

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #15: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:9**

טמאתה בשוליה
לא זכרה אחריתה

ותרד פלאים
אין מנחם לה

ראה יקנק את עיני
כי הגדיל אויב

**Her impurities are on her hems
She did not consider¹ her end**

**She spiraled downward wondrously
There is none to comfort her**

**“Look, God, at my affliction
For the enemy is exalted!”**

Continuing the portrait of Jerusalem’s moral impurity, this verse contains a powerful metaphor of a sullied city, whose moral impurities are visible to all. A distasteful image, it simultaneously establishes the city’s humiliation and her patent culpability. Further compounding her guilt, this verse accuses her of willful ignorance; she did not consider the consequence of her actions, thereby sending her spiraling downward toward a terrible fate.

Jerusalem Interrupts the Narrator

Verses 8 and 9 harshly assign blame to Jerusalem for her own misery, accusing

¹ This translation follows Rashi’s reading of the word *zakhara*. See below for an explanation of Rashi’s interpretation.

her of wanton sinning. Jerusalem's initial response seems muted; following the public exposure of her nakedness, Jerusalem quietly groans and recoils in shame (verse 8). A deep sense of isolation follows the description of her collapse: "She spiraled downward wondrously; there is none to comfort her." This lonesome state seems to bring Jerusalem to her emotional breaking point; Jerusalem's voice intrudes mid-verse, seeming to interrupt the narrator's speech. After her brief but evocative plea, the narrator will resume his third person narration (in verse 10), indicating that Jerusalem's interjection is unplanned, a function of her inability to restrain herself any longer.

What precipitates Jerusalem's impertinent interruption, directed toward God ("Look, God at my affliction!")? Preceding her outburst, the narrator describes Jerusalem's isolation, the absence of someone to console her. The syntax suggests that this is what forces her to turn directly to God. In the absence of human comfort, Jerusalem directs her plea to God, desperate to make some kind of contact that can alleviate her loneliness.

Possibly, it is her burgeoning recognition of God's role in these events that motivates this startling direct address to God. As noted earlier, Jerusalem does not appear to internalize the initial accusation in *Eikha* 1:5, which links God's punitive acts with Jerusalem's sins. Now that the narrator has exposed Jerusalem's sins in greater detail (1:8-9), Jerusalem turns to God out of a newfound understanding of His involvement in her catastrophe. Jerusalem gradually absorbs this; even in our verse, however, she has not yet fully acknowledged her own culpability. At this stage, she still regards the evil of the enemy as the center of the calamity, "Look, God, at my affliction, for the enemy is exalted!" We will see that in her next direct plea to God (1:11), Jerusalem will turn inward, another step in the slow, inexorable movement toward admission of her culpability.

Look, God!

Jerusalem appeals to God to look at her, to see her misery and to note the triumphant success of the evil adversaries. Until now, the word *ra'ah* described the mocking and invasive gaze of the enemies (verses 7 and 8). In place of that offensive scrutiny, Jerusalem endeavors to draw God's empathetic attention to her sorry state.

Jerusalem's entreaty implies that God is not presently looking at Jerusalem. God's purposeful disregard of His nation is presented in *Devarim* as the foreseen penalty for their idolatrous practices:

And God said to Moshe, "You are going to lie with your forefathers and this nation will rise up and whore after the gods of foreign lands... and he will forsake Me and violate My covenant that I have made with him. My anger will be kindled against him on that day,

and I will abandon them and **I will hide my face** from them. He will be as prey and many troubles and travails will find him. He will say on that day, 'Is it not because God is no longer in my midst that these troubles have found me?' Yet **I will surely hide My face** on that day because of all of the evil that he has done, for he turned to other gods." (*Devarim* 31:16-18)

Jerusalem's request that God look at her suggests that the ominous day has arrived. God has turned His face away from Israel, rendering Him both inaccessible and seemingly unconcerned with Israel's fate. This triggers Jerusalem's desperate plea: "Look, God, at my affliction!"

The minimal request, that God should look and see His nation, becomes a leitmotif of the book. With the exception of chapter 4, every chapter contains this entreaty before God.² Before the nation can beg God to restore its fortunes, the nation must reestablish the foundations of communication between the people and God. All further appeals rest upon whether God chooses to reinstate a relationship with His nation.

The punitive context of God's hiding His face sometimes obscures its beneficial side – the fact that turning away from them prevents God from punishing them directly. It seems that God cannot gaze directly upon Israel's errant behavior without responding with swift punishment. In fact, several verses use the phraseology, "And I will set my face against that person," to describe God's punitive actions.³ God's face turned toward a sinful Israel portends disaster for them if they are not strictly obedient. Within this context, God's decision to turn His face away from Israel is an act of charity, sparing Israel from God's unremitting gaze and disciplinary actions.

Lo Zakhara

The word *zakhara* generally means to remember. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition between the word *zakhara*, which usually refers to an event that took place in the past, alongside "her end" (*acharita*), which seems to refer to something that has yet to take place, results in an awkward formulation ("she did not remember her end").⁴

Several biblical interpreters resolve this literary problem by interpreting the word *zakhar* contrary to its usual meaning. For example, one *midrash* (*Peskita Zutrata, Eikha* 1:9) suggests that the word *zakhar* here means *yada*, to know. In other words, Jerusalem did not know that this would be her terrible fate. Similarly, Rashi suggests that we should understand the word *zakhar* to mean to consider

² In our examination of chapter 4, we will offer an explanation for this notable omission.

³ See *Vayikra* 20:3, 5; *Ezekiel* 14:8.

⁴ An identical phrase appears in Isaiah's description of Babylon's stubborn sinfulness: "But you did not put these things on your heart; you did not remember your end" (*Isaiah* 47:7).

or to think deeply about something.⁵ According to Rashi, when Jerusalem was sinning, she simply was not thinking about her end or considering the results of her egregious transgressions. This approach does not alleviate Jerusalem's complicity; instead, it suggests that the dynamic of sinning is so absorbing that the sinner is prone to disregard the consequences.

Another *midrash* (*Peskita Zutrata, Eikha* 1:9) reads this verse as a critique, implying that Jerusalem **should** have contemplated the consequence of her activities. After all, God previously informed the nation that the punishment for abominations is exile (*Devarim* 18:9-11). Thus, when Jerusalem engaged in sinful activities, she was not remembering God's admonition (see similarly R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 1:9).

In any case, the word *zakhar* clashes with its previous appearance in *Eikha* 1:7. There, Jerusalem painfully remembers her precious delights during her glory days, before her enemies plunged her into an abyss of grief. Our verse employs the same word, *zakhar*, to rebuke Jerusalem for not using her memory properly during her heyday.

Metrical Rhythm and Poetry

Verse 9 includes two sentences in which the second half maintains more metrical beats than the first. Both of these consecutive sentences contain two stressed syllables in the first half of the sentence and three in its second half (2 + 3).⁶

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Some scholars recommend emending the phrase *va-tered pela'im* ("She spiraled downward wondrously") because of its "unusual brevity",⁷ especially in light of the metrically lengthier second half of the sentence. Although it is less evident in the translation, the same may be said for the two words, *tumata be-shuleha* ("Her impurities are on her hems"), which contains fewer metrical beats than the

⁵ As noted, I translate the verse above in accordance with Rashi's interpretation.

⁶ To understand this better, see the chapter "Introduction to Poetry," where I discuss the metrical arrangement in biblical poetry.

⁷ See, for example, Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 10.

second half of the sentence, *lo zakhera acharita* (“She did not consider her end”). Still, the imbalanced lines leave us with a palpably weighted impression.

This weighted sentence seems to be in consonance with the plunging movement of the sentences themselves. The first sentence sends the reader’s eyes skittering rapidly down to the hems of Jerusalem’s skirts, noticeably stained by her impurities. The second sentence explicitly observes Jerusalem’s downward spiral, its unnatural swiftness indicated by the brevity of the phrase. To compound the experience of witnessing Jerusalem’s collapse, the metrical weightiness of the second half of the sentence suggests that Jerusalem remains slumped and finds it difficult to rise from her descent. Later in the chapter, Jerusalem will testify that this is, indeed, her present state (*Eikha* 1:14): “God has given me into the hands [of one before whom] I cannot rise.” Once again, we witness the manner in which *Eikha*’s poetic techniques and features contribute to the meaning of the text.

Conclusion

Jerusalem’s breakthrough voice ceases just as suddenly as it emerged, and in the following verse, the narrator will resume his tale. Jerusalem’s evocative plea seems, however, to have affected the narrator. Instead of continuing his accusatory tone against the hapless city, he will turn his attention back to Jerusalem’s suffering and to her enemy’s brazenness.