

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Dedicated in memory of our alumnus  
Rav Elyashiv Mordechai Knohl,  
The Rav of Kibbutz Kfar Etzion and one of its founders.  
Yehi zikhro barukh.**  
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**Shiur #23: Eikha 2:2**

בִּלְע אֲדֹנָי [לא] וְלֹא הִמְלֵךְ  
אֶת כָּל-נְאוֹת יַעֲקֹב

הָרִס בְּעִבְרָתוֹ  
מִבְצָרֵי בֵּת-יְהוּדָה

הִגִּיעַ לְאָרֶץ  
חָלַל מַמְלָכָה וְשָׂרֵיהָ

**God swallowed up; He did not pity  
All of the habitations of Jacob**

**He demolished in his rage  
The fortresses of the daughter of Judah**

**He thrusts it down to the earth  
He profaned the kingdom and her officers**

While the previous verse had a vertical movement, which directs the reader's gaze up (clouds, heaven, God) and down (Zion, earth, God's footstool), this verse offers us a horizontal landscape of destruction. God swallows, demolishes, and profanes a broad swathe of Judah: houses and fortresses, kingdom, and officers. The verse moves from the common habitations (possibly in the countryside<sup>1</sup>) to those protected by fortresses. It

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<sup>1</sup> The term *naot* (from the root n.v.h.) can mean either habitations (e.g. see the parallelism with the word *bayit* in *Mishlei* 3:33) or meadows (namely, dwelling places for animals: see e.g. Targum *Eikha* 2:2; *Tehillim* 23:2; *Jeremiah* 9:9). Some translators use the term

also contains the first indication of the special attention that this chapter gives to the destruction of the royal elite of the city: “[God] profaned the kingdom and her officers.”

*Verbs: Bila, lo chamal, haras, higi'a, chillel*

Five verbs portray the active destruction in this verse. God is the subject of each of the verbs: He swallows, does not pity, demolishes, thrusts to the ground, and desecrates His nation.

Frequently employed as a verb of destruction, *bila* literally means to swallow. A verb that can describe the behavior of mindless animals (*Jonah* 2:1) and wicked people (*Habbakuk* 1:13), “swallowing” is an all-consuming act, one that engulfs and overpowers, leaving behind no remnant. Often used to describe the hostile act of an enemy (e.g. *Hosea* 8:7-8), this is how God presents the actions of Job’s adversary, the Satan, who induces God to torment Job for no good reason (*Job* 2:3). Jeremiah depicts the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, swallowing Jerusalem in a serpent-like act of rapacious hunger (*Jeremiah* 51:34). In our verse, the Babylonian enemy recedes into the background; it is God Who swallows the city. This verb will appear twice more in verse 5 as part of a terrifying portrait of God’s enmity. The final appearance of this verb in *Eikha* reverts to the enemies, who gleefully proclaim (in 2:16), “We have swallowed!” The dual usage of this verb to portray both God and enemies illustrates how the chapter blurs between them, as they collaborate to devour Jerusalem.

For the second verse in a row, a verbal clause begins with the negative *lo*, highlighting what God does not do. In this case, God does not exhibit compassion (*lo chamal*), a phrase that will recur twice more in this chapter (verses 17 and 21). The word *lo* suggests purposeful withholding, rather than passivity. God’s compassion for His nation is commonplace (e.g. *Isaiah* 63:9; *Joel* 2:18; *Malachi* 3:17); one has the impression that God suppresses His natural instinct.

Often used within a ritual, sacred context, the word *chillel* means to profane something, or remove its sacredness. This verb can denote either sinfulness (e.g. *Jeremiah* 16:18) or punishment for sins (e.g. *Isaiah* 47:6), as in our verse. The desecration of the kingdom and her officers hints to their former consecrated status.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the orthography of the verb *chillel* parallels the nominal *challal*, designating the corpses that languish on Jerusalem’s streets in *Eikha* 2:12. This apt wordplay illustrates the defilement of the formerly pure city, now sullied by the corpses strewn in its midst.

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habitations (e.g. NJPS), while others translate pastures (e.g. Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 141).

<sup>2</sup> For a similar description of the manner in which God punishes the Davidic dynasty by desecrating their royal symbols, see *Tehillim* 89:39.

## The Use of Language in *Eikha* 2:2

Language conveys meaning in many ways. Within the context of the biblical canon, words tend to echo each other in a significant manner. When a word or phrase evokes another biblical passage, it hints to an inter-textual relationship that can offer a richer understanding of both passages. In the following section, we will use *Eikha* 2:2 as an example to illustrate these linguistic flourishes.

### *Actualizing Prophecies of Admonition*

The language of destruction in this verse (and throughout *Eikha*) frequently evokes prophetic admonitions, indicating that their fulfillment has arrived. For example, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel inform Judah of the possibility that God will withhold compassion from His people:

And I will also act in anger: My eyes will not have compassion and I will not pity (*ve-lo echmol*), and they will call out in my ears with a great shout, but I will not listen to them. (*Ezekiel* 8:18)<sup>3</sup>

The destructive verb *haras* likewise evokes Jeremiah's stern admonitions:

So shall you say to him, "So says God, Behold that which I built, I will destroy (*hores*) and that which I planted, I will uproot, along with all of this land" (*Jeremiah* 45:4).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the unusual phrase *higi'a la-aretz* appears in *Ezekiel* 13:14 alongside another linguistic association with *Eikha* 2:2 (*haras*):

And I will demolish (*harasti*) the wall that you covered with plaster, and I will make it reach the ground (*ve-higa'atihu el ha-aretz*) and its foundations will be exposed and it will fall, and you will perish within it and you will know that I am God. (*Ezekiel* 13:14)

By employing words that recall prophetic admonitions, *Eikha* suggests that no part of this catastrophe is unforeseen. While this may be small comfort for those suffering in Jerusalem, it places these events within the broader biblical theology of destruction, making it clear that these catastrophic events are part of the divine order.

### *Reversing Prophecies of Doom*

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<sup>3</sup> See also e.g. *Jeremiah* 13:14; *Ezekiel* 5:11; 7:4, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah's opening prophecy also employs the word *haras* to caution of upcoming catastrophe; see *Jeremiah* 1:10.

Prophetic texts of consolation are also in dialogue with *Eikha*. Several passages spin *Eikha*'s language of destruction into language of redemption in a linguistic flourish designed to offer solace and hope. For example, *Isaiah* 49:19 alludes to the destruction described in *Eikha* 2:2, using its harsh words (*haras* and *bila*) to describe Israel's reconstruction:<sup>5</sup>

For your ruins and your desolate places and your destroyed land (*eretz harisuteikh*) will now be bursting with inhabitants, and those who consumed you (*mivale'ayikh*) will be distanced. (*Isaiah* 49:19)

By employing the same words used to convey the ruin in order to reverse it, the prophet offers hope for a full rehabilitation of Jerusalem and the nation. The broader picture offers an assurance of perfect reconstruction, using the very same language that conveyed a terrible portrait of devastation.

In referring to *Eikha*, these prophets also imply that the destruction is only one stage in God's plan for His nation. Jerusalem's destruction is not the end of her story. When the circumstances allow, God will surely reverse Jerusalem's calamity, returning her to her former status and glory. Therefore, embedded within destruction are the means for her restoration; Jerusalem's calamity is part of the ongoing relationship between God and His nation.

This is the message of R. Akiva, who, in a celebrated aggadic account in *Makkot* 24b, expresses his stalwart faith in the future, even as he witnesses the collapse of the present.<sup>6</sup> In this anecdote, R. Akiva expresses joy in the fulfillment of the prophets' threat of destruction, inasmuch as it confirms the veracity of the prophets' messages of rejuvenation. This consoles his forlorn friends, who begin to see the catastrophe as part of a broader historical plan, conceived by God, foretold by prophets, and experienced by the nation of Israel over the course of the long span of Jewish history.

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<sup>5</sup> While I will not discuss the controversial question of the dating of the composition of *Isaiah* 40-66, these chapters explicitly offer consolation and promises of redemption that follow the destruction of Jerusalem described in *Eikha*. (See e.g. *Isaiah* 48:20; 52:9-10. Note also the explicit reference to Cyrus in *Isaiah* 44:28-45:1.) These chapters often linguistically reverse the book of *Eikha*, as we will continue to note throughout our commentary.

<sup>6</sup> See *shiur* #8, where I bring the full text of the aggada.

**Eikha 2:3**

גָּדַע בְּחַרְי־אֵף  
כָּל קֶרֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל

הִשְׁיֵב אַחֲזֹר יְמִינוֹ  
מִפְּנֵי אֹיֵב

וַיִּבְעַר בְּיַעֲקֹב כָּאֵשׁ לְהִבָּה  
אֲכָלָה סָבִיב

**He hewed down in his smoking anger  
All the horns of Israel**

**He withdrew His right hand backward  
In the face of the enemy**

**And he burned in Jacob as a flaming fire  
That consumes its surroundings**

God's anger continues to smolder in the fourth mention of divine wrath in the chapter's three initial verses. God's anger causes Him to becloud the city, purposefully not to remember her, and to destroy her fortresses. In our verse, God's anger bursts into lethal flames, consuming everything in its environs. In the next verse, that same anger will surface as a fire that spills over from God, surging forward to obliterate the tent of the daughter of Zion.

The first and third sentences in this verse conform to the general pattern of destruction. They each contain a verb denoting destruction (*gada, va-yiv'ar*) as well as the object that is destroyed (*keren Yisrael, Ya'akov*).<sup>7</sup> The third sentence describes the burning fire in more detail than in most sentences, focusing upon the central theme of the conflagration of Jerusalem.

Unlike the surrounding sentences, the middle sentence of this verse does not have a direct object, nor does it contain an active verb of destruction; God merely withdraws His right hand, allowing the enemy unfettered entrance. Instead of featuring Jerusalem or some part of it, this middle sentence highlights the enemy, whose terrifying appearance in place of God's protective right hand suggests imminent ruination.

*Gada... kol keren Yisrael*

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<sup>7</sup> The object that is burned in the third sentence is framed as part of a prepositional phrase, "and he burned *in Jacob*." Nevertheless, it appears that Jacob is the object destroyed by the fire. Alternatively, the object destroyed by the fire is the unspecific environs (*saviv*).

The word *gada* means to hew down an object, thereby detaching it from its tight connection, often a biological one. *Gada* can refer to the hewing down of trees, which, once separated from their roots, fall and crash (e.g. *Isaiah* 9:9). By extension, this verb sometimes describes the felling of humans (*Isaiah* 10:33), whose height, grandeur, and immutability are likened to majestic trees,<sup>8</sup> planted deep in the earth.

In this verse, the word *gada* modifies the “horn of Israel.” This phrase recalls the magnificent horns of an animal, which serve as a symbol of their strength, glory, and beauty. Hewing off Israel’s horn may metaphorically connote the removal of Israel’s might and splendor,<sup>9</sup> leaving it defenseless and deformed.<sup>10</sup>

*Keren Yisrael* can refer metonymically to those anointed by oil poured from a horn, namely the kings.<sup>11</sup> This continues the end of the previous verse, which referenced the desecration of the kingship. God instructs Samuel to anoint David with a *keren* (*I Samuel* 16:2), and this becomes the accepted mode for anointing those kings whose reign is designed to endure (see also *I Kings* 1:39).<sup>12</sup> Thus, the verse’s testimony that God cut off the horn of Israel may allude to the termination of the Davidic dynasty, in spite of God’s promise that it shall be eternal.<sup>13</sup>

This phrase (*gada... keren*) may also hint to the sins that provoke this punishment. Biblical texts employ the word *gada* to instruct Israelites to hew down idolatry (e.g. *Devarim* 7:5; 12:3), and sometimes specifically the corners (literally, the horns) of the idolatrous alters

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. *Amos* 2:9.

<sup>9</sup> See Rasag on *Eikha* 2:3.

<sup>10</sup> Drawing from various appearances of the word *keren* in the Bible, an evocative *midrash* (*Yalkut Shimoni, I Samuel* 81) describes Israel as possessing ten horns. These ten horns include righteous people (Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moshe, Messiah) and religious institutions (priests, Levites, Temple, prophecy, Torah). This *midrash* seems to suggest that these functioned both as Israel’s splendor and their fortification, beautifying them and protecting them from harm. The decisive removal of these horns means that Israel no longer deserves its horns, no longer adheres to the ideals that they represent, and is therefore no longer glorified or protected. Intriguingly, the *midrash* avers that once Israel sins, the horns are taken from them and given to the idolatrous nations. In spite of the harshness of transferring Israel’s horns to its enemies, this notion allows for the preservation of the glorious horns, which can be returned to Israel when Israel repents.

<sup>11</sup> Note the parallelism in *I Samuel* 2:10: “And He shall give strength to his king and raise the horn of His anointed.” See also e.g. Radak on *II Samuel* 22:3 and *Tehillim* 132:17; Malbim on *Tehillim* 89:25. Ibn Ezra (*Eikha* 2:3) suggests that this refers to both kingdoms (the northern kingdom of Israel destroyed by Assyria and the current destruction of the southern, Judean kingdom)

<sup>12</sup> *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 6:1.

<sup>13</sup> *Tehillim* 89 contends with the pressing theological problem of the abrogation of God’s promise of eternal reign to David.

(*karnei ha-mizbeach*) (*Amos 3:14*). This suggests that the failure to obliterate idolatry entangles Israel in a situation of sinfulness that concludes with their own destruction.

### *Heshiv yemino*

God's right hand is "glorious in power" and "shatters the enemies" as it protects Israel at the Sea (*Shemot 15:6*).<sup>14</sup> After the incident at the Sea, Israel continues to benefit from God's might, frequently depicted simply as God's right hand (e.g. *Tehillim 21:9; 44:4; 60:7*). In our verse, God withdraws His right hand, deliberately leaving Jerusalem defenseless and exposed. The absence of God's protective power enables the enemy to enter.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the enemy does not assume the pivotal role in Jerusalem's destruction in this chapter. Even in this verse, the human foe emerges briefly, only to fade quickly into the background, making way for God to resume His assault on Jerusalem.

### *Va-Yiv'ar Be-Ya'akov*

The subject of the burning fire is either God (who is the subject of every other sentence in this verse) or God's anger (God spills his wrath out like fire in the next verse). Fire is a common depiction both of divine revelation (*Shemot 24:17; Tehillim 18:13-14*) and of God's anger (e.g. *Isaiah 66:15; Jeremiah 4:4*) and punishment (*Devarim 32:22*). Shapeless and intangible, fire offers an apt metaphor for God's rage, which burns and incinerates offenders (e.g. *Vayikra 10:2; Bamidbar 16:35; II Kings 1:9-14*). This verse describes a frightening destructive fire, a terrible conflagration that envelops Jerusalem, consuming everything in its environs.

Nevertheless, fire maintains beneficial qualities as well, offering warmth and light. Metaphorically, this conveys the favorable aspects of divine revelation – its clarity, protection, and mysterious splendor. Humans seeking spirituality and divine radiance sometimes encounter this fire. Thus, Moses veers from his path to contemplate the burning bush (*Shemot 3:2-3*), Elijah is spirited heavenward amidst flaming chariots and horses (*II Kings 2:11*), and Elisha perceives similar fiery cavalry that surrounds and protects him (*II Kings 6:17*). A fire that signifies God's glory burns at the top of Sinai (e.g. *Shemot 24:17*) and on the *Mishkan* at night (*Shemot 40:38*). In Zechariah's vision of the ideal state of Jerusalem, he describes God as a ring of fire around Israel, providing glory and protection:

Jerusalem will be an unwalled city, [continually growing] from the multitude of people and animals in its midst. And I will be for her, says God, a wall of

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<sup>14</sup> See R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha 2:3*.

<sup>15</sup> The Targum on this verse explains that God withdraws His right hand (which customarily gave assistance to Israel in the face of the enemy) so as not to give aid to His nation: "He drew back His right hand, and did not help His nation from the enemy."

surrounding fire; I will be a glory in her midst. (*Zechariah* 2:8-9)

### **Language of Destruction and Redemption**

Despite its debilitating message, the language used to depict Judah's destruction evokes redemption. The hewing down of the horns of Israel recalls biblical passages that promise the cleaving of the enemy's horn, indicating Israel's salvation (e.g. *Jeremiah* 48:25; *Tehillim* 75:11). The horn also anticipates the raising of Israel's horn, implying the restoration of her fortunes (*Tehillim* 112:9).<sup>16</sup> God's right hand appears elsewhere in biblical passages to strengthen and support Israel and deliver them from their enemies (*Isaiah* 41:10-11). As noted, the fire of destruction can easily transform into a protective fire, reflecting God's resplendence and His defense of Israel.

The verses in chapter 2 that describe the downfall of Jerusalem do not represent the conclusion of the tale of Israel's fortune. Downtrodden and demoralized, Judah undergoes a crushing blow. Nevertheless, *Eikha* weaves language of redemption into her language of destruction, thereby retaining a core of hope, which flutters softly within the portrait of gloom.

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<sup>16</sup> Both of these ideas appear in the *midrash* cited above (*Yalkut Shimoni, I Samuel* 81), which concludes with the removal of the horns from the enemy and the return of the horns to the messianic figure who will restore Israel's fortunes.