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**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Shiur #07: Biblical Poetry and the Book of *Eikha* (Part I)**

A sustained expression of anguish and woe, *Eikha*, like many compositions designed to convey human emotions, is a book of poetry, not prose. Designed to impact upon the reader's passions, poetry offers the reader an emotional experience rather than a cognitive one, feelings rather than narrative. Prose aims to inform, but poetry seeks to have an effect.

Although defining the distinction between poetry and prose (especially in biblical literature) remains a controversial topic,<sup>1</sup> the dense concentration of poetic techniques used in the composition of the book of *Eikha* indicates its poetic nature. This book successfully wields characteristic poetic features, such as elliptic sentences, elevated discourse, meter, metaphor, multivocality, structure, sound, parallelism, wordplays, and imagery, to convey to the reader its grief-stricken tone and tale of calamity.

Biblical books are not mere literature; they are religious texts, which present the human experience through the lens of the relationship between humans and God. In *Eikha*, mourning and pain obtain religious significance, as humans grapple with God amidst roiling emotions and tragic circumstances. In our study, we will examine the manner in which *Eikha's* poetic techniques and features shape and convey the religious meaning of the text, in a bid to extract its deeper theological meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Berlin, "Reading Biblical Poetry," in A. Berlin and M. Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2097. J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 63, observes that, "the same traits that seem to characterize Hebrew 'poetry' also crop up in what is clearly not poetry." Similarly, on p. 69, Kugel asserts that, "to speak of poetry at all in the Bible will be in some measure to impose a concept foreign to the biblical world." Nevertheless, R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 5-6, disagrees with Kugel, maintaining that one can recognize poetic discourse. He further cautions that one should not overstate the difficulty of biblical poetry: "There remains much that can be understood about biblical verse... it may exhibit perfectly perceptible formal patterns that tell us something about the operations of the underlying poetic system." Nevertheless, scholars often bemoan the elusive nature of biblical poetry, defining it by the degree and concentration of poetic techniques, rather than clear parameters.

Due to the dense and terse nature of *Eikha's* poetry, it is especially important to examine its techniques. A myriad of details convey the book's themes, emotions, and theology. To understand this delicately-crafted poetic composition, we must pay careful attention to its details – its verbal nuances, sounds, rhythm and imagery.

The following examination does not purport to be comprehensive, but rather representative. I will bring several examples from different categories of poetic techniques to illustrate the manner in which they contribute to conveying the themes and theology of the book. As we progress through our study of the book, I will examine these poetic features as they arise.

### **Imagery and Metaphors**

Although scholars do not always concur on how to define poetry, most scholars agree that a major feature of poetry is its attempt to activate the reader's imagination by using techniques such as imagery and metaphors. A poem employs imagery when it intends to trigger the reader's senses, offering the reader a visceral experience. Commonly, imagery appeals to the visual sense, evoking pictorial images that enable the reader to envision the scene. *Eikha* vividly describes the terrible sights of Jerusalem's calamity: her desolate roads (1:4); enemies forcibly penetrating her holy precinct (1:10); her sunken gates (2:9); elderly men sinking to the grounds in mourning, ashes fluttering off their heads (2:10); children languishing on the streets (2:11); people rendered wizened and unrecognizable by the ravages of starvation (4:8); foxes cavorting upon the site of the Temple. These constitute a sampling of the vivid images in *Eikha*, which enable the reader to picture the terrible sights that the book conjures.

*Eikha's* imagery evocatively stimulates other senses in the reader as well. The reader hears Jerusalem weeping in the night (1:2); the sounds of the raucous rejoicing of the enemies (2:7); the children begging their mothers for a morsel of food (2:12; 4:4); and the mocking jeers and whistles of gloating adversaries (2:16).

The protagonist of chapter 3 (known as the *gever*) evokes the sensation of touch, as he describes his enemy cruelly breaking his bones (3:4) and viciously mangling him (3:11). Moreover, the nations express their revulsion toward Jerusalem's residents by exclaiming, "Go away; do not touch!" This scenario seems intent upon evoking a mental image, allowing the reader to envision a face filled with loathing and an involuntary recoil backward. Those who encounter Jerusalemites after the bloody destruction instinctively pull away, withdrawing in disgust from any bodily contact.

In recalling the desirable past, the book evokes images of tasty delicacies (4:5), a contrast to the dry mouth and empty palate caused by the famine that has overtaken Jerusalem (4:4). In a peculiar and savage anthropomorphic image, God also “consumes” in the book, swallowing Israel and her palaces (2:5). The predominant act of tasting in the book, however, remains the indelible and gruesome image of the women eating their children (2:20; 4:10), an act that surely evinces in the reader revulsion and horror.

The text does not specify the various odors that waft in the languishing city. The reader can only imagine the putrid stench of death that pervades the houses (1:20) and emerges from the corpses that litter the streets (2:21). The overpowering smell of the rotting garbage (4:5) surely assails the reader, as the hapless residents of Jerusalem hug the refuse heaps to obtain warmth.

Poetry employs metaphors with a similar goal of engaging the reader, providing tools for the reader to internalize the poem’s subject and theme. Metaphors compare the subject to an unrelated object or action, in an attempt to represent or symbolize what the poem wishes to convey. By referencing something unrelated, the metaphor allows for rich and multifaceted meanings. It also involves the reader in the act of interpretation, encouraging people to construct their own associations and insights.

Consider, for example, the initial metaphor of the book, which depicts the city as a widowed woman. *Eikha* often employs the well-known biblical trope that regards cities as women,<sup>2</sup> portraying Jerusalem in various aspects of her feminine persona. Jerusalem’s suffering as a widowed wife suggests her solitude, her vulnerability, the removal of her economic security, and her loss of hope. In recalling her role as a wife, Jerusalem’s betrayals also come to the fore, as the book recalls her former lovers and infidelities: “She has no comforter from all of her lovers” (1:2); “I called to my lovers; they betrayed me!” (1:19). The reference to Jerusalem’s impurities (1:9) also may suggest her perfidious and immoral behavior. The book likewise evokes this metaphor of Jerusalem the woman when describing Jerusalem’s punishment. Indeed, those who once respected her now disparage her; having viewed her nakedness, they regard her as cheap (1:9). Sometimes, *Eikha* describes Jerusalem as a bereft mother, whose children have gone into captivity (1:5, 18). In this feminine personification of the city, the book highlights Jerusalem’s intense pain due to the loss of her children, representing the loss of her future. Possibly, the maternal figure who consumes her children also alludes to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> In this representation,

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include *Isaiah* 47:1-15; *Nachum* 3:1-19.

<sup>3</sup> See *Eikha* 2:20 and 4:10. The starving and rapacious women in these verses refer to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it is possible that this image draws on the previous

Jerusalem betrays her maternal nature, devouring her children instead of nurturing them.

Thus, the metaphor of Jerusalem personified as a female figure elicits multiple ideas: she is both a vulnerable widow who has lost her present and a grieving mother who has lost her future. A resonant metaphor, Jerusalem emerges as both sinner and victim; she simultaneously evokes in the reader sympathy and repugnance.

Another efficacious metaphor appears in *Eikha* 2:13. Describing Jerusalem's pain appears to be impossible; the verse begins by declaring that nothing can compare to the splintering pain of Jerusalem's tragedy. Yet, as the verse winds to a close, the poet does identify something that recalls Jerusalem's shattered agony, something utterly unexpected, underscoring the difficulty of finding an adequate comparison: "For as great as the sea is your brokenness; who can heal you?" The sea emerges as a rich and diverse metaphor, conveying different meanings simultaneously. First, the sea describes the enormity of Jerusalem's pain. The sea is unbridgeable and the depths are unknown (e.g. *Tehillim* 104:25). The sea's characteristic vastness represents the endless breadth and depth of Jerusalem's pain. The salty water of the sea also recalls Jerusalem's copious tears (mentioned just two verses previously, in *Eikha* 2:11), plentiful enough to produce a veritable sea. Moreover, the sea is stormy and tempestuous, its waves rise and fall, whip and churn, and one cannot find peace in its turbulent violence. No one can place an anchor in the sea; stability is elusive, mirroring Jerusalem's state of unrest. In an evocative wordplay, the root used to describe Jerusalem's brokenness (*shivreikh*) functions as a homonym for the sea's breakers (*mishberei yam*), often evoked to describe the hapless situation of a person lost in a sea of despair (*Jonah* 2:4; *Tehillim* 42:8).<sup>4</sup>

This metaphor is a fine example of the way in which metaphors can produce a rich multivocality. The sea evokes multiple associations that characterize Jerusalem's shattered emotional state. The various readings conjured by this concise metaphor illustrate well the cogency of the technique.

A final example is the simile provided by the *gever* in *Eikha* 3:10. As his description of his own suffering at the hands of God gains traction, the *gever* appears to lose control, abandoning any semblance of theological sense. In a burst of anguished frenzy, the *gever* asserts, "He [God!] is a bear lying in ambush to me, a lion in hidden places" (*Eikha* 3:10). This portrayal of God defies all

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representation of the maternal figure of Jerusalem, suggesting that she too is complicit in the insatiable consumption of her populace.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the wordplay in Hebrew exists in English as well; the word *shever* means both broken and breakers of the sea.

accepted notions of God's ways. Rather than regarding God's ways as just, evenhanded, and premeditated, the comparison suggests a fierce, bestial enemy, who is both predatory and arbitrary. This simile conveys the depths of the *gever's* alienation from God: his bewilderment, outrage, and his utter incomprehension of his dismal circumstances. The wielding of this image cannot fail to capture the reader's attention, allowing the reader a vivid glimpse into the *gever's* state of mind.

### **Parallelism, Meter, and Rhythm**

Biblical poetry tends to employ binary sentences, divided into two parts by a slight conceptual pause. These sentences often contain some kind of parallelism, considered one of the characteristic features of biblical poetry.<sup>5</sup> *Eikha's* poetry, however, lacks frequent or strong parallelism. While some sentences still reflect some manner of parallelism, many seem entirely devoid of it, despite their binary construct. Instead, the idea of the first line of the sentence frequently carries over to the second line, furthering and developing the topic.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following three sentences in *Eikha*:

1. The roads to Zion are desolate,  
    for no one comes for the appointed day. (1:4)
2. Her king and officers are among the nations,  
    there is no instruction. (2:9)
3. They cut off my life in a pit,  
    and they case a stone at me. (3:53)

None of these sentences contains lines that parallel one another; instead, they simply continue the idea presented in the first line.

Though *Eikha* lacks parallelism in many of its binary sentences, some sentences do exhibit parallelism, which is especially present toward the conclusion of the book.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Parallelism pairs the poetic lines of the binary sentence (either synonymously or antithetically), using lexical, grammatical, phonological, or semantic features. A rich and varied technique, parallelism never fully duplicates (or contrasts) two lines; the meanings of the lines always diverge slightly or greatly, thereby extending the meaning of the line in various ways. For more on this important topic, see Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*; A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> *Eikha's* sentences use a technique called enjambment, a phenomenon in which the syntax or meaning carries over to the next line without pause. See e.g. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Although more than two-thirds of the book lacks parallelism, chapter 5 retains a predominantly parallelistic sentence structure. See Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 19, who claims that enjambment gives the book "a palpable sense of forward movement." According to this view, as

Corresponding to their parallelism, binary sentences tend to retain some sort of balanced meter or rhythm in each part, supporting the thematic equilibrium of the corresponding lines.<sup>8</sup> However, although some passages in *Eikha* maintain the customary metrical symmetry, many of its sentences exhibit a distinctly different, imbalanced meter. In the early twentieth century, Prof. Karl Budde identified and proposed a term for *Eikha's* unusual meter, dubbing it "kinah meter."<sup>9</sup> Kinah meter is uneven in a consistent fashion; the second part of the sentence tends to contain fewer accentuated units (stressed syllables) than the first part.<sup>10</sup>

I will illustrate Budde's theory by examining the meter of *Eikha* 4:7. (Chapter 4 contains two binary sentences per verse): I have bolded the stressed syllable:

Sentence one: *Zaku nezireha misheleg*                      *Tzachu meichalav* (3 + 2)  
Sentence two: *Ademu etzem mipeninim*                      *Sapir gizratam* (3 + 2)

The first part of each sentence contains three stressed syllables. In symmetrical biblical poetry, the second half should also have three stressed syllables, resulting in balanced meter. However, the second half of each of these sentences has two stressed syllables, creating an imbalance in the rhythm of the binary sentence.

Budde asserted that this metrical asymmetry is an apt characteristic of lamentation poetry. The effect, according to Budde, is a peculiar imbalanced rhythm, in which the second part of the sentence fades away.<sup>11</sup> This conveys the book's inability to finish its sentences, a condition produced by exhaustion and despair.<sup>12</sup> Cut off in the midst of his sentence, the speaker chokes back the final

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the book draws to a close, its forward movement slows, as seen in the waning enjambment. It seems to me, however, that the return to parallel sentences represents a return to normalcy, a slow movement back to a harmonious, balanced world.

<sup>8</sup> The idea that biblical poetry retains a metrical system remains a subject of controversy among scholars. Kugel, *Idea*, pp. 292-299, objects strenuously to the possibility of finding a metrical arrangement in biblical poetry. Indeed, finding a clear metrical system in biblical poetry has proved elusive, despite the many attempts to do so. Certainly, no system has achieved any kind of scholarly consensus. Nevertheless, Berlin (*Reading*, p. 2099; *Lamentations*, p. 2) maintains that binary lines tend to maintain balanced length and rhythm, even without adhering to a strict metrical system that can be measured in a precise and consistent manner.

<sup>9</sup> K. Budde, "Das hebraisches Klagelied," *ZAW* 2 (1882), pp. 1-52.

<sup>10</sup> The indicators of stressed syllables are part of the Massoretic tradition that included the vowels and cantillation points. First transmitted in written form in the seventh to tenth centuries CE, these massoretic points emerge as a late written addition to the biblical text.

<sup>11</sup> See also S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1891), pp. 457-58.

<sup>12</sup> Some scholars broaden Budde's theory, suggesting that the overall structure of the book reflects a similar pattern. W. H. Shea, "The *Qinah* Structure of the *Book of Lamentations*," *Biblica* 60 (1979), pp. 103-106, for example, identifies a 3+2 "kinah meter" in the book's chapters, which

word of his litany of suffering, tapering off into a disconcerting silence. Moreover, the uneven cadence produces an effect similar to *Eikha*'s scant use of parallel sentences; it mirrors an imbalanced world, where harmony no longer prevails.

The biblical listener, who hears not just the words but also the rhythm of the poetry, feels unsettled by its metrical lopsidedness. Straining to hear the last beat of the sentence, its absence jars the reader, producing a sensation that the final word remains unspoken.

While the existence of this phenomenon remains controversial,<sup>13</sup> and it likely cannot be as widely applied as Budde proposed, some meaningful examples seem to support Budde's hypothesis that *Eikha* employs prosody with conscious artistry and design. Consider *Eikha* 1:5, a verse that contains three binary sentences. The first and third sentences maintain Budde's "kinah meter," in which the second part of the sentence maintains fewer stressed syllables than the first:

Sentence one: *hayu tzareha le-rosh*                      *oyveha shalu* (3 + 2)  
Sentence three: *oleleha halekhu shevi*                      *lifnei-tzar* (3 + 1)

Unexpectedly, however, the middle sentence contains parallel meter, a balanced number of stressed syllables:

Sentence two: *Ki-YHVH hoga*      *al-rov peshaeha* (2 + 2)

How can we understand the erratic metrical arrangement of this verse?<sup>14</sup> In this case, the prosody of the verse clearly reflects its content. Sentences one and three describe a world filled with injustice, unharmonious and baffling. The first sentence reflects upon the tranquility and success of Israel's enemies, known for their unremitting cruelty: "Her adversaries were at the head, her enemies were tranquil." The third sentence portrays the suffering of the innocents, namely the children: "Her young children went into captivity, before the adversary." These

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opens with three long chapters and decrescendos with the final two shorter chapters. He further perceives a 2+1 arrangement in the group of the first three chapters, followed by a 2+1 pattern in the final chapters (note that chapter 4 is twice as long as chapter 5).

<sup>13</sup> Scholars have criticized this theory on different grounds. Some note that this metrical pattern also appears in poetry that is not elegiac. See e.g. G. B. Gray, *Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (New York: Ktav, 1972), p. 116. Others note that many biblical laments do not maintain kinah meter. See Shea, *Qinah*, p. 103, who makes both of the above points. Still others object to the assertion that the biblical metrical system rests on its stressed syllables. Nevertheless, Grossberg, *Centripetal*, p. 86, asserts that even if this meter does not characterize all biblical elegies, it certainly can be established that this meter exists in *Eikha*.

<sup>14</sup> The disparity between the metrical arrangements of the sentences in this verse is hardly unusual. Many verses in *Eikha* flit from even to uneven meter, some of which can be explained and some not. This, of course, contributes to the skepticism of many scholars that one can identify a deliberate metrical arrangement in the book.

topics represent the crux of the theological question of evil. Why do wicked people prosper (*rasha ve-tov lo*)? Why do bad things happen to the righteous (*tzaddik ve-ra lo*)? The metrical imbalance that bookends this verse thus reflects its discordant message. Yet, at the heart of the verse appears a balanced sentence, one that restores the verse's equilibrium, along with that of the tumultuous world it represents. In His first appearance in the book, God enters as a stabilizing force, restoring faith that the world functions in an equitable manner, even if we do not perceive it on the surface: "For God made her grieve, *because* of the greatness of her transgressions." This steady sentence expresses faith in divine justice, in a system not readily seen, as it remains engulfed by a swirling storm of injustices that appear to overwhelm the world. The metrical balance found in the central axis of the verse mirrors its tone and idea, suggesting that the verse's unharmonious periphery belies the deep core of justice that sustains the world.

Scholars continue to debate whether biblical poetry (including in the book of *Eikha*) contains any metrical system. This brief examination does not intend to offer a sweeping conclusion to this long-running debate. Perhaps we can simply conclude that the search for a relationship between the metrical arrangement and the meaning of the text can sometimes yield elegant and meaningful results.<sup>15</sup>

In our next class, we will continue to examine the meaning that emerges from poetic features of the book of *Eikha*.

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<sup>15</sup> Kugel, *Idea*, p. 301, concedes that meter (in his view, "a loose and approximate regularity") is, at times, "clearly cultivated."