

**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Shiur #16: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)**

**Jerusalem's Sufferings  
Eikha 1:10-11**

יְדֹן פֶּרֶשׁ יָצָר  
עַל כָּל-מַחֲמֵדֶיהָ

כִּי-רָאָתָה גוֹיִם  
בָּאוּ מִקִּדְשָׁהּ

אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָהּ  
לֹא-יָבֹאוּ בִקְהָלָהּ

כָּל-עַמָּה נֶאֱנָחִים  
מִבְּקָשִׁים לֶחֶם

נִתְּנוּ מִחֲמֵדֶיהֶם בְּאֶכָל  
לְהַשִּׁיב גִּפְשׁ

רָאָה יְקִוֵּל וְהִבִּיטָהּ  
כִּי הִיטִי זֹלֶלָה:

**The enemy spread out his hand  
Over all of her precious delights**

**For she saw nations  
Enter her Temple**

**About which You commanded  
[Members] of Your congregation shall not enter<sup>1</sup>**

**Her entire nation groans  
They seek bread**

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<sup>1</sup> We will discuss this translation below.

**They exchanged their precious delights for food  
To restore their lives**

**Look, God, and see!  
For I have become a glutton**

Jerusalem has fallen silent and, without missing a beat, the narrator resumes his tale. In response to Jerusalem's brief, but poignant disruption in verse 9 ("Look, God, at my affliction, for the enemy is exalted!"), the narrator focuses his attention first upon Jerusalem's enemy and then upon her suffering.

### **The Enemy: *Yado Paras Tzar***

The verse opens with the enemy's hand closing in on Jerusalem's precious delights. Recalling a similar phrase in verse 7, this appears to describe the greedy hand of a human enemy (Babylonia or her minions),<sup>2</sup> who brandishes its power against the wretched city, seizing its precious objects.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the enemy is not named, leaving open the possibility that this verse refers to the divine hand, commonly used to describe God's punishments and power.<sup>4</sup> Possibly, the word *tzar* does not refer to the enemy at all, but functions as an adverb describing the manner in which a hand closes in "narrowly" (*tzar*) upon the treasures of Jerusalem. In this reading, the verse obscures the identity of the hand's owner, alluding to divine power and involvement. This coheres well with the conclusion of the verse, where the narrator directly addresses God in a bewildered bid to comprehend God's role in these events.

Even if God does not actually wield the rod of punishment, He directs Israel's enemies, having commissioned them to punish His nation. This does not necessarily absolve the conquerors of responsibility; God's accomplices undertake their role with enthusiasm, under the impression that their actions are of their own volition.<sup>5</sup>

In this verse, the narrator directly addresses God for the first time, "For she saw nations enter her Temple - about which You commanded, [members] of your congregation shall not enter." Perhaps the narrator derives the inspiration to address God from Jerusalem's recent plea to God. In trying to make sense of the unfathomable events, the narrator thrusts the rumblings of questions directly toward God. A question arises regarding God's omnipotence: How is it possible that God did not prevent enemies from flouting His command and entering His hallowed precinct? Intimations of God's

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<sup>2</sup> *Yevamot* 16b (see also Rashi and Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 1:10) asserts that this refers to the hand of Ammon and Moab. According to *II Kings* 24:2, Ammon and Moab were among the nations that invaded Judah alongside Babylon. It is likely that Babylon sent in these surrounding nations to launch the assault, as they began their long march from Babylon to Jerusalem. We will examine this approach below.

<sup>3</sup> Verse 7 also described the "precious delights" of Jerusalem, prior to the arrival of the avaricious enemy.

<sup>4</sup> The Bible commonly refers anthropomorphically to God's "hand" to describe His power and actions (e.g. *Shemot* 9:3; *Bamidbar* 11:23; *Joshua* 4:24).

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah contends with a similar situation within his own historical context; see *Isaiah* 10:5-19.

accountability likewise flutter and stir: How could God stand aside as evildoers defy His law?

A second person shift suggests prayer, as the speaker turns directly to God in his desperation. Jerusalem will again address God in second person briefly in verse 11, and will then conclude the chapter with three verses directed toward God. This progression marks a growing boldness in addressing God, perhaps one that is born from an increased sense of isolation. It also marks a progression from an excessive focus on external enemies to a mounting recognition of God's role in these events.

### What was God's command?

About which You commanded  
They shall not enter your congregation  
(*lo yavo'u va-kahal lakh*)<sup>6</sup>

My translation above obscures the abstruseness of the sentence. What, in fact, did God command? Who is the subject of the words *lo yavo'u* ("they shall not enter")?

Some biblical interpreters understand this verse as a reference to *Devarim* 23:4:<sup>7</sup>

An Ammonite and a Moabite shall not enter (*lo yavo*) the congregation (*be-kehal*) of God. Even in the tenth generation, they shall not enter (*lo yavo*) the congregation of God for eternity.

The phrase, *lo yavo*, alongside the word *kahal*, congregation, creates a strong parallel between the verses. Observing the similarity between the verses, rabbinic interpreters explain that the verse in *Eikha* focuses on the Ammonites and Moabites, who have entered the Temple alongside the Babylonians:

In the hour that enemies entered Jerusalem, Ammonites and Moabites entered with them, as it says (*Eikha* 1:10), "The enemy spread out his hand over all of her precious delights, for she saw nations enter her Temple about whom You commanded, 'they shall not enter your congregation.'"<sup>8</sup> (*Eikha Rabba Petichta* 9)

A *gemara* offers a further elaboration of Ammon and Moab's heinous acts:

R. Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: About whom does it say, "The enemy spread out his hand over all of her precious delights?" This is Ammon and Moab. When the idolaters entered the Sanctuary, everyone turned to the silver and gold, while [Ammon and Moab] turned to the Torah scrolls. They said, "[The scroll] in which it is

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<sup>6</sup> I altered the translation to reflect the rabbinic interpretation examined below.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Rashi and Targum, *Eikha* 1:10.

<sup>8</sup> In this *midrash*, I translated *Eikha* 1:10 in accordance with the midrash's interpretation (but in contrast to my translation above).

written, 'An Ammonite and a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of God,' must be burned in the fire." (*Yevamot* 16b)

In this rabbinic interpretation, while the Babylonians concentrated on looting the Temple, the Ammonites and Moabites desecrated the holy Torah scrolls (the "precious delights" mentioned in the verse). According to some sources, this is the event that precipitates the final decree of destruction upon the Ammonites and Moabites (*Zephania* 2:8).<sup>9</sup> This interpretation also explains the zeal of Israel's neighbors in joining the Babylonian enemy (*II Kings* 24:2). It shifts attention away from the contemporary enemy onto a more historic one, tapping into a rich and complex history of relations between Israel and her neighbors. It would appear that the betrayal of Abraham's descendants by Lot's descendants is far greater and more painful than the impersonal conquest wrought by the voracious Babylonians.<sup>10</sup>

I have chosen a different direction for interpreting this verse. Despite the linguistic suggestiveness, there is no mention of the Ammonites or Moabites here or anywhere in the book. While the rabbinic interpretation focused on the identity of the nations who entered the Sanctuary, the interpretation that I propose focuses on the very act of entering the Sanctuary. The holiness of the Temple precludes even members of God's holy congregation from entering. The wanton incursion of foreigners into this sacred spot is another reminder of the desecration of the holy city, explaining the perplexity and outrage of those who witness the foreigners invade the Temple.

### **Jerusalem's Pain: Seeking Bread**

Focusing for the first time on the misery of starvation, this depiction of hunger will reappear quite frequently in the book. One characteristic feature of famine is the levelling of societal distinctions and the worthlessness of valuable objects when there is no bread.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, here, the inclusive phrase, *kol ama*, "her entire nation," highlights the shared communal desperation that accompanies starvation. Absent of sustenance, no one is more affluent than his neighbor; the value of material objects vanishes when there is no food for purchase.

### **Precious Delights (*Machamudeha*)**

They exchanged their precious delights for food  
To restore their lives

Verses 10 and 11 twice refer to Jerusalem's precious delights (*machamadim*). Previously (see our discussion of verse 7), I discussed several possibilities for

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<sup>9</sup> *Eikha Rabba Petichta* 9, citing *Ezekiel* 25:8-11, adds a scenario in which Ammon and Moab see the cherubs in the Holy of Holies and mockingly accuse Israel of idolatry, thereby igniting God's wrath.

<sup>10</sup> We will see something similar in *Eikha* 4:21:22, which reserves special anger for Edom, who also has a historical relationship with Israel (see also *Obadiah* 1:10, 12). There will be no need for speculative interpretation there, as the verse explicitly points to Edom as Israel's primary foe.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ezekiel* 7:19 and the less specific reference in *Zephania* 1:18. We will examine this further in the extensive description of famine in *Eikha* 4:1.

identifying these *machamadim* in the book of *Eikha*. Based on biblical usage, this word could refer to the Temple, its valuable vessels, or its human population. To this varied list, rabbinic interpreters add the Torah scroll, as we have seen above. In verse 10, the enemy's rapacious hand grasps Jerusalem's precious delights: her populace, her vessels, her Temple.

The identity of the precious delights in verse 11, however, obtains greater significance. Which *machamadim* does Jerusalem offer in exchange for food, in order to survive? The words "to restore life," convey the desperate state of the nation's starvation. Jerusalem's inhabitants must undertake drastic measures to cope with the urgent situation. Did they sell the Temple vessels? Perhaps they peddled the sacred Torah scrolls in order to obtain food?

Conceivably, this verse could allude to a more dreadful crime. If these precious delights refer to human beings, and presumably children, this may recall the sale of the children on the slave market. More horrible even than this is the possibility that this subtly alludes to the cannibalism that we will witness in the continuation of the book.<sup>12</sup> In this reading, Jerusalem's inhabitants consume their precious children. As noted, the text follows this description by the explanatory phrase, *le-hashiv nafesh*, "to restore life," indicating their desperate state. Ironically, *Ruth* 4:15 employs this very phrase to mean continuity through children. In our verse, the phrase justifies the consumption of children in order to obtain short-term survival, while ignoring the manner in which it precludes survival in the long term.

### **"Look, God, and See!" Jerusalem's Second Interjection**

The description of the nation's willingness to use her precious delights for food precipitates Jerusalem's second brash intrusion into the narrator's monologue. This time, however, Jerusalem does not permit the narrator to resume his narrative. Instead, Jerusalem continues speaking (aside from one interruption) until the conclusion of the chapter.

Jerusalem's initial words depict her horror at herself, and at what she has become: "Look, God, and see, I have become *zolela*!" While the word *zolela*, similar to the word *zol*, may represent Jerusalem's cheapened value,<sup>13</sup> it can also refer to her gluttony (*zala*).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this is Ibn Ezra's reading. In her heart-wrenching cry to God, Jerusalem recoils from horror over the manner in which starvation has transformed her. In what may be another allusion to her cannibalistic practices, Jerusalem has become a

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<sup>12</sup> Berlin observes that in an ancient Near Eastern epic, the sale of family members during a famine functions as a prelude to cannibalism (see Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 56). Berlin offers a positive spin on this, suggesting that families may have given away their children during a famine in order to save them from starvation.

<sup>13</sup> See Rasag and R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 1:11. See also Ibn Janach, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, on the root *z.l.l.*

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *Devarim* 21:20. It is possible that the words *zol* and *zala* are derivatives of the same two letter root (*zl*), meaning worthless. According to BDB, pp. 272-273, gluttony is the cheapening of the value of food, to the point that one squanders it.

gluttonous consumer of her own children,<sup>15</sup> a city that has squandered her future. In this reading, Jerusalem's cry derives from pain that is self-imposed, horror that she has inflicted upon herself.

In any case, Jerusalem's second interjection is markedly different from her first. Her first entreaty to God is not self-reflective ("Look, God at my affliction, for the enemy is exalted!"). Jerusalem remained focused on the enemy's role in her misery. Now Jerusalem turns inward, forgetting for a moment the external pain imposed by the enemy; instead, she focuses upon herself. While initially this will cause Jerusalem to sink into a terrible state of self-pity and turmoil, self-reflection will eventually lead Jerusalem to an entirely different conclusion. In Jerusalem's third and final direct appeal to God to look at her (*re'ei*) in this chapter (verse 20), she will explain her misery as a consequence of her own rebellious behavior. By noting the progression of Jerusalem's direct appeals to God, we observe her slow and steady movement from self-centered suffering toward introspection, reconciliation with God, and recognition of culpability.

### **The Chiasm at the Center**

Looking ahead to the next verse, we observe that Jerusalem will address the passersby using the identical verbs "look" (*re'ei*) and "see" (*habit*), in reverse order. This linguistic chiasm (AB B'A'), appearing in the center of chapter 1, draws the reader's attention to its central idea – Jerusalem's agonizing solitude.

Jerusalem's urgent plea to both God and passersby to relieve her loneliness highlights her desperate yearning for someone, *anyone*, to look her way. The structure of the chiasm also draws our attention to the absence of God's response to her entreaty. Jerusalem's first instinct is to turn to God, imploring Him to look her way and offer her respite from her wretched isolation (verse 11). God, however, does not appear to heed her cries and, with no answer forthcoming, Jerusalem flails in all directions, desperate to find someone who will look at her. Therein lies the meaning of her address to the uninvolved, disinterested passersby in verse 12.<sup>16</sup> The significance of their identity lies in their very insignificance; these passersby are no one in particular, instead constituting whoever happens to pass by. In Jerusalem's misery, she grabs hold of the nearest person, begging for some sympathy, for a supportive glance, for some assurance that she is not utterly alone.

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<sup>15</sup> The spies of *Bamidbar* 13:32 describe Israel as a land that consumes its inhabitants, a negative depiction that requires interpretation (see also *Vayikra* 26:38). Perhaps Jerusalem's gluttonous acts realize the negative vision of the spies.

<sup>16</sup> For another example of the usage of the passersby in this way, see *Job* 21:29.