

After 1140, and after the conversion of his only surviving child to Islam, he became a wanderer on a 30-year journey of self-imposed exile. There are suppositions that he lived in Rome, Lucca, Mantua, Verona, Provence, Narbonne, and London, Egypt, and North Africa, as well as in Northern France. In Northern Europe Ibn Ezra linked the Jews of Christian Europe to the ideas and innovations of the Arabic world because he could translate and interpret Arabic works into stylistic and fluid Hebrew. Most remarkable is that despite this constant mobility, Ibn Ezra was stunningly prolific, writing biblical exegesis, codifying Hebrew grammar, and writing tracts on religious philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology, as well as poetry.

Leader: *This kinah merges Ibn Ezra's interests in poetry and astrology into a mournful poetic song. Let's read this kinah twice. First you read silently and then I'll read the text aloud and you respond with the refrain. Save your questions until after we've read it aloud.*

Discussion question: What do you notice that surprises you?

Answers might include:

- The impact of the repetition of the response
- The surprising use of astrological imagery (isn't that contrary to Jewish belief?)
- The phrase "lambs to the slaughter"

Leader: *Look at the Hebrew. What do you notice about the first letter of each verse?*

Here we find an acrostic. Many kinot employ the conventions of coding. Sometimes acrostics woven into the texts themselves reveal the author's name. You might imagine how the alphabetical construction of these kinot, sometimes with double and triple acrostics plus names intertwined into the text, can both limit and challenge the poet, affording opportunity within clear rules for creativity, even gamesmanship.

The chapters of *Eikhab* itself are composed using a complicated set of single, double and triple acrostics, so it is not surprising that the authors of the kinot also use this convention.

This kinah employs a simple alphabetic acrostic.

Leader: *Let's look at the first six verses. How is the universe responding to the destruction of the Temple?*

Answers might include:

- The heavenly sanctuary and the angels in heaven weep (v.1)
- The planets, the universe, and all the constellations weep (v.2)
- The spirits of our forefathers, the voices of Israel, the Torah herself weeps (v.3)
- The sun and moon have begun to mourn, donning sackcloth, their lights dimmed (v.4)

Leader: *How do you visualize or understand this poetic notion that not just we, but the entire universe is crying, is mourning? Is that a surprise?*

Answers might include:

- The whole universe in fact cries out.
- This may come as a surprise, since Tisha b'Av is an historically particularistic holiday, affecting us alone.
- This grand imagery magnifies our sorrow throughout the universe, and though the universe responds to recognize our misery, God is not roused.

Leader: *We have all heard the phrase "lambs to the slaughter." Where is this image from? How do you understand its meaning? How is the imagery of lambs and their shepherd used in this kinah?*

- The phrase "lambs to the slaughter" or some slight variation of it, occurs several times in the Hebrew Bible, each time as part of a prophetic description of the Jewish people being led to their doom. The citations occur twice in Jeremiah, 11:19 and 51:40, Isaiah 53:7, and in variation in Psalm 44:11 (*You have given us like sheep to be eaten*).
- The metaphor of God as a shepherd is likewise psalmic, from the familiar Psalm 23 (*God is my shepherd; I lack for nothing*). Christianity has taken loan of the notion of God as both a shepherd but added God as lamb—God as guardian as well as sacrifice.

- There is contemporary resonance to the phrase; Holocaust writers have used it to describe the unwitting Jews of Europe led to their deaths.
- The poet lets Aries, the astrological symbol of the ram/lamb, connect the familiarity of the biblical phrases from Isaiah and Jeremiah to the symbol, yet poignantly arouses the notion of our flock being abandoned by their shepherd. (“*But the faithful shepherd inclined not his ear*”).

Leader: *Each of the last 6 verses contains references to pairs of astrological symbols (mazalot), in calendrical order, beginning with Aries. Which ones are they?*

Are you surprised to see these astrological references? Aren't Jews forbidden to dabble in astrology?

Point of interest: Aries, symbolized by the ram/lamb, coincides with the first month of the rabbinical calendar, Nisan. This invites additional symbolism—Passover is in Nisan, and the lamb (Aries) becomes both the feast food and the blood marker for Jews at that time. And here the poet uses the opportunity to echo eerily “like lambs to the slaughter” from Isaiah and Jeremiah.

And to further draw a connection between the *mazalot* and the 12 months of the calendar, Libra, represented by the scales of judgment, matches up typically with Tishrei, the month of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the holiday that might be symbolized by scales of justice.

Leader: *The poet cleverly connects each of the mazalot to a verse from some metaphoric idea connected to Tisha b'Av, a verse from Jeremiah or another prophet, or to a verse from Eikhah. Here we can surely appreciate the skill and breadth of the poet.*

In case you want some examples [choose a few to point out if there is time and interest]:

- Taurus, the bull, connects us to the text with a quote from Lamentations, 5:5—“on our necks we were pursued” (*al tzivaranu nirdafnu*) which might mean that our enemies are in hot pursuit.
- Libra, the scales of justice: “...because the verdict for us is death over life” (*ki nikhra' lanu khaf mavet me-hayyim*) echoes Jeremiah 8:3 “for we will choose death over life” (*ve-nivhar mavet me-hayyim*). Notice that in this kinah Libra “twirls about” (*sivev*) to beg for mercy for us, while Jeremiah, in his assault, blames Israel.
- Sagittarius “shed tears like rivers of water” (*palgei mayim horidu dim'ab ka-nahal*) references Lamentations 2:18 “Let tears stream down like a river” (*horidi kha-nahal dimah*) and “water flowed over our heads” (*tzafu mayim al rosheinu*) references Lamentations 3:54 “water flowed over my head” (*tzafu mayim al roshi*).

Leader: *Here comes the most disturbing line: “Compassionate women cooked their children” (rachmaniot bishlu yaldeihen) is a direct reference to Lamentations 4:10.*

What do we make of this extremism? The poet of Eikhah—and of this kinah—chronicles the horrors of starvation by arousing an image of cannibalism. This is language of exaggeration composed to shock you into realizing the horrors of the calamity. Does it work?

We read in the last verse: “Be zealous Zion with a great zeal” (*tekanay l’zion kinah gedolah*) references Zechariah 8:12, “I was zealous for Zion with a great zeal” (*Kenayti l’zion kanah gedolah*).

Leader: *A final example is “...a populous city” (lerabati ‘am) quotes Lamentations 1:1 (a populous city) in which the populous city disappears. What does the last verse of this kinah suggest?*

- A time when God will illuminate and highlight the city again.

Leader: *What about the question of Jews dabbling in astrology?*

- There are famous remnants of the astrological symbols decorating floors and walls of synagogues from as early as the 6th century. These images were familiar and decorative, rather than pagan, in late antiquity.
- Although the use of the *mazalot* to predict the future or determine behavior contradicts the engrained Jewish notion of free will, there seems to be a fascination with the concept.
- There’s some commentary on the *mazalot* in the Talmud, and one might argue that it was at least a topic of discussion.
- In the medieval period, Ibn Ezra, of all people, wrote several works and treatises on astrology. God can overrule the stars, he wrote, but the stars have an influence.

Final Discussion Question: *What are we to make of this kinah?*

Answers might include:

- Grief and sorrow is a universal experience for Jews (including the patriarchs and the tribes) and extends even to the heavens (the heavenly sanctuary, the planets, the sun and moon)
- The poet seeks an answer to the question: How long will [perhaps, *should*] the mourning continue?
- Is redemption possible?
- Does the repetition of the mournful refrain, the cry for justice, hasten the process?

For the Experimental Leader: *Let’s read it again. I’ll read the text again, but this time, you read the chorus differently. Begin by reading it very softly, almost a whisper with this emphasis: “How **much** longer will there be weeping in Zion and **mourning** in Jerusalem” With each reading, read with more voice, increasing the volume. After the first 6 verses, change the emphasis on the words to “How much **longer** will there be weeping in Zion and mourning in **Jerusalem?**”*

How do you understand the kinah now?

Perhaps redemption is contained in the insistency and the conscious intensification of the dirge-like repetition.