

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
on the occasion of their eleventh *yahrtzeits*
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray

Shiur #18: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:16**

על־אֵלֶּהָ אֶנִּי בֹכֶיָה
עֵינַי עֵינַי יִרְדֶּה מַיִם

כִּי־רָחֵק מִמֶּנִּי מְנַחֵם
מִנְשִׁיב נַפְשִׁי

הֵיוּ בְנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים
כִּי גִבֵּר אֹיֵב:

Over these things, I weep
My eyes, my eyes, trickle water

For a comforter is far from me
A restorer of my soul

My sons became desolate
For the enemy has overcome

This verse concludes the first stage of Jerusalem's first person account (1:12-16). Wrapping up her tale, Jerusalem describes her weeping eyes, recalling the nocturnal tears of verse 2. The twice-repeated word *eini* (my eyes) has several possible functions; each word may refer to one of her eyes (Targum), or the repetition may seek to convey the torrential, ceaseless flow of tears (Rashi).

Following the tears, the chapter portrays Jerusalem's loneliness, entwining it with her

grief, such that they exacerbate and intensify one another.¹ Jerusalem cannot quiet her sobs in the absence of a consoler; she has no one who can relieve her pain or restore her morale. The absence of social support increases her misery, preventing her from beginning her movement toward recovery.

Al Eileh (Over These Things)

What are “these things” that cause Jerusalem’s tears? As the conclusion of Jerusalem’s tale of her suffering, she is surely referring to the previous verses, in which she describes the nation’s suffering in torturous detail. Possibly, “these things” also refer to the continuation of the verse, in which Jerusalem describes her desolate sons and the triumphant enemy.

A *midrash* focuses on the word *eileh*, suggesting that it implicitly references activities associated with the robust functioning of the religious and political institutions in Jerusalem:

Over these things, I weep... R. Nehemiah said: Over the abolishment of the priesthood and the monarchy. This is as it says (*Zechariah* 4:14), “These (*eileh*) are the two sons [anointed by] oil who serve the master of all the land.” They are Aaron and David. R. Yehoshua ben Levi says: Over the abolishment of Torah, as it says (*Devarim* 12), “These (*eileh*) are the statues and laws.”... Zavdi ben Levi said: Over the abolishment of sacrifices, as it says (*Bamidbar* 29), “These (*eileh*) shall you do for God on your festivals.” The Sages said: Over the abolishment of the [priestly] shifts. (*Eikha Rabba* 1:51)

An alternate reading suggests that Jerusalem weeps not over her loss, but over the sins that led to her misfortune:

Over these things, I weep... R. Samuel bar Nachmani said: Over idolatry, as it says (*Shemot* 32), “These (*eileh*) are your gods Israel.” (*Eikha Rabba* 1:51)

According to this *midrash*, Jerusalem’s words hint to the stirring of confession, in which the city assumes responsibility for her suffering. Though she tacitly acknowledged the presence of her sins in describing the rope woven with her transgressions (*Eikha* 1:14), Jerusalem mostly shirks responsibility during the course of her first person tale of woe (*Eikha* 1:11-15). This *midrash*, in contrast, anticipates the next part of the chapter (1:18-22), in which Jerusalem will admit her transgressions, expressing pain and shame at her betrayal of God.

¹ See verse 2, where her tears remain undried on her cheeks because she lacks a comforter (*menachem*). The theme of the elusive comforter (*menachem*) appears in our verse as well, following the description of her copious tears.

Jerusalem's first person account concludes with a tone of resigned hopelessness. Her cascading tears are no balm for her boundless grief, and a comforter remains elusive. Jerusalem's initial perception of the enemy's victory ("for the enemy is exalted," *Eikha* 1:9) intensifies in this depiction of the enemy's decisive triumph ("for the enemy has overcome"). Unable to continue, Jerusalem falls silent; her despair overtakes the narrative.

***Eikha* 1:17**
Interlude of the Narrator

פְּרָשָׁה צִיּוֹן בְּיָדֶיהָ
אֵין מְנַחֵם לָהּ

צוּהָ יְלֹמֵק לִיעֲקֹב
סְבִיבֵי צָרֶיו

הִתְהַ יְרוּשָׁלַם
לְגֵדָה בְּיַנְיָהֵם

Zion spreads out with her hands
There is no comforter for her

God commanded against Jacob
That around him shall be enemies

Jerusalem has become
Like a menstruant amongst them

The narrator enters to fill Jerusalem's silence. Briefly, third person replaces first person for the duration of this one verse. Having drawn a tormented conclusion ("for the enemy has overcome!" *Eikha* 1:16), Jerusalem seems to have nothing left to say. Yet, the narrator's speech will stir Jerusalem's transition from impotence and bewildered anguish to comprehension coupled with admission of guilt. Indeed, the narrator's words lead to the following verse, in which a chastened Jerusalem confesses her sins: "God is righteous, for I have rebelled against His word!" (*Eikha* 1:18).

What does the narrator actually say? How do his words move Jerusalem to recognize God's righteousness and her own culpability?

Zion spreading out with her hands (*peiresa Tzion be-yadeha*) is an obscure gesture, subject to interpretation.² Some *midrashim* understand this movement as a desperate call for help (*Eikha Rabba* (Buber) 1:17), while others regard it as the ultimate surrender to God's punishments (*Eikha Rabba* 1:52). It is noteworthy that the same phrase (*paras yad*) appeared in *Eikha* 1:10 to describe the enemy's hand looting the precious delights of Jerusalem.³ In our verse, the mirror phrase may function as a response to the rampant violations of the enemy, as either a cry of despair or an act of submission.

Rashi tenders two interpretations, both of which interpret this gesture as an expression

² One of the basic limitations of interpreting ancient texts lies in comprehending their cultural references. When it comes to the meaning of physical gestures, biblical interpreters engage in a good deal of speculation, most of which remains unsubstantiated.

³ Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 113, observes that *Eikha* 1:10 is an anomaly; nowhere else does the image of the spreading hand convey a hostile act.

of anguish. Based on *Isaiah* 25:11, he explains that the phrase *paras yad* depicts the grief-stricken manner in which a sufferer waves his arms. Alternatively, Rashi suggests that this portrays someone who squeezes his hands together in such pain that they nearly break.

Another *midrash* (*Pesikta Zutrata, Eikha* 1:17) focuses on the word *be-yadeha*, with her hands, explaining that this indicates that Zion has to construct her own mourning carpets with her own hands, because of the absence of comforters indicated in the following phrase. This again emphasizes the loneliness of Jerusalem that prevails throughout the chapter.

Perhaps the word *paras* alongside the word *yad* (hand) is a phrase that indicates prayer. In a similar vein, *Isaiah* 1:15 uses the phrase *paras kapeichem* (hand) to describe a gesture of prayer. If that is the intended meaning, then Zion's prayer is futile; the verse continues by declaring that there is no one to console Zion. Moreover, God's role in the verse falls short of a desirable response to Zion's prayer. Instead, God commands Jacob's enemies to surround and isolate Jerusalem, an overtly hostile response to Jerusalem's supplication.

Possibly, this phrase evokes prayer in an ironic fashion. In fact, Zion may stretch out her hands in a familiar gesture of prayer, but the address to which she turns is not God. Rather, she directs her desperate plea toward her neighbors and allies, issuing a desperate, but futile, call for assistance.⁴ Prophets often exhort Israel to turn to God for assistance, rather than humans, so that Israel does not lose sight of its reliance upon God.⁵ According to this reading, the continuation of the verse illustrates God's response to Zion's misdirected pleas – God commands surrounding nations to cultivate hostility to Jacob, conferring pariah status upon Jerusalem. Subtly, this verse remonstrates Zion: If only she had properly turned to God in prayer, rather than directing those pleas to her neighbors, the events could have unfolded differently!

God Commands these Events

This verse contains God's second command (*tzivah*) in this chapter. In verse 10, Jerusalem recalls God's former ban on the nations entering the Temple (*tzivita*).⁶ This indicated better times, when God's directives worked to the benefit of Israel and against foreign nations. In contrast, this verse portrays God commanding those same nations to cultivate enmity against Israel.

By recalling God's edict, verse 17 refocuses Jerusalem's attention on God. The vision of the triumphant enemies silenced her in the previous verse (1:16), and the narrator now steers her back to the proper topic: her relationship with God. This verse presents God

⁴ See Y. M. Moshkovitz, "Eikha," in *Daat Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), p. 8 [Hebrew], who explains the verse in this way.

⁵ An apt example appears in *Isaiah* 31:1, where the reliance on Egypt causes Israel to lose trust in God.

⁶ In our examination of 1:10, we offered several possible interpretations as to the nature of the divine command.

directing Jacob's situation, compelling Jerusalem to rethink the question: Why did God orchestrate Jerusalem's downfall?

From this point on in the chapter (1:18-22), Jerusalem will indeed focus the greater part of her attention on God. While the city does address the nations (1:19) and her enemies (1:21-22), Jerusalem's human adversaries are no longer her primary concern. Jerusalem reopens her speech speaking of God's righteousness (1:18) and closes it with three verses that directly address God (1:20-22), thrusting all of her concluding thoughts upon Him.

Jerusalem's Utter Isolation

To highlight Jerusalem's isolation, this verse engages in a series of contrasts between Jerusalem and those outside of her. Each sentence opens by focusing on Jerusalem and continues by focusing on outsiders, who could potentially lend support, sympathy, or aid to the troubled city.

Zion spreads out with her hands There is **no comforter** for her

God commanded against **Jacob** That around him shall be **enemies**

Jerusalem has become Like a menstruant amongst **them**

Relations with outsiders range from inattention to antagonism to disgust; no foreign nation offers the much-needed empathy or assistance. Zion stretches out her hands to no avail; Jerusalem remains utterly isolated. Orchestrated by God, there seems to be little recourse for Judah's loneliness. Nevertheless, God's command suggests His continued involvement in Jerusalem's fate. Although God deliberately surrounds Israel with threatening enemies, He remains on Israel's side. The appearance of God's name in the first half of the second sentence, alongside Jacob, indicates God's ongoing personal association with His city.

Midrashim often emphasize the above idea, insisting that God's punishment does not spell rejection. Based on an interpretive reading of *Vayikra* 16:16, *Yoma* 56b explains that God continues to dwell amidst Israel, even when they are rife with impurities. In an interesting polemic exchange, the *gemara* reports on a conversation between a heretic and R. Hanina in this matter:

A heretic said to R. Hanina: Now you are an impure people, for it is written "Her impurities were on her hems" (*Eikha* 1:9). He responded to him: Go and see what it says there: "Who dwells with them in the midst of their impurities" (*Vayikra* 16:16). Even at a time when they are impure, the divine presence dwells amongst them. (*Yoma* 57a)⁷

⁷ Some *midrashim* extrapolate this idea from the metaphor of Jerusalem as a *nidda* (menstruant) in this verse, as we will see shortly.

According to other *midrashim*, God even accompanies His nation into exile, a sure indication of His enduring commitment to His nation.⁸

Perhaps it is the subtle intertwining of God's presence alongside Israel that spurs the following verse, allowing Jerusalem to resume her first person account, reconcile with God, and declare His righteousness.

Jerusalem the *Nidda* (Menstruant)

Maintaining that Jerusalem has become like a *nidda* (a menstruant) among the nations, this verse returns to the metaphoric representation of Jerusalem as a woman, which we have previously seen in this chapter (Jerusalem as widow, bereaved mother, or exposed woman). What is the meaning of the specific imagery of Jerusalem as a menstruant?

Menstruation represents a period of ritual impurity (*tum'a*). Prophets sometimes employ this image as a metaphor for moral and religious defilement, especially in the land of Israel.⁹ Ezra describes a land filled with idolatry, prior to Israel's conquest:

The land which you came to possess, is a ritually impure (literally, menstruant) land (*eretz nidda*), due to the impurities (*nidat*) of the nations of the lands, and their abominations with which they, in their impurities, filled it from one end to the other. (*Ezra* 9:11)

Ezekiel offers a similar description:

Son of man: The house of Israel sits on its land and they defile it with their ways and their deeds; their ways were like the impurities of the menstruant before me. (*Ezekiel* 36:17)

Our verse, however, employs the metaphor of the menstruant not to describe Jerusalem's sins, but rather her punishment. We find a similar usage in Ezekiel:

And they put on their beautiful adornments in arrogance, and they made their abominable images and repulsive [idolatry]; therefore, I have made them like a menstruant. (*Ezekiel* 7:20)

By weaving together Israel's abominable acts and God's decision to render her in a state of *nidda*, Ezekiel suggests that Israel's impure activities lead to her treatment as a menstruant, an apt consequence for her actions.

⁸ Note the poignant conversation between Jeremiah and God in *Eikha Rabba*, *Petichta* 34, in which God and Jeremiah discuss which one of them will be more effective in accompanying the nation into its exile.

⁹ The prophets do not mean that menstruating women are religiously or morally corrupt; this is simply a metaphor used to describe the impurity of the land.

As a punishment, the ritual state of menstruation evokes isolation, since during that period, married couples separate and refrain from physical contact (*Vayikra* 18:19).¹⁰ In this schema, the word *nidda* in our verse indicates Jerusalem's isolation; nations refrain from any contact with her. This image coheres well with the overarching theme of the chapter, which emphasizes Jerusalem's loneliness.

Similarly, in his reading of *Ezekiel* 36:17, Radak maintains that the *nidda* imagery points to a situation in which God distances Himself from Israel, precluding intimacy:

Like the impurity of the menstruant. Because by way of a parable, the community of Israel is called God's wife, and He is her husband. During the period of sinfulness, [Israel] is likened to a menstruant, in which the husband is distant all of the days of her menstruation and draws her near again after she becomes ritually pure. Likewise did God distance Israel and exile them to the lands of the nations because of their sins. In the future, He will return them, after they return to Him and purify themselves from their sins. (Radak, *Ezekiel* 36:17)

Implicit within this idea is great optimism, since the ritually impure period of menstruation is designed to be temporary.

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: "She became a *nidda*."¹¹ This is a blessing. Just as the menstruant will become permissible [to her husband], so Jerusalem will again become permissible. (*Taanit* 20a)

God has sent Israel into exile, far from His dwelling place, because of her moral and religious impurities. A great blow to the relationship between God and His nation, this punishment prevents continued intimacy. Nevertheless, this is not a permanent state. Israel can renew the relationship by casting away its impurities and reacquiring its moral and religious purity. Reconciliation is not elusive; the disruption of relations is provisional, wholly dependent upon Israel's decisions and behavior.

¹⁰ The separation of married couples during the woman's menstruation is not itself a punishment. As Berlin (p. 58) notes, the menstruant is not a social outcast: "The Bible does not separate a menstruant from her family or from society." While some biblical passages employ the mandated separation from her husband as a metaphor for isolation, in a metaphor, not every aspect of the compared situations are necessarily parallel.

¹¹ This is the *gemara's* interpretation of *Eikha* 1:8. As noted previously, the word *nida* there does not refer to a menstruant (which has a doubled *daleth*), but emerges from the root n.o.d., meaning to wander. Even though the interpretation is not about our verse, it coheres well with our verse, and I therefore have introduced it here.