

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #11: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:2**

בָּלוּ תִבְכֶּה בַּלַּיְלָה
וְדַמְעֹתֶיהָ עַל לְחֵיָהּ

אֵין־לָהּ מְנַחֵם
מִכָּל־אֲהָבָיֶיהָ

כָּל־רֵעֵיהָ בְּגָדוּ בָּהּ
הָיוּ לָהּ לְאֹיְבִים

**She surely cries in the night
and her tears are upon her cheeks**

**She has no comforter
from all of her lovers**

**All of friends betrayed her
Became her enemies.**

Picking up the theme of loneliness from the previous verse, this verse emphasizes the haunting absence of comforters. Tears remain undried on Jerusalem's face; emptied of her inhabitants, the city lacks community or consolers.¹ Loved ones have abandoned her; friends betray her.

Cries in the Night

The dark night seems to be particularly suited for weeping.² The eerie scene enhances the portrait of Jerusalem's anguished loneliness, but it also points to her state of mind. Related biblical usages suggest that the night creates and heightens Jerusalem's feeling of doom (*Amos* 5:18-20) and danger (*Obadiah* 5;

¹ Rashi (1:2) explains differently: Her tears remain on her cheeks because she cries ceaselessly.

² Other sources indicate this as well. See e.g. *Tehillim* 6:7; 42:9; 77:3; 88:2; Job 7:3.

Jeremiah 6:4-5), her lack of clarity (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:1), confusion (*Isaiah* 59:9-10), terror (*Tehillim* 91:5), and turmoil (*Job* 34:20). Quiet weeping reverberates through the frightening darkness, aptly conveying the city's bewilderment, fear, and gloom.

The *Tanakh* also employs the nighttime as a metaphor for exile, or a situation in which God is unattainable or obscured (e.g. *Micah* 3:6). Biblical passages often describe God as a source of light (e.g. *Tehillim* 27:1; *Micah* 7:8); God illuminates Israel's existence, offering a brightly lit path for Israel to tread (*Isaiah* 60:1-3). Night conveys the opposite – confusion born of darkened paths, disorientation caused by the abundant shadows. We will explore this theme at greater length in our examination of this image in chapter 3.

***Ohaveha* and *Ray'eha* (Lovers and Friends)**

Who are the loved ones who deny Jerusalem comfort? Who are the friends who betray her? Why do these associates of Jerusalem fail her in her time of need?

It is possible that the loved ones are the Judean residents of Jerusalem. Their love for the city is undeniable, and it is easy to fathom why they are unable to offer consolation. Forcibly taken to exile, Jerusalem's lovers cannot relieve her pain or wipe away her tears.

Alternatively, Jerusalem represents the nation of Israel, and the word *ohaveha* evokes the nation's illicit lovers. Prophets often censure the errant nation, whose quest for lovers hints to her unfaithfulness toward God. A common literary trope, prophets employ the metaphor of Israel's betrayal of her monogamous relationship with God in describing both the worship of other gods (e.g. *Hosea* 2:7-15)³ and the political alliances forged with other nations (e.g. *Jeremiah* 22:20-22). The reference to Jerusalem's absent lovers evokes her culpability, in addition to her lonesomeness. Predictably, Israel's act of betrayal implodes, leaving Jerusalem bereft of the lovers that the nation had cultivated. This recalls the punishment prophesied by Hosea, who rebukes Israel over their terrible betrayal of God:

And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not catch up with them;
she will search for them and not find them... And I will expose her
disgrace in front of her lovers, and no man will save her from My
hand. (*Hosea* 2:9, 12)

A *midrash* (*Eikha Zuta* [Buber] 1:6) suggests that these *ohaveha* are the false prophets. This intriguing proposal hints at the possible sincerity of the false prophets, since they are deemed *ohaveha*. Jeremiah often describes these prophets projecting peace and good tidings for the nation (e.g. *Jeremiah* 6:14; 14:13). While God pronounces these prophecies false, the prophet's intentions

³ See Targum on *Eikha* 1:2, which weaves this reading in the Aramaic version of the verse.

often remain obscure. Perhaps the *midrash* intends to suggest that these prophecies emerge from a genuine love for Jerusalem and the hope that their optimistic forecast will prove true. Yet, in their failure to rebuke the nation properly, the false prophets ultimately cause her downfall. This *midrash* turns our attention to the central topic of the false prophets, which we will examine at greater length in chapter 2.

Who are “*Ray’eha*”?

Ray’eha may not be distinct from *ohaveha*.⁴ Perhaps these two sentences are parallel, with an incremental intensification of meaning. If the first sentence describes the loved ones who are not there to comfort, the second portrays their behavior in a more grievous manner. Those who had a relationship with Jerusalem owe her some measure of consolation.⁵ Silence is a betrayal; their absence during Jerusalem’s time of need transforms former friends and even beloved ones into enemies.⁶

Tehillim 38:12 and 88:19 both mention loved ones and friends in conjunction with each other. Similar to *Eikha* 1:2, in these psalms the loved ones and the friends of an anguished sufferer maintain their reserve:

My lovers and friends stand opposite my afflictions, and my intimates stand at a distance. (*Psalms* 38:12)

You distanced lovers and friends from me, my acquaintances are in darkness.⁷ (*Psalms* 88:19)

The lovers and friends may not actively seek harm in any of these cases. However, their passivity and aloofness aggrieve the sufferer and constitute a betrayal of their friendship and affection.

An alternate reading sharply divides between *ray’eha* and *ohaveha*.⁸ While the *ohaveha* are absent (possibly due to circumstances beyond their control), only the friends (*ray’eha*) actually betray Jerusalem, remodeling themselves as adversaries. These “friends” never loved Jerusalem; their relationship was

⁴ Rashi and R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 1:2. R. Yosef Kara avers that both terms refer to other nations.

⁵ In this reading, it is unlikely that both terms refer to Jerusalem’s exiled residents. After all, they can hardly be blamed for their absence and inability to offer comfort to Jerusalem! Possibly, Jerusalem’s absent populace must still accept some measure of responsibility for the sins that led to the exile. In this schema, the sins of the nation render her a traitor to her city.

⁶ See *Job* 6:15-29, where Iyov describes the lack of support of his brethren during his time of need, referring to it as a betrayal.

⁷ In other words, I cannot see them; it is as though they are in darkness (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Metzudat David).

⁸ See e.g. *Mishlei* 18:24, which clearly distinguishes between the *ohav* and the *ray’a*.

pragmatic, based on interests.⁹ This may refer to Israel's political allies, especially Egypt.¹⁰ Prophets repeatedly warn against forging political alliances that offer Israel a false sense of security and repudiate their dependence upon God.¹¹ Indeed, when the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem, the Egyptians fail to save them.¹²

Possibly, the *ray'eha* who betray Jerusalem hint at Israel's national accountability. Israel betrayed Jerusalem by engaging in errant behavior that spawns Jerusalem's calamity. This interpretation finds support in Jeremiah's oracle against Israel, which employs similar language as *Eikha* 1:2:

Just as a woman betrays (*bageda*) her friend (*may'ray'ah*), so you have betrayed Me, house of Israel, says God. (*Jeremiah* 3:20)

The Totality of the Word *Kol*

The word *kol* appears twice in this verse to convey the comprehensiveness of Jerusalem's isolation. **All** of her lovers and **all** of her friends fail her. The frequent appearances of the word in this chapter, appearing sixteen times in its twenty-two verses, conveys the totality of the disaster (as does the acrostic format). Jerusalem is not caught by some of her pursuers, but by **all** of them (v. 3). Similarly, **all** of her enemies rejoice in her downfall (v. 21). **All** of her gates mourn (v. 4), and **all** of her nation groans (v. 11), miserable **all** of the day (v. 13). **All** of her glory has departed (v. 6), and **all** of her precious delights have been seized by the greedy, grasping hands of the enemy (v. 10). **All** of those who once honored her now regard her cheaply (v. 8), and God tramples **all** of her strong men.

This totality also exists in Jerusalem's perception of the world external to her disaster: She entreats **all** passersby to look at her (v. 12), calls on **all** nations to listen to her and see her (v.18), and begs God to consider **all** of the wickedness of her enemies (v. 22). This complete portrait of Jerusalem's catastrophe applies to every aspect of this chapter: Jerusalem's total isolation, misery, defeat, suffering, betrayal, loss, and humiliation.

The closing *kol* in the chapter may be its most significant one. In the final verse, Jerusalem assumes responsibility for God's punitive acts against her, declaring that God carries out His punishments, *al kol pe'shai*, "because of **all** of my sins."

⁹ As Henry Kissinger famously remarked, "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests."

¹⁰ R. Yosef Kara (1:2) suggests that this may also refer to Babylon and the Chaldeans (e.g. *Ezekiel* 23:14-18) or Zor. Other problematic political allies include Assyria and, perhaps, the immediate neighbors of Israel and Judah, with whom they forge shifting economic and political alliances. In *II Kings* 24:2, these neighbors are actively involved in Judah's destruction.

¹¹ *Isaiah* 20:3-6; 30:2-5; 31:1-3; *Jeremiah* 2:18, 25; *Ezekiel* 16:25-29; *Hosea* 5:13; 7:11; 8:9.

¹² See *II Kings* 24:7; *Jeremiah* 37:5-8; *Ezekiel* 29:6-7. Ironically, this corresponds to Sennacherib's warning in *II Kings* 18:21.

The chapter will conclude with Jerusalem's categorical admission of her total sinfulness, which corresponds to her total suffering. As we will see, this attitude characterizes chapter 1, which gropes its way toward conviction of culpability, constituting the general theological approach of the chapter.

***Eikha* 1:3**

גְּלִתָּהּ יְהוּדָה מֵעֲנִי
וּמִרַב עֲבֹדָה

הִיא יֹשְׁבָה בְּגוֹיִם
לֹא מִצָּעָה מְנוּחַם

כָּל־רֹדְפֶיהָ הַשִּׁיגוּהָ
בֵּין הַמְצָרִים

**Judah has been exiled in suffering
And in terrible labor¹³**

**She sat amongst the nations¹⁴
And did not find respite¹⁵**

**All of her pursuers caught up with her
Between the narrow straits**

Exile

As *Eikha* continues to construct its fragmented mosaic of human suffering, the verse shifts our attention from deserted Jerusalem to the dynamism of exile. Exile is frenetic, in ceaseless flux. There is little choice except to continue moving. Israel's attempt to settle among the nations is futile. Those who pursue the shattered deportees easily overtake them "between the narrow straits."

Aching loneliness accompanies the nation into exile. Though not explicitly noted, the theme of isolation that predominates throughout this chapter is implicit here.

¹³ The letter *mem* placed before the words *oni* (*me-oni*) and *rov avoda* (*me-rov*) generally denotes a causative preposition. In other words, Judah is exiled **because** of the suffering (as Rashi suggests). It is not clear exactly what this means. In what way does the suffering cause the exile? The Targum on *Eikha* 1:3 explains that this refers to the oppressions that Israel wrought upon the orphans and the widows, whom they enslaved and mistreated. In this schema, the verse blames Israel for having engaged in immoral behavior, thereby instigating her own punishment. Alternatively, R. Saaadia Gaon explains the prepositions as a temporal description, "**after** much suffering and hard labor." Perhaps this simply describes the order in which the situation deteriorates: first suffering and slave labor, followed by exile. Possibly, this describes a state of mind: Judah's exile takes place as she suffers and labors.

¹⁴ Ibn Ezra notes that the Bible refers to Judah (like Israel and Egypt) variously as both feminine (e.g. *Tehillim* 114:2) and masculine (e.g. *Jeremiah* 52:24; *Zechariah* 2:16). In this study, I take my cues from *Eikha*, which treats the word Judah in this verse as a feminine construct.

¹⁵ Israel's restless state, *lo matzte'a mano'ach* ("she did not find respite"), recalls a similar phrase in the covenant treaty (commonly known as the *tokhecha*) in *Devarim*. As we noted in our "Introduction to Theology," *Eikha* subtly weaves phrases from that covenant into the book. This phrase suggests the execution of the treaty-punishments, forewarned consequences that were entirely dependent upon Israel's behavior. *Eikha* is not the product of random brutality; linguistic allusions indicate that Israel's violation of the treaty produced her calamity.

Note, for example, the phrase, *lo matz'a mano'ach* ("she did not find respite"). In *Ruth* 1:9, Naomi uses a similar phrase, sending her daughters-in-law back to Moav with a blessing that they should find respite (*u-metzaena menucha*), each woman in the house of her husband. Judah's failure to find respite (*mano'ach*) in exile recalls Jerusalem's widowhood of verse 1, her absent husband, and her insecurity and loneliness.

The word *yasheva* offers a second hint to Judah's loneliness in exile. The second appearance of the word in rapid succession draws our attention back to its appearance at the opening of the book, "How has the city sat (*yasheva*) lonely!" Though Judah sits "amongst" the nations in exile, the word *yasehva* alludes to her loneliness. Indeed, sitting amongst strangers in a foreign land foments the existential loneliness of exile, which contrasts with the feeling of belonging that defines a nation in its own land.

The words of this verse ironically echo portrayals of Israel's security within their land. The word *yasheva*, here denoting the nation's unsuccessful bid to settle down in exile (*yasheva*), is used elsewhere to promise Israel secure residence in its land (e.g. *la-shevet*, *Bamidbar* 33:53; or *ve-yeshavtem*, *Vayikra* 26:5). Just two verses ago, we glimpsed Jerusalem's former princely status among the nations (*rabbati va-goyim*, *Eikha* 1:1); in exile, Judah cannot even find rest among the nations (*va-goyim*). Conquest of Israel aims at an idyllic restful state (*be-haniach*),¹⁶ while there is no restfulness (*mano'ach*) in exile. Banishment is characterized by Judah's inability to find (*lo metza'a*), while the aim of the ideal community is to find that which humans seek, namely God: "And you will seek from the [exile] your God and you will find [Him] (*u-matzata*) when you seek Him with all of your hearts and all of your souls" (*Devarim* 4:29).¹⁷

The Egyptian Exile

Israel's experience of exile in Egypt echoes in the backdrop of this verse. Unmistakable allusions to the Egyptian exile include the word-pair *oni* and *avoda*, meaning suffering and labor, employed often to portray the Egyptian exile (e.g. *Bereishit* 15:3; *Shemot* 1:11; *Devarim* 26:6). While the word *mitzarim* seems to mean distress or narrowness,¹⁸ it is phonetically identical to the word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*. This wordplay evokes that original exile, the prototype of Israel's suffering and deliverance.

Other allusions to the narrative of Israel's servitude in Egypt are scattered throughout the chapter. The word *anach*, describing the nation's groans, appears five times (*Eikha* 1:4; 8; 11; 21; 22), recalling the groans of the Israelites during

¹⁶ E.g. *Devarim* 3:20; *Joshua* 1:13; 23:1.

¹⁷ See also *Jeremiah* 29:13. Both of these sources present finding God as part of the redemption, in which Israel leaves exile and returns to the land.

¹⁸ Qumran, *Thanksgiving Psalm* (1QH v 29), paraphrases this line and follows it with the words, "so I could not get away."

their slavery in Egypt (*Shemot* 2:23). The word *mas*, tributary (*Eikha* 1:1), evokes the officers (*sarei misim*) in Egypt appointed to oversee their miserable labor (*Shemot* 1:11). Jerusalem's bitterness (*Eikha* 1:4) parallels Israel's bitterness in Egypt (*Shemot* 1:14); the pain that echoes three times in *Eikha* 1 (*makh'ov*)¹⁹ is featured in Egypt as well (*Shemot* 3:7). The evils (*ra'atam*) of the enemy (*Eikha* 1:22) recall the evils committed by Egypt (*va-yarei'u*, *Devarim* 26:6).

In spite of these linguistic parallels, the Babylonian exile will not be like the exile in Egypt. It will be both shorter and less brutal, characterized by economic success and a thriving community, rather than enslavement and persecution.²⁰ Why, then, does this verse refer to the Egyptian exile when it describes the beginnings of the Babylonian exile? Perhaps at this preliminary stage, the assumption is that this exile will indeed follow a similar pattern as the Egyptian one.²¹ In any case, recalling Egypt reflects the hopelessness of the chapter, as the community marches toward what will surely be a cruel fate.

There is a more uplifting aspect to these references to the Egyptian exile. The Bible presents the narrative of the enslavement in Egypt primarily as a story of God's revelation, His deliverance, and Israel's redemption.²² Indeed, Jerusalem first addresses God in this chapter with a request: "Look (*re'ei*) God, at my afflictions (*onyi*)!" (*Eikha* 1:9). This entreaty invariably recalls the first time that God promises salvation to the nation of Israel in the Bible:²³

And God said, "I have surely seen the affliction (*ra'o ra'iti et oni*) of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cries because of his oppressors and I know his pain. I will go down to save him from the hand of Egypt and bring him up from that land to a good and broad land, to a land flowing with milk and honey..." (*Shemot* 3:7-8)

In requesting that God see her afflictions, Jerusalem endeavors to enlist the compassionate God who redeemed His nation from Egypt and returned them to the land of their forefathers. The echoes of Egypt may sound ominous, but they also allude to God's eternal promise, His assurance of divine commitment. Evoking the Egyptian exile at this early stage of the Babylonian exile hints to the possibility of redemption and offers a quiet message of hope.

¹⁹ The word appears twice in verse 12 and once in verse 18.

²⁰ A recent exhibit in the Bible Lands Museum ("By the Rivers of Babylon") featured tablets that constitute the earliest evidence of the Judean community exiled to Babylon in 586 BCE. These tablets reveal a prosperous and secure community, autonomous landowners involved in trade and business.

²¹ The exile to Egypt becomes the paradigm of exile in *Tanakh*. See e.g. *Devarim* 28:68; *Hosea* 8:13; 9:3.

²² Allusions to this also appear quite frequently in Isaiah's portrayal of exile and redemption, which follows the Egyptian paradigm. For a magnificent example of a section that alludes to the Exodus from Egypt, see e.g. *Isaiah* 52:7-12.

²³ God informs Abraham that he will deliver Israel from the foreign land during the *berit bein habetarim* (*Bereishit* 15). This promise may constitute the first realistic promise of salvation, offered to a nation in the throes of suffering and juxtaposed to the actual process of deliverance.