

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #12: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:4**

דְּרָכַי צִיּוֹן אֲבֵלוֹת
מִבְּלִי בָּאֵי מוֹעֵד

כָּל־שַׁעֲרֶיהָ שׁוֹמְמִין
כֹּהֲנֶיהָ נֹאנְחִים

בְּתוֹלְתֶיהָ נוֹגְוֹת
וְהִיא מֵרֶלֶה

**The roads to Zion mourn
For there is no one who comes on the festival**

**All of her gates are desolate
Her priests groan**

**Her maidens grieve
And she is very bitter**

After a brief glance at the exiles in verse 3, we will soon return our attention to Jerusalem, but not immediately. First, we experience the eerie loneliness of the journey back to Jerusalem. We seem to have abandoned the itinerant exiles of verse 3, relinquishing them to their exhausted misery. Progressing toward the city, we scan the dusty roads for pilgrims, but in vain; instead, we bear witness to their unnerving emptiness.¹ Arriving at the once-bustling gates, previously teeming with wayfarers and travelers, especially on the festivals, we bleakly observe their desolation.² Priests, whose hectic festival duties had once not left them much time for leisure, now keen listlessly, emitting low and anguished groans. And the maidens! Their joy and vibrancy have dulled, their circle dances

¹ For a similar description of the desolation of roads (presumably of Jerusalem, although this is not certain), see *Isaiah* 33:8.

² In its portrayal of the ideal state of Jerusalem, *Isaiah* 60:11 describes her gates as always open, day and night, ready to admit wealth and kings.

have terminated (*Jeremiah* 31:12). Wearily, they too issue sounds of grief, incomprehensible expressions of despair. Jerusalem herself is bitter, a despondent witness to her own collapse.

Ba'ei mo'ed

Ambiguity attends the word *mo'ed* in the book of *Eikha*. *Mo'ed* derives from the word *ya'ad*, meaning appointed or designated. It can refer to a time or a place. In *Eikha*, this word refers variously to an appointed day³ or to an appointed place, usually the Temple (e.g. *Eikha* 2:6).⁴ While the context often sheds clarity on its usage, in this verse, its meaning remains ambiguous. Ibn Ezra cites both possibilities:

Ba'ei mo'ed – They would come on the festivals. But it is preferable in my eyes to interpret that this refers to the Temple, and it is called *mo'ed* because all of Israel assemble by appointment there. Similarly, “in the midst of your appointed place (*mo'adekha*)” (*Tehillim* 74:4), “they burned all of the appointed places (*mo'adei*) of God...” (ibid. 74:8). (Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 1:4)

Ibn Ezra concludes that this refers to the Temple, which used to attract throngs of pilgrims, who no longer visit.⁵ Ibn Ezra brings two proof texts from a psalm that describes the destruction of the Temple. His approach focuses our attention on the meaninglessness of the city without its sacred center, the Temple.⁶ Rashi appears to reach the opposite conclusion, explaining that the word *mo'ed* refers to the appointed festivals when pilgrims would visit Jerusalem.⁷

Although translators have to decide one way or another, perhaps it is best to retain a dual meaning for the word *mo'ed* here. Everything has ceased to function according to its purpose. Poignant especially during the festival, the Temple's absence means that the roads are no longer used, the priests do not fulfill their duty, and young maidens cease their festive celebrations.

The City's Grieving Populace

Although the chapter mentions several groups (priests, maidens, children, officers), it does not single out any one group, focusing instead on the suffering of the general populace. A *midrash* notes this:

³ This day can be holy, namely a festival (e.g. *Eikha* 2:6), or a day appointed by God for destruction (e.g. *Eikha* 1:15)

⁴ The precursor to the Temple, the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*), is also referred to as the *ohel mo'ed*, commonly translated as “tent of meeting.”

⁵ Similarly focused on the experience of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, *Tehillim* 42:5 longingly recollects the hordes of celebrating pilgrims coming to the house of God.

⁶ See also Rashbam, *Eikha* 1:4.

⁷ It appears that most translations and scholars choose this reading, as I did in my translation above. See e.g. Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 41, 45.

For there is no one who comes on the festival... It does not say [there are no] honored people [who made the pilgrimage], but rather, there is no one who comes on the festival. (*Eikha Rabba* 1:20)

The solemn priests and the joyous maidens would seem to be an incompatible pair.⁸ But catastrophe unifies disparate factions in their shared grief, erasing distinctions of age and social standing. All mourn equally.

Perhaps, however, this juxtaposition highlights the special role that both priests and maidens once played in conjunction with the festival. As a complement to the dignified rituals of the priests, maidens cast off some of the solemnity, allowing the assembled masses to witness the celebration of the youth, with their characteristic exuberance (see e.g. *Judges* 21:19, 21). In this schema, priests and maidens mourn the destruction with common cause, as each group has forfeited its unique role.⁹

Even the personified roads mourn,¹⁰ further emphasizing the entwined relationship between the city and her inhabitants. Highways and gates, priests and maidens: all bemoan the meaninglessness of a desultory existence, the cessation of their primary functions. In this way, a *midrash* explains the peculiar image of the grieving roads:

The roads to Zion mourn. R. Huna said: All seek [to fulfill] their function. (*Eikha Rabba* 1:30)

The continuation of this *midrash* suggests that the roads mourn the loss specifically of their religious role, rather than their pedestrian function:

R. Avdimi from Haifa said: Even the roads seek [to fulfill] their function, as it says, "The roads to Zion mourn for there is no one to come on the festival." It does not say, "there are no station-houses for travelers and they are not guarded by turrets." (*Eikha Rabba* 1:30)

All associated with Jerusalem (people and objects) band together to facilitate worship of God in His sacred city. Correspondingly, when the city is destroyed, all

⁸ Commonly, maidens are linked alongside young men in biblical passages (see *Devarim* 32:25; *Isaiah* 62:5; *Jeremiah* 51:22; *Ezekiel* 9:6; *Amos* 8:13; *Zechariah* 9:17). This is true in *Eikha* as well (1:18 and 2:21).

⁹ See also *Joel* 1:8-9, where the verses describe the mourning of maidens and priests in successive verses.

¹⁰ R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 1:4, explains differently; it is not that the roads mourn, but rather that the people mourn the roads. In any case, the personification of objects animated by grief is a common biblical trope. See, for example, the mourning of the land in *Hosea* 4:3, the gates' misery in *Jeremiah* 14:2, and the mourning of the rampart and the wall in *Eikha* 2:8.

join together in mourning.

Embittered Jerusalem

Bitterness attends several notable biblical women: Chana (*I Samuel* 1:10), the Shunemite woman (*II Kings* 4:27), Rachel (*Jeremiah* 31:14), and Naomi (*Ruth* 1:20). Common to all of these women is the absence or loss of their children, producing unbearable suffering. Jerusalem's bitterness is the first indication of Jerusalem's role as a mother figure in the book of *Eikha*.¹¹

Although this is an undeniably negative portrayal, *midrashim* characteristically find a deep core of hope in associating Jerusalem with the bitter biblical women. After all, none of these women remains miserable forever; each of them eventually obtains children, dispels her bitterness, and replaces it with joy. In this vein, a *midrash* posits a stunning reversal of the loneliness that echoes throughout this chapter:

“She has no (*ein la*) comforter” (*Eikha* 1:2) – So says R. Levi: Every place in which it says, “she has none (*ein*),” she will have [what she lacks]. “And Sarai was barren; she had no child” (*Bereishit* 11), and she had, as it says, “God remembered Sara” (*Bereishit* 21). Similarly, “And Chana had no children,” and then she did, as it says, “For God remembered Chana.” Similarly, “She is Zion, there is none that seeks her” (*Jeremiah* 30), and she will have, as it says, “And a redeemer shall come to Zion” (*Isaiah* 59). Here too, you say that “she has no comforter.” She will have, as it says, “I [God] am your comforter” (*Isaiah* 51). (*Eikha Rabba* 1:26)

¹¹ Some scholars (e.g. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 59) see this theme in the use of the root *tzar*, meaning distress, in verse 3 (*mitzarim*), which evokes the description of the pain of childbirth (e.g. *Jeremiah* 4:31; 49:24).

Eikha 1:5

הִיוּ צָרִיחַ לְרֹאשׁ
אֵיבֵיהֶם שְׁלוֹ

כִּי־הָ הַזֹּגָה
עַל רַב־פְּשָׁעֶיהָ

עוֹלָלֶיהָ הִלְכּוּ שָׁבִי
לְפָנֵי־צָר

**Her adversaries were at the head
Her enemies were tranquil**

**For God made her grieve
Because of the greatness of her transgressions**

**Her young children went into captivity
Before the adversary**

God enters the scene for the first time alongside a blunt presentation of Israel's transgressions, the first explicit indication of Israel's culpability. While the verse does not elaborate on the nature of Israel's sins, their central position in this verse highlights their pivotal role. However, surrounded by the bewildering success of the enemies and the terrible suffering of the children, Israel's unnamed sins stand to lose some of their impact. How do these two topics – inexplicable injustice and human responsibility – obtain balance in this verse? Do they clash or cohere? Are they mutually exclusive or complementary? To answer this, we will examine the substance as well as the meter of this verse, observing their contributions to this key topic.

The first and third sentences of this verse focus on enemies, on an unjust world. These sentences succinctly describe the problem of theodicy. The paramount human quandary finds expression in two separate, but related questions:

1. Why do evildoers prosper? [*rasha ve-tov lo*]
2. Why do innocents suffer? [*tzaddik ve-ra lo*]

The first sentence (“Her adversaries were at the head, her enemies were tranquil”) describes the evildoers, adversaries, and enemies who have prevailed, triumphantly emerging at the helm of an enormous and prosperous empire. The word *shalu*, meaning tranquility, recalls Jeremiah's similar query, in which he describes his confusion regarding the scoundrels who flourish:

You are righteous, God. Shall I contend with you? I will still speak justice with you. Why do the ways of evildoers prosper? [Why do] all those who are traitorous [obtain] tranquility (*shalu*)? (*Jeremiah* 12:1)

In the beloved psalm that celebrates Jerusalem, tranquility appears as a reward for those who love Jerusalem:

Ask after the peace of Jerusalem. Let those who love her obtain tranquility. (*Tehillim* 122:6)

The enemies who obtain tranquility do not love Jerusalem; on the contrary, they cruelly assault her. Yet, in this incongruous world, the enemies of Jerusalem acquire the elusive tranquility that rightfully belongs to those who love her.

Captured children feature in the final sentence (“Her young children went into captivity before the adversary”), the archetype of suffering innocents. No transgression can ever account for the death of children, whose youth precludes them from assuming the burden of responsibility. Thus, the torment of children creates a theological conundrum, characterized by feelings of outrage and incomprehension.

These sentences revolve around the verse’s pivotal center. The core of the verse introduces God; this is His first appearance in the book. At the same time, the verse introduces the notion of Israel’s culpability. God enters the book in a punitive role, but one that is balanced by Israel’s sins¹² and the explanatory *ki* (“For God made her grieve because of the greatness of her transgressions”). God is responsible for Israel’s sorrow, dispensing punishment in accordance with Israel’s transgressions.

We can perhaps gain some theological insight into this difficult verse by turning our attention to the covenant of *Devarim* 28.¹³ The chapter lists the punishments that God threatens to inflict upon Israel if they violate the terms of the covenant. Sentence 3 of our verse echoes the warning of *Devarim* 28:41:

You will birth sons and daughters and they will not remain for you,
for they will go into captivity.

Devarim 28:44 cautioned Israel of the consequences that come to fruition in sentence one of our verse:

¹² The word employed to convey Israel’s sinfulness is *pasha*. Often used to describe a political infraction or rebellion (e.g. *II Kings* 1:1; 3:5), the term implies a willful act of rebellion against divine authority.

¹³ We previously discussed the relationship between *Eikha* and *Devarim* 28 in the introduction to theology.

The sentences that describe rampant injustice maintain meter that is uneven and discordant, an apt reflection of the tension and dissonance that characterize the human condition.

The middle verse is different; balanced meter manifests a harmonious worldview. Unadorned and lucid (in spite of the complex situation), this stark presentation belies the complexity of the human condition; it manages to restore equilibrium, conveyed both by its meter and by its content. In the midst of the turbulence of theological confusion, and surrounded by the churning uproar that suggests an unfair world, one idea rings clear: we maintain a deep-seated belief in God's justice. This conviction steadies and braces humans, who are overcome by the bewilderment of a world fraught with injustices.