

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
\*\*\*\*\*

## **EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

**By Dr. Yael Ziegler**

\*\*\*\*\*  
Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah  
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –  
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.  
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.  
\*\*\*\*\*

### **Shiur #01: Introduction to *Eikha***

#### **Goals and Focus**

Writing a commentary on *Eikha* involves a completely different set of challenges than writing a commentary on [Ruth](#).<sup>1</sup> In writing that commentary, I focused on the themes that emerged from an examination of the plot and characters in the book. *Eikha* lacks plot and characters. Thus, this commentary focuses instead on the themes and ideas that emerge from the language of the poetry of *Eikha*. As we will see, this book masterfully employs language to craft an exquisite composition of grief-stricken emotions and profound meaning.

We will examine broad themes, such as theodicy, false prophets, national sinning, and human suffering, but we will also engage in a close reading of the text. This presents a particular challenge, inasmuch as we must first contend with the difficult words, the ellipses, and the deliberate ambiguities strewn throughout biblical poetry. Interpreting Hebrew poetry in translation presents another difficulty. In spite of the technical difficulties, I hope that this reading will yield a stimulating understanding of the book itself and, more generally, that it will illustrate how biblical poetry works and how it offers its readers spiritual insights and wisdom.

While drawing on academic sources and methodology (to which I am indebted and appreciative), in this commentary, I remain chiefly devoted to the religious quest. My interpretative framework is rooted deeply in the world of Torah

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of my book, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), can be found on the VBM (<http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/megillat-rut>).

learning, in both its resources and goals. In the final analysis, I hope and pray that this commentary on *Eikha* moves people to strengthen and deepen their religious experience.

In the following introduction, I will raise some of the technical questions that arise with respect to the book of *Eikha*. The book's title, its author, its unity, and its date of composition are all subject to dispute. After presenting a brief overview of various approaches to each of these issues, I will explain the approach that I will adopt in this series in addressing each of these subjects.

### **Name of the Book**

In this commentary, we will refer to the book by its popular title, *Eikha*, which is the initial word of the book. The word “*eikha*” opens the book (and chapters 2 and 4) with a rhetorical question, an elongated form of the word *eikh*, meaning “How?” This form seems to affix a sigh to the terse query, powerfully conveying the bewildered pain of the nation.

Nevertheless, *Eikha* is not the official title of the book. *Chazal* refer to the book by its substantive name, *Kinot*, meaning lamentations.<sup>2</sup> A *kina* is a lament used for the public mourning of an individual (e.g. *II Samuel* 1:17-27; 3:33-34). As a rhetorical device, prophets sometimes utter a *kina* for the nation,<sup>3</sup> or for the cities that represent the nation. Jeremiah (9:9-10), for example, declares that he will engage in mourning rituals, including a *kina*, due to the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. A *kina* over the destruction of a city is a literary trope, in which the text treats the destruction of a city in the manner of mourning an individual who has died. Thus, by calling the chapters of this book *kinot*, *Chazal* suggest that *Eikha* expresses grief for Jerusalem's demise, an irreversible loss. In this view, the destruction of Jerusalem represents an irrevocable tragedy, one that threatens the continued spiritual and physical existence of the nation.

### **Authorship**

While the book itself does not identify its author, there is a strong tradition that the prophet Jeremiah composed *Eikha*. The *gemara* in *Bava Batra* (15a) states this as fact, and *midrashim* tend to cite verses from *Eikha* in Jeremiah's name.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *Chagiga* 5b; *Bava Batra* 14b; *Yerushalmi Shabbat* 16. Rabbinic literature also refers to select chapters of *Tehillim* as *kinot*. *Tehillim* 3 (*Berakhot* 7b) and *Tehillim* 79 (*Eikha Rabba* 4:2). The Greek and Latin names for the book, *threnoi* or *threni*, are a translation of the rabbinic title, *Lamentations*, which is the title of the book in the English translation of the Bible as well.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. *Ezekiel* 19:1; *Amos* 5:1-2.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. *Eikha Rabba* 1:23, 51; 2:23; 4:18.

Various Targumim (Greek Septuagint, Syriac Peshitta, Aramaic Targum, Latin Vulgate) open the book with an additional verse or a superscription that attributes authorship to Jeremiah.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Septuagint's placement of *Eikha* immediately after the book of *Jeremiah* (with some traditions regarding them as one continuous book) lends further support to this tradition.

Prophetic laments scattered throughout Jeremiah's book evoke a similar style and spirit as the laments in *Eikha*. Compare Jeremiah's evocative cry to that expressed by Jerusalem in *Eikha*:

How I wish my head were water and my eyes a spring of tears; I would cry day and night for the fallen of the daughter of my nation!  
(*Jeremiah* 8:23)

My eyes are drained from tears, my innards churn, my liver spills to the ground, because of the brokenness of the daughter of my nation. (*Eikha* 2:11)

Shared themes likewise link *Jeremiah* to *Eikha*. These include the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the direct connection between sins and suffering, God's relationship to the events, the accountability of the false prophets, the futility of reliance upon political alliances, the terrible famine that causes maternal cannibalism, and the ultimate defeat of the enemies.<sup>6</sup> Similar phrases, shared vocabulary, and stylistic similarities further cement the association between *Jeremiah* and *Eikha*.<sup>7</sup>

Several biblical narratives associated with Jeremiah lend support to his authorship of *Eikha*. In *II Chronicles* 35:25, Jeremiah composes (or chants) lamentations over Josiah's death, which are then inscribed in a "*sefer ha-kinot*,"

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, the Greek Targum prefixes this verse to the first chapter, "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said." An Aramaic Targum's ascription is more concise and is affixed to the first verse of the book: "Jeremiah the prophet and High Priest said." Although *Jeremiah* 1:1 does ascribe priesthood to Jeremiah, according to this Targumic tradition, Jeremiah was the High Priest, a tradition not found elsewhere. This tradition may derive from the notion that Jeremiah's father, Hilkiya, should be identified as the High Priest who functioned during the time of Josiah (see e.g. Malbim, *Jeremiah* 1:1, and Radak ad loc., citing his father).

<sup>6</sup> We will examine these similarities in detail as we delve more deeply into the book.

<sup>7</sup> Some notable examples include the phrases "*betulat bat Tzion*" and "*meguray mi-saviv*." Language strongly evocative of *Eikha* appears in *Jeremiah* 13:17, 22, 26; 14:17; 15:17; 20:7; 48:43. This partial list proffers some striking examples. For more on this, see G. H. Cohn, *Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016), pp. 217-229, and his references on p. 223, footnote 5. It should be noted, however, that we will observe striking similarities to other biblical books as well, especially *Isaiah* and *Ezekiel*.

or book of lamentations. Some biblical interpreters adduce this verse as support for Jeremiah's authorship of *Eikha*, maintaining that (some of) these lamentations over Josiah's death appear in *Eikha*, especially in chapter 4.<sup>8</sup> At the very least, this verse establishes Jeremiah's inclination and ability to compose lamentations.

In another biblical episode that suggests Jeremiah's involvement in composing *Eikha*, he sends a scroll to the sinful Judean king, Jehoakim (*Jeremiah* 36). The scroll (referred to as "*megillat sefer*") contains "all of the words that [God] said to [Jeremiah] regarding Israel, Judah, and all of the nations from the day that [God] spoke to [Jeremiah], from the days of Josiah until today" (*Jeremiah* 36:2). Composed in order to move the nation to repent, the scroll describes the catastrophe that God intends to bring upon the nation as punishment for their deeds (*Jeremiah* 36:3). Moreover, it testifies to the imminent arrival of the Babylonian king and the impending destruction of the land (*Jeremiah* 36:29).

This scroll agitates and frightens the king's officers, but the king himself remains impassive. Jehoakim calmly feeds Jeremiah's scroll into the fireplace, a brash display of the king's disdain for prophetic counsel. Following this episode, God instructs Jeremiah to reconstruct the destroyed scroll, which Jeremiah does, even as he supplements it with new ideas and details (*Jeremiah* 36:32).

Some rabbinic sources identify Jeremiah's scroll that Jehoakim burned as the book of *Eikha*.<sup>9</sup> Ibn Ezra (in the introduction to his commentary on *Eikha*) disagrees, noting that *Eikha* contains none of Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and never alludes to the contemporary events or people in Jehoakim's time (including the Babylonians!). In any case, the incident in which Jeremiah writes a scroll regarding the Babylonian destruction lends credence to the idea that Jeremiah could have written *Eikha*.

Some scholars assert that Jeremiah did not write this book. These scholars base their suggestion on a variety of reasons,<sup>10</sup> one of which is that *Eikha* does not

---

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. *Eikha Rabba* (Vilna) 4:1; Rashi, *Eikha* 4:1. In particular, *Eikha* 4:20 may allude to Josiah's death (see also Targum on *Eikha* 1:18 and 4:20).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Warsaw), *Parashat Shemini* 9; *Moed Katan* 26a; Rashi, *Jeremiah* 36:23, 32; Rashi, *Eikha* 1:1; Rashbam, Introduction to *Eikha*. There is some debate as to which parts of *Eikha* the king burned and what exactly Jeremiah added later (in accordance with *Jeremiah* 36:32). Rashi (*Eikha* 1:1; *Jeremiah* 36:32) maintains that chapters 1, 2, and 4 were written in God's initial command (*Jeremiah* 36:1), while chapter 3 was added later. A *midrash* (*Eikha Rabba*, *Petichta* 28) discusses the issue, suggesting that only chapter 1 was original. See also Radak, *Jeremiah* 36:30, who cites the debate.

<sup>10</sup> Some scholars identify theological and ideological differences between the books. Among several examples, S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, reprinted 1914), p. 463, doubts that the author of *Jeremiah* would state that prophetic vision has ceased (*Eikha* 2:10) or would maintain a favorable view about King Zedekiah (who Driver assumes is the subject of *Eikha* 4:20). R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and*

name Jeremiah, a known figure in Jerusalem. However, this fact does not establish that Jeremiah is not the author; it only indicates that the book chose not to name its author. In fact, there could be a very good reason why Jeremiah would write *Eikha* without including his name. After all, Jeremiah was a well-known prophet of rebuke. Coming from Jeremiah, the book would sound like a reprimand; worse, it could appear to be a triumphant conclusion to his prophetic exhortations. As we will see, this book is neither reproof nor triumph. Its tone is not that of an irate or vindicated prophet, but rather an anguished witness, or member, of a downtrodden nation.

In any case, *Eikha* deliberately obscures the identity of the author, deeming him non-essential, and perhaps distracting. Moreover, the absence of an author is a statement in its own right. The anonymity of the book enables the author to merge with his subject and share in the nation's grief. This camaraderie would be difficult to achieve if the book attributed authorship to a renowned castigator. By choosing not to name its author, the book remains the story of Everyman, a human tale of catastrophe that blurs any distinction between the identities of different individual personae.

In this commentary on *Eikha*, we will adopt *Chazal's* position with regard to Jeremiah's authorship. While the question of authorship will not impact greatly upon this commentary, we will pay special attention to the two additional books that *Chazal* attribute to Jeremiah in *Bava Batra* 15a, namely, *Kings* and *Jeremiah*. According to rabbinic tradition, Jeremiah wrote three books, each of which expresses a different viewpoint on the catastrophic exile and destruction. The book of *Kings* provides the history of Jerusalem's fall and the book of *Jeremiah* the theological perspective, while *Eikha* supplies the emotional response.

---

*Lamentations* (New York: Ktav, reprinted 1974), p. 125, observes that Jeremiah's negative view of Israel's behavior in the Temple (which he describes as a den of thieves in *Jeremiah* 7:10) does not match the obvious regard for the Temple in the book of *Eikha* (e.g. 2:1, 6). D.R. Hillers, *Lamentations* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), pp. xxi-xxii, observes that some of the first-person content of the book contradicts Jeremiah's own prophecies (e.g. contrast *Eikha* 4:17 to *Jeremiah* 2:18). Hillers further argues (p. xxii) that *Eikha* suggests an author "more closely identified with the common hopes and fears of the people than it was possible for Jeremiah to be." Many of these arguments are dependent upon interpretation of the text. Moreover, these arguments tend to adopt a rather one-dimensional view of the prophet; they cannot imagine that Jeremiah could hold more than one opinion or approach in his lifetime, notwithstanding changing circumstances. This type of evidence is at best inconclusive, and at worst unconvincing; it offers a poor assessment of the diversity of human character and the complexity of the positions people can hold. Furthermore, these arguments are compelling only if we assume that Jeremiah wrote this book from a personal, rather than a national (or religious) perspective. In fact, *Eikha* and *Jeremiah* have very different aims, such that even if they have the same author, one would expect to find different viewpoints in each.

Nevertheless, we will not limit ourselves to understanding the book only within the context of Jeremiah's authorship. We will examine this book as it presents itself – namely, as the work of an anonymous representative of the nation. We will also search for interactions between *Eikha* and books not ascribed to Jeremiah, observing that both *Isaiah* and *Ezekiel* interact with *Eikha*, as do certain chapters in *Tehillim*. The theological meaning of the connection between *Eikha* and the prophetic biblical books cannot be overstated; by linking the events of *Eikha* to the prophetic exhortations that precede it, the book presents these events as expected consequences of human actions. Proper adherence to the prophetic exhortations could have allowed the nation to avert the disastrous outcome. On the flip side, by reading *Eikha* within a broader prophetic context, the nation can find its way out of the gloom of *Eikha*'s present circumstances by adhering to prophetic counsel and modifying its sinful behavior.

### Unity of the Book

Does the book of *Eikha* exhibit a consistent narrative flow and progression, or is it an anthology of five separate, independent laments? Some scholars assert that there is an absence of logical development in the book, and they therefore attempt to establish that the chapters reflect separate and distinct poems.<sup>11</sup> The absence of a plot that moves forward or characters that develop and grow makes it difficult to establish that *Eikha* involves conscious construction that unifies the book. Nevertheless, some scholars adduce the unity of form (such as alphabetic construction), thematic and verbal correspondences, and the lyric style as evidence of narrative cohesiveness.<sup>12</sup> Others have paid attention to the way in which the book as a whole progresses and weaves together themes, ideas, and theological considerations.<sup>13</sup>

It seems evident that each chapter constitutes its own separate poetic composition. After all, each chapter has its own complete acrostic form, linking each chapter together as a distinctive unit, containing a cohesive idea. I will therefore examine the separate themes, tone, and theology of each chapter of

---

<sup>11</sup> A. Berlin (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 6, maintains that *Eikha* originally consisted of five separate poems. Similarly, see Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 117, who supports this view with the claim that the literary genre of each chapter is different. Even if Gordis is correct (and there is little doubt that chapters 3 and 5 are different in many ways from chapter 1, 2, and 4), that does not necessarily mean that one author could not write using different styles. Chapters written in different styles may still come together in a coherent whole, maintaining a narrative flow and progression. Even the absence of logical development (maintained by Gordis) can be a product of deliberate construction.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 5, 23; D. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures In Biblical Poetry* (SBL Monograph Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 83-104.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot Ha-Emuna Ha-Yisraelit*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), pp. 584-590, who sees a poetic unity in the five chapters of the book; Grossberg, *Centripetal*, p. 95.

*Eikha*. At the conclusion of each chapter, I will summarize its ideas, its structure, its trajectory, and its subject matter. Nevertheless, I will also strongly advocate a reading of the book of *Eikha* as a unified construct, rather than an anthology of separate lamentations. At the conclusion of this series, I will attempt to sketch a broad picture of the book. By viewing *Eikha* as a unified book, we can discern the manner in which *Eikha* subtly, but magnificently, weaves its themes into a cohesive poetic arrangement.

### **Date of Composition**

Although the book offers no specific date of composition, it purports to be an eyewitness account of the events of 586 BCE. The siege, destruction, and exile of Jerusalem and her inhabitants surface and then fade, as *Eikha* intersperses the portrait of catastrophe with the nation's emotional and theological response to it. Many modern scholars accept the book's date at face value, regarding it as an account written by someone who witnessed the events of 586 BCE.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars adduce linguistic evidence to support a date close to the destruction.<sup>15</sup> The book's lack of hope in the future and the rawness of the poignant account of suffering may suggest the proximity of the author to the events. Nevertheless, as Berlin points out, a skilled author should have little trouble conjuring up the depth of feeling of these events, even if he lived long after.<sup>16</sup>

As we have noted, some rabbinic sources regard the book as a composite product of several events, some of which occurred even before the Babylonian Empire began its meteoric rise (such as Josiah's death in 609 BCE and Jehoakim's intractable sins, which followed immediately after Josiah's death).

In my view, the question of when exactly the book was written remains less important than its meaning and timeless relevance. The events leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE constitute the historical context of the book. Nevertheless, interpretive tradition does not limit interpretation of this book to its particular historical context. Instead, *Eikha* functions as a paradigm of national catastrophe; it is a blueprint for contending with suffering and all manner of analogous human experience. Indeed, rabbinic commentary tends to interpret the verses of *Eikha* (which relate to the destruction of the First Temple) in relation

---

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. xviii-xix; Dobbs Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 4-5; J. Renkema, *Lamentations: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. B. Doyle (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), p. 54; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 33. Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 126, accepts this dating with regard to chapters 2 and 4, which graphically describe Jerusalem's fall. For a brief overview of the range of dates that scholars have proposed, see I. Provan, *Lamentations* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 10-11.

<sup>15</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Lamentations," *Journal of the Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 26 (1998), pp. 8-9. Provan, *Lamentations*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 33.

to its own contemporary national tragedies (including, but not limited to, the destruction of the Second Temple):

“She shall surely cry (*bakho tivkeh*)” (*Eikha* 1:2) – Why does [the word] *bakha* [appear] twice? Rabba said in the name of R. Yochanan: One for the First Temple and one for the Second. (*Sanhedrin* 104a)

“On the day of His anger” (*Eikha* 2:1). [The word] “His anger” (*apo*) appears twice; once for the First Temple and once in regard to the Second Temple. (*Eikha Rabba* 2:1)

Thus, *Eikha* obtains a meaning that stretches beyond the events of 586 BCE. Rabbinic texts transform *Eikha* into a book that transcends one calamitous era, allowing its portrayal to extend to all periods of Jewish history in its evocative bid to contend with national grief.

The answers to the questions raised in this chapter (title, author, date, and cohesion) remain inconclusive. I have attempted to offer the reasons for my particular approach to each of these issues. In the upcoming introductory chapters, we will examine the historical background for the book, its poetic features, and its elusive theology.

Questions and comments are welcome: [yaelziegler@gmail.com](mailto:yaelziegler@gmail.com)