

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #09: *Eikha*: Chapter 1

Summary: A Desolate City

The opening of the book of *Eikha* reveals a melancholic scene. Jerusalem sobs in anguish, and we observe the dreadful sights and sounds of her destruction. Formerly a bustling metropolis, Jerusalem is desolate; the sound of the priests mourning and the young women grieving eerily echo in the abandoned city. The citizens of Jerusalem empty out of the city, plodding wearily toward an unknown fate. Jerusalem remains alone with her miserable thoughts and memories of better times.

Eikha's initial chapter attempts to grasp the reason for this calamity. Gradually, the chapter begins to put forward the notion that Jerusalem's sins led to this punishment (1:5), an assertion that tempers compassion for the beleaguered city. At this point, Jerusalem's shame and humiliation rise to the fore, and the chapter loudly proclaims her guilt (1:8: "Jerusalem has surely sinned!"). Suffering follows accusations, and a howl of pain intrudes upon the description of Jerusalem's turpitude (1:9: "Look God and see!"). When Jerusalem herself picks up the narrative, she focuses more on her unbearable sorrow (1:12) than on her culpability, to which she only alludes elliptically (1:14). Eventually, however, Jerusalem acknowledges the justness of divine retribution (1:18), loudly proclaiming God's righteousness. The chapter concludes with a description of sins, the final word in an arduous journey toward admission of guilt.

The depiction of God in the chapter follows the cues provided by the quest to understand the tragic events. As the chapter struggles to comprehend, it alternates between descriptions of a God who actively punishes the city for her sins (1:5, 13), an elusive God who refuses to take note of Jerusalem's pain (1:9 and 11), an angry God who lashes out at His nation (1:12, 15), and a righteous God whose edicts are proportionate and just (1:18).

Is there a logical progression of ideas in this chapter? Perhaps not. It is possible that the absence of a logical progression indeed best captures its timbre. The initial experience of grief is not cogent and analytic, but rather chaotic and turbulent. Erratic movement between one notion and its opposite illustrates the chapter's frenzied churn of emotions. Jerusalem is shattered. It is no wonder that this chapter fluctuates wildly between perceptions, experiences, and emotions.

Nevertheless, the acrostic structure allows for a measure of order and even progression in this chapter. Indeed, we will see that the chapter moves steadily towards assuming responsibility for the events, towards admission of sin, which will allow Jerusalem to make sense of the roiling madness that has engulfed her.

Structure

The shift in speaker divides the chapter into two basic units. Part 1 (vv. 1-11) comprises a third person account of Jerusalem's desolation (with two brief interjections in verses 9 and 11). Part 2 (vv. 12-22) recounts Jerusalem's pain and anguish in the first person (with one exception in v. 17):

- 1) 1-11b- Third person speaker (except for 9c).
- 2) 11c-22- First person speaker (except for verse 17).

Why does the chapter choose these different modes of expression? The third person account describes Jerusalem from the outside, while the first person account offers Jerusalem's own view of her catastrophe. Filled with pathos and grief, Jerusalem's self-portrait enables the reader to identify with the city's anguish. For example, while the third person description of Jerusalem's cries straightforwardly depicts her sorrow ("She surely cries in the night"), Jerusalem's own tale proffers a more evocative wail: "My eyes! My eyes! They flow with water."

If the more powerful speaker is Jerusalem, then why employ a third person narration at all? This chapter presents two different perspectives on the catastrophic event. While these accounts overlap, their voices remain distinct. The first perspective aims to create an external and objective tone. It is somewhat empathetic, but also detached. The narrator unflinchingly accuses Jerusalem of sinfulness, noting the wayward behavior that explains the severity of her punishment (see verse 5, 8-9). This is not the case when we encounter Jerusalem's own account. She gradually moves toward admission of sinfulness, in a slow and difficult progression, featuring her hesitation, indignation, confusion, and anger.

Let us consider these two perspectives within the theological context and goal of the book. While *Eikha* does not contain a direct prophetic exhortation, it may be possible to discern a prophetic undertone in the book, one that weaves together God's perspective (the third person) and the human perspective (the first person) into one magnificent cloth. This mighty feat is the ultimate achievement of any prophet, who functions both as the representative of God to the people and of the people to God.

The bifurcated (some might say contradictory) job of the prophet is not simple, and some high profile prophets failed to live up to this task. A *midrash* presents three types of prophets:

One demands the honor of the father [God] as well as the honor of the son [Israel]. One demands the honor of the father, but not the honor of the

son. And one demands the honor of the son but not the honor of the father. Jeremiah demands both the honor of the father and the honor of the son, as it says, "We have transgressed and rebelled, but You did not forgive!" (*Eikha* 3:42)... Elijah demands the honor of the father, but not the honor of the son... Jonah demands the honor of the son but not the honor of the father. (*Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael, Bo, Parasha 1*)

This *midrash* views Jeremiah as the model prophet, the one who devotedly represents both God and humans. Interestingly, in its bid to portray Jeremiah as the ideal prophet who strikes the ideal prophetic balance, the *midrash* draws from the book of *Eikha*, rather than from the book of *Jeremiah*. Indeed, in the latter, Jeremiah does not appear to be particularly sympathetic toward the errant nation. His prophecies often contain expressions of antipathy and anger, and Jeremiah seems more comfortable in his role as God's representative.¹ Yet, in the verse from *Eikha* cited in the *midrash* (3:42), Jeremiah manages to strike an extraordinary balance, condemning Israel for its sins while identifying himself as part of the nation by using the pronoun "we", and, in the very same verse, accusing God of not exercising proper compassion.

It seems to me that Jeremiah exhibits similarly masterful prophetic skill in the overall composition of the first chapter of *Eikha*. By composing the first part of the chapter in a third person voice, Jeremiah succeeds in representing God's point of view. This part of the chapter scrutinizes Jerusalem from an outsider's perspective, sympathizing with, but also strongly censuring, the nation.² In the second part of the chapter, Jeremiah presents the situation from the viewpoint of the personified city, allowing the reader an inside glimpse of the anguished human spirit.

¹ Jeremiah often becomes so angry at the people that he requests that God wreak vengeance upon them (see e.g. *Jeremiah* 11:20, 12:3, 15:15, 17:18, 18:21-23, 20:12.)

² One *midrash* (*Eikha Zuta* (Buber) 1:1) assumes a different approach, maintaining that Jeremiah is staunchly representing the people in this book. Using the first part of chapter 1 as its example, this *midrash* presents the text as one half of a discussion between Jeremiah and God, in which Jeremiah's evocative descriptions of Jerusalem's pain are immediately countered by God's recollections of the sins that provoked these punishments:

Jeremiah said before God, "Master of the Universe! Will the city that contains Your name and Your praise and most of her nation during the three festivals sit lonely ["How has the city sat lonely!" (*Eikha* 1:1)]" God said to Jeremiah, "Jeremiah, before you represent them, represent Me!" ["How (*Eikha*) has the city become a harlot!" (*Isaiah* 1)]. Jeremiah said, "She surely cries in the night!" (*Eikha* 1:2). And the Holy Spirit said to him, "And behold there the women are crying over the *Tammuz* [idolatry]!" (*Ezekiel* 8:14). Jeremiah said, "Judah has been exiled (*galeta*) in misery and in terrible labor" (*Eikha* 1:3), and the Holy spirit said, "And she revealed (*va'tegal*) her nakedness!" (*Ezekiel* 23:18).