EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #10: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

Section I: 1-11
The Narrator's Account of Post-Destruction Jerusalem

Jerusalem's Sufferings and Loneliness
Eikha 1:1

Eikha 1:1

אֵיכָה֙ יָשְׁבָ֣ה בָדָ֔ד
הָעִיר֙ רַבָּ֣תִי עָ֔ם
הָיְתָ֖ה כְּאַלְמָנָ֑ה

רַבָּ֤תִי בַגּוֹיִם֙
שָׂרָ֣תִי בַּמְּדִינ֔וֹת
הָיְתָ֖ה לָמַֽס

How[1] does this city sit alone?
The city that was once so full of people
has become like a widow.

[Once] great among nations,
the prince of countries,
has become a tributary.

The construction of this verse sets it apart, marking it as the opening of the book. While most verses in chapter 1 contain three binary (two-part) sentences, this verse seems to comprise two ternary (three-part) sentences. The final stanza of each line begins with the word *hayeta* ("has become"), signifying the conclusive

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[1] The opening word, *eikha*, is an elongated form of the word *eikh*, an interrogatory word that opens a question: "How?" This word is a not so much a question as a rhetorical device, an expression of pain and confusion, the opening of a lament. The shortened word, *eikh*, opens Ezekiel's lamentation over the destruction of Zur (*Ezekiel* 26:17). Its lengthened version stretches out the word, ending in a vowel, which conveys the drawn out sounds (of sobbing, howling, or sighing) that accompany the rhetorical exclamation of despair. We will devote an excurses to this word at the conclusion of the chapter.

change in fortune of the once-regal city.

The mourning of the city is personified by a female figure, a resonant image that reveals multiple layers of grief, strength, and loneliness. The feminine singular person does not represent solely the mourning of the individual. By using the city as a metaphor, it turns our attention to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the collective community. The fusion of the inhabitants into one collective entity conveys the importance of the national loss. The book thus opens by focusing our attention upon the political, social, and religious loss suffered by the community. Shared disaster creates a unified community of grief, erasing social, economic, and age-related distinctions. Young suffer alongside old, and once-frivolous maidens mourn together with wealthy priests and powerful military men.

In depicting a singular figure, the book succeeds in overriding the impersonal nature of grief experienced by a collective or by vast numbers of people. *Eikha* discloses an individual's agony, personalizing the suffering of the national entity. Ironically, this description renders Jerusalem a pitifully solitary figure; experiencing her pain as one entity may be a form of comfort, but no one who remains outside the disaster can comfort her.

The city's forlorn state is both literal and figurative. Emptied of its populace, the book depicts the physical city mourning its desolation, while simultaneously alluding to the human inhabitants of the city, who mourn their own losses. This blurring between city and humans enhances both the portrait of Jerusalem and her inhabitants. By employing characteristics generally accorded to the human experience (such as mourning, crying, and sitting alone), the book animates the city, attributing to it a human portrait that evokes genuine empathy and compassion. Moreover, by representing her as a person, the *Tanakh* can convey Jerusalem's symbolic significance, as well as the enormous tragedy of her destruction.

Indeed, Jerusalem is so much more than the sum of her palaces, houses, and fortresses. In biblical literature, Jerusalem is a sacred city, one that radiates God's holiness and pulses with spiritual vibrancy. Jerusalem retains an active role as arbiter and disseminator of divine morality. Isaiah conveys this idea well in his famous eschatological vision, in which Jerusalem plays a central role:

> And it will be at the end of days, the mountain of the house of God will be established at the tops of mountains and be elevated above the hills, and all the nations will flow toward it. And many peoples will go and they will say: Let us go up to the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, and He will instruct us in His ways and we will walk in His paths, for from Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of God from Jerusalem. (*Isaiah* 2:1-3)

Indeed, divine blessings flow from Jerusalem; salvation, security, and stability

reside there. Jerusalem's collapse causes terrible bereavement. Its personification allows the reader to experience more acutely its meaning for the nation.

Loneliness

The book of *Eikha* does not open with destruction. Instead of thundering, forceful verbs depicting the raucous roar of the enemies or the loud crash of demolition, *Eikha* opens with a deafening silence. The book commences with the quiet sounds of loneliness, the eerie echoes of an emptied city.

The first theme of the book is loneliness, illustrated poignantly by the metaphor of the widowed city, the *almana*, and acknowledged explicitly by the use of the word *badad* (lonely), which launches the book.

a. *Badad* (*vadad*)[2]

The uncommon word *badad* appears twice in *Eikha*. Aside from launching the book, the word appears at the heart of its central chapter (*Eikha* 3:28). These two key placements call attention to the pivotal importance of this word in the book. Elsewhere in *Tanakh*, the word *badad* describes a leper (*Vayikra* 13:46),[3] a social outcast (*Jeremiah* 15:17), and a destroyed city (*Isaiah* 27:10). The image of Jerusalem sitting all alone (*badad*) focuses attention on the pain of her desolation, the abandonment of her loved ones, her pariah status within the world, or some combination of these experiences.

Jerusalem's inability to find consolation magnifies her loneliness. Jewish rituals of mourning revolve around human contact – seven days of social support, during which the community envelops the mourners in solace and sympathy. Following Job's tragedy, for example, his three friends arrive to console him (*Job* 2:11). Without company, how can Jerusalem be comforted? Who will alleviate her pain and offer her empathy? The absence of community means the absence of consolation, an important theme of this chapter.

While the word *badad* primarily conveys the city's dreadful loneliness, a positive biblical usage of the word implies Israel's singularity or security. Balaam prophetically proclaims that Israel is a "people that dwells alone (*am le-vadad yishkon*) and is not reckoned among the nations" (*Bamidbar* 23:9), emphasizing

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[2] The second letter of the Hebrew alphabet may be written with a dot inside of it (a *dagesh*), in which case it is pronounced as a "b," or without a *dagesh*, in which case it is pronounced as a "v". In our verse, the letter lacks a *dagesh*, and is therefore pronounced *vadad*, but because this letter is more commonly rendered as a b, I use the word *badad* throughout this section.

[3] The Targum on *Eikha* 1:1 compares Jerusalem to a leper: "The Attribute of Justice replied and said: Because of the greatness of the rebellion and sin that was within her, she will dwell alone, as a man plagued with leprosy upon his skin, who sits alone." This Targum is based on the similar phrase used to describe Jerusalem sitting alone (*yasheva vadad*) and the leper sitting alone (*badad yaishev*), outside of the camp (*Vayikra* 13:46).

Israel's uniqueness. Other verses illustrate the manner in which isolation (using the word *badad*) can be positive, guaranteeing Israel's safety (e.g. *Devarim* 33:28; *Tehillim* 4:9).[4]

This word may simultaneously point us to the cause of Israel's loneliness and its solution. If only Israel had maintained its perception of its singularity among the family of nations! If only Judah had refrained from creating alliances that erased fundamental ideological and religious differences! Israel's willingness to blend into the community of nations, her refusal to maintain her divinely mandated uniqueness, turns a blessing of singularity (*am le-vadad yishkon*) into a curse of isolation (*yasheva vadad*). Therefore, the experience of loneliness may be the very thing that can facilitate Israel's return to the ideal. Sitting along can be a constructive experience for the battered city, reminding her that her isolated position is God's bidding and Jerusalem's destiny among the world's nations.

b. *Almana*

Eikha opens by focusing on Jerusalem's miserable state. To concretize the city's pain and loss, the first verse compares her to a widow. This metaphor evokes her vulnerability; the Bible often makes provisions for the special care that society should afford for its weaker members, often specifying the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (e.g. *Shemot* 22:20-23; *Devarim* 10:18).

Strikingly, the book initially renders the city anonymous, unnamed for the first three verses of the chapter.[5] By initially describing the city without name or identity, the book sharpens our perception of the city's widowed state. The Bible confers the appellation *Peloni Almoni* upon characters and places that are deliberately unnamed (e.g. *I Samuel* 21:3; *II Kings* 6:8; *Ruth* 4:1). While the etymology of the word *almoni* remains elusive, the word *alman* or *almana*, meaning widow, may be a cognate.[6] The semantic connection between these words suggests that the absence of a husband can obscure a widow's name along with her identity, initially rendering her anonymous.[7]

A city's personification as a woman is a common biblical trope (see e.g. Babylon in *Isaiah* 47; Nineveh in *Nahum* 3), one that we will see is a general theme of the

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[4] *Jeremiah* 49:31 uses a similar description to describe the security of Keidar.

[5] In verse 4, the book names Zion, while in verse 7, the name Jerusalem surfaces. *Eikha* refers more frequently to Zion (13 times) than to Jerusalem (7 times). While many commentators assume that Zion and Jerusalem are synonymous names for the capital city, Ibn Ezra maintains that Jerusalem is the name of the city, while Zion is the area designated for the king (Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 1:17). For more approaches to Zion's distinctive meaning, see J. Renkema, *Lamentations* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament. Leuven: Peeters, 1998), p. 112; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 52-53; P. R. House, *Lamentations*, (Word Biblical Commentary 23B. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), p. 349.

[6] Rashi, *Ruth* 4:1, seems to allude to this interpretation: "*Almoni* – a widower without a name."

[7] See also *Isaiah* 4:1, which seems to support this notion.

chapter. In *Eikha*, Jerusalem manifests her female persona both as a mother[8] and as a wife. Within the context of the catastrophe of the *churban*, Jerusalem is a grieving mother and a widowed city (see e.g. *Eikha* 1:5).[9] But while her children are easily identifiable as Jerusalem's inhabitants, the identity of her husband is less clear.

Perhaps Jerusalem's deceased husband refers to her inhabitants. If so, then *Eikha* represents Jerusalem as both mother and wife of her residents. By seamlessly weaving together two different metaphors, *Eikha* succeeds in constructing a multifaceted portrait of Jerusalem's loss. As a bereaved mother, Jerusalem's grief is incalculable. The loss of her children is the loss of Jerusalem's future, her hope, her destiny. It is also unnatural, a poignant reminder of the topsy-turvy nature of a world in which a child predeceases a parent. The sorrow of a widow denotes a different kind of loss, one that exists more in the present than in the future.[10] The metaphor of the city-as-widow features her loneliness, vulnerability,[11] and economic instability.

Perhaps, however, the metaphor implies that God is Jerusalem's husband (see e.g. *Isaiah* 54:4-8; 62:4-5). In this metaphor, Jerusalem represents the nation, whose relationship with God is often described within a matrimonial context.[12] In its ideal form, this relationship suggests passion and commitment, love and exclusivity. In its less than ideal situation, it evokes the possibility of infidelity and betrayal. The portrayal of Jerusalem as a wife recalls her promise of exclusive loyalty to God. It also reminds us that Israel's betrayal of the relationship led to its demise.

A linguistic parallel alludes to Jerusalem's sins in this opening of the book. The phrase that describes Jerusalem's haunting loneliness (*Eikha yashva vadad*) recalls a scathing censure of the errant city, which engaged in voluntary promiscuity (*Isaiah* 1:21): "*Eikha hayeta le-zona*," "How has this city become a harlot!" Jerusalem's loneliness is surely an outcome of her infidelities.

The lack of clarity with regard to the identity of the dead husband remains a salient omission. The reader experiences the loss, the widowed city's loneliness and anguish, without full knowledge of the precise nature of the tragedy. Instead,

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[8] See also *Isaiah* 51:17-18.

[9] *Isaiah* 47:8-9 also employ these two different metaphors when he describes Babylon's impending punishment.

[10] Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 1:1, understands the distinction quite differently. He claims that a mother's loss of children is endurable, because she still has a husband with whom she can bear more children. When a woman suffers the death of her husband, however, she has no hope of having more children, and she therefore loses her future.

[11] Several biblical passages reflect the vulnerability of the widow, whose lack of resources and protection often renders her the victim of social injustice (see e.g. *Isaiah* 1:23; 10:2; *Ezekiel* 22:7; *Job* 24:3).

[12] See e.g. *Ezekiel* 15; *Hosea* 2; *Shir Ha-Shirim*. We will discuss this point again later in the chapter.

Eikha focuses on Jerusalem's overpowering grief, while the identity of her husband is of secondary concern. Moreover, in refusing to name the deceased, *Eikha* allows room to hope that neither God nor Israel is dead. Present destruction leaves Jerusalem widow-like in her grief, but lacking a corpse, no definitive husband has permanently vanished.

Ke-Almana: A Moment of Optimism

In its description of the city's widowhood, Eikha prefaces the word *almana* with the preposition *kaf*, known as the *kaf ha-dimayon*. It functions in a comparative sense, in which the verse employs the concept of a widow as a simile.

But this image is problematic. Is it possible that Jerusalem's metaphoric husband (whether God or nation) is deceased, never to return? Is Jerusalem's devastation hopelessly unalterable? Perhaps this simply reflects Jerusalem's sense of despair. The simile of the widow offers a bleak outlook for the future, similar to other expressions in the chapter: "God has given me into the hands of those before whom I will not again rise" (*Eikha* 1:14).

Even if this accurately reflects Jerusalem's despondency, is this a theologically tenable position? After all, God promised His nation an eternal covenant. Moreover, can one say of God that He is deceased? Jeremiah makes this point elsewhere, in a verse that contravenes *Eikha* 1:1:

> For Israel is not a widow, [nor is] Judah from his God… (*Jeremiah* 51:5)

Radak's explanation of the verse in *Jeremiah* is unambiguous:

> For Israel is not a widow – [S]he is not like a widow whose husband died and she is abandoned by him forever. Not so Israel! For her husband lives and exists, and if he left her in exile, he shall yet remember her and return to her and punish the enemies. (Radak, *Jeremiah* 51:5)

Rashi interprets *Eikha* 1:1 in a manner that reconciles with *Jeremiah*. According to Rashi, the *kaf* does not establish equivalence, but rather limits the comparison, expressing resemblance in a deliberately partial and contrastive manner:

> **Not** an actual widow, but **similar** to a woman whose husband went to a faraway land and his intention is to return to her. (Rashi, *Eikha* 1:1)

This creative reading is typical of Rashi's commentary, designed not simply to explicate the text, but also to offer comfort and hope.[13] Moreover, Rashi's viewpoint is a more accurate reflection of biblical theology, in which God never completely abandons Israel.[14]

Recalling the Past

Comparison to the past (a city that was once teeming with people, great among nations, the prince of countries) focuses our attention on Jerusalem's astonishing fall. From her glorious heights of distinction, Jerusalem has fallen into the depths of wretched lowliness. While this surely is not the source of her pain, the change in her fortune undoubtedly bears upon Jerusalem's present state of shock and humiliation. Shattered expectations give rise to disorientation and confusion; Jerusalem's downfall leaves her deflated and bewildered.

Still, this opening line recalls a past of glory and dignity, majesty and splendor. This was no ordinary city. Jerusalem was a prince among nations, a remarkable city, a thriving metropolis! Although *Eikha* lacks actual comfort, in recalling the greatness of this city, the initial verse makes the present situation slightly more bearable. It allows the inhabitants to retain a sense of self-worth and may even provide the reader with a flash of hope, however miniscule. This opening verse does not consciously foster optimism. Its primary intention is to utilize the contrast between past and present to magnify Jerusalem's improbable plummet. Nevertheless, by recalling Jerusalem's past, the book offers a snippet of dignity – miniscule, but perhaps sufficient to allow biblical readers to glimpse a modicum of hope in the undercurrents of the book. We will return to this when we explore the way in which rabbinic interpreters take hold of this idea and regard it as a textual opportunity (one of several) to coax consolation from this book.

Recollection of the past reminds us that Judaism does not focus exclusively on the present. Past events infuse the present with meaning and concrete aspirations. Similarly, present experiences incorporate awareness of the future – our goals, hopes, and anticipations.[15] The timelessness of the Jewish historical experience has often enabled the nation to bear a miserable present.

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[13] Rashi bases his approach on earlier rabbinic interpretation (*Sanhedrin* 104a and *Eikha Rabba* 1:3). It is typical of Rashi to choose, from among many rabbinic interpretations, an idea that consoles and uplifts.

[14] See e.g. *Vayikra* 26:44.

[15] To describe the experience in which past in integrated into present and present anticipates future, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik coins the phrase, "unitive time-consciousness." See *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering, and the Human Condition*, eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City: Ktav, 2003), pp. 14-17. See also *Halakhic Man,* trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983), pp. 113-123, and "Sacred and Profane," reprinted in *Shiurei Ha-Rav*, ed. Joseph Epstein (Hoboken: Ktav, 1994), pp. 4-32.