

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #17: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:12**

לֹא אֶלֶיכֶם כָּל־עֲבָרֵי דָרֶךְ
הַבֵּיטוּ וּרְאוּ

אִם־יֵשׁ מִכְאוֹב כְּמִכְאוֹבִי
אֲשֶׁר עֲזַלְלִי לִי

אֲשֶׁר הִוָּגָה יְקֻנָּה
בְּיוֹם תְּרוֹן אִפּוֹ

**Not upon you, all you passersby¹
Look and see!**

**Is there any pain like my pain
That has been committed against me?**

**When God made me grieve
On the day of his burning anger**

The second part of this chapter (verses 12-22) features Jerusalem, who recounts her anguish in the first person (with the exception of verse 17).

In the first part of the chapter, we observed Jerusalem from the outside, judging

¹ Biblical interpreters generally understand this obscure phrase as an utterance of recoil tinged by horror, with the meaning, “That which was done to me should never happen to you!” See, for example, *Eikha Rabba* 1:40; Rashi and Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 1:12. *Sanhedrin* 104b regards this phrase as a colloquial formula used to ward off danger from one’s fellow.

and censuring her. When Jerusalem begins to speak, she springs to life, sharing the depths of her pain. We no longer regard her with disapproval; instead, we are party to her agony, experiencing it alongside her. In Jerusalem's direct plea to the passersby, "Look and see! Is there any pain like my pain?" she appeals also to us, the readers, eliciting our attention and giving us pause to consider her suffering.

The advent of Jerusalem's personal perspective shifts the narrative in other ways as well. In verse 5, the narrator balances his description of God's destructive role (*ki Hashem hoga*) with an explanatory statement that focuses on Israel's transgressions (*al rov pasha'eha*). Jerusalem uses a nearly identical phrase in verse 12 to describe God's punitive acts (*asher hoga Hashem*). Nevertheless, Jerusalem follows this description with the explanatory, *be-yom charon apo*, "on the day of His great anger." God's justice disappears from Jerusalem's account, replaced by her claim that God's anger triggers His acts. Perhaps Jerusalem's misery obscures her ability to recognize the justness of God's action. Possibly, however, she remains unconvinced that her sins warrant this terrible recompense, illustrating how difficult it is for Jerusalem to assume responsibility.

Jerusalem seems to posit that God singled her out for punishment. The word "me" (*li*) appears as a direct object of God's acts (*olali*), hinting to this disquieting notion. A *midrash* regards Jerusalem's words as a complaint:

Look and see! Is there any pain like my pain? He did not bring upon any nation what He brought upon me. He was not exacting from any nation in the manner in which He was exacting with me! (*Eikha Rabba* [Buber] 1:3)

The prophet Amos unabashedly asserts that God does behave in a more exacting fashion with His chosen nation:

Listen to the word that God spoke against you, children of Israel, upon the entire family that I brought up from Egypt, saying: Only **you** have I known from all of the families upon the earth. Therefore, I will remember **you** for all of your sins. (*Amos* 3:1-2)

God selected the children of Israel in order to cultivate a unique relationship with them. Chosen-ness entails both advantages and obligations. Closeness to God

requires more vigilance; God expects more from those whom He nurtures and loves.²

The next few verses contain a bold description of God's punishments. These expressions, while characteristic of *Eikha* (and often found elsewhere in *Tanakh*), offer a harsh portrait of God. Taking our cues from *Eikha*, we will interpret these verses without sparing the reader, while attempting to grapple with some of the delicate issues that they raise.

² See Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Malbim on *Amos* 3:2.

Eikha 1:13-15: God Torments Jerusalem

מִמְרוֹם שָׁלַח אֱלֹהִים בְּעַצְמוֹתַי
וַיִּרְדְּנָה

פָּרַשׂ רֶשֶׁת לְרַגְלִי
הִשִּׁיבֵנִי אָחֹר

נִתְנַגְלִי שִׁמְמָה
כָּל־יְמֵי דַוָּה

נִשְׁקַדְדֵּי עַל פְּשָׁעַי בְּיָדוֹ
יִשְׁתַּרְקֵי

עָלוּ עַל־צוּאָרַי
הִכְשִׁיל כַּחֲמִי

נִתְנַגְנִי אֲדָנָי
בְּיָדַי לֹא־אוּכַל קוּם

סָלָה כָּל־אֲבִירַי
אֲדָנָי בְּקֶרְבִּי

קָרָא עָלַי מוֹעֵד
לִשְׁפָר בַּחֲוָרַי

גַּת דְּרָדָךְ אֲדָנָי
לְבַתּוּלַת בַּת־יְהוּדָה

**From up high He sent fire in my bones
And it overpowered [me]**

**He spread a net for my feet
Sent me reeling backwards**

**He placed me in desolation
The entire day [I am] faint**

**My transgressions were twisted into a yoke
In His hands**

**They became entangled,³ were lifted upon my neck
They made my strength fail**

**God has placed me
In the hands [of someone before whom] I could not rise**

**God trampled all of my nobles
In my midst**

**He called against me an appointed time
To break my young men**

**God stamped like a winepress
On maiden daughter of Judah**

Turning her attention to God, Jerusalem describes the day of God's anger. Richly drawn metaphors impart the variety and force of these torments. First, God sends a fire from His heavenly abode, which penetrates her bones and overpowers the city.⁴ God spreads a metaphoric net for Jerusalem's feet, causing her to retreat

³ Most interpreters assume that the word *yistargu* is related to the word *sarig*, meaning a vine. The verbal form of the word denotes the manner in which the vines grow intertwined.

⁴ The subject of the verb *va-yirdena* is unclear, with some (e.g. Ibn Ezra) suggesting it is the fire (referred to here in the masculine), while others assume that it is God (see the Greek and Syriac Targumim). Interpreters and translators generally accept that the root of the word *va-yirdena* is r.d.h., meaning to rule or subjugate Jerusalem (see BDB, p. 921). Rashi translates according to the homonym r.d.h. (to scrape out; *Judges* 14:9), with the meaning to eviscerate Jerusalem. Possibly, this verb relates to the word r.d.d., meaning to beat down or crush. It is uncommon to use any of these verbs to describe the effects of fire.

Despite the linguistic distinction, the word *va-yirdena* evokes the root y.r.d, which signifies a downward movement. This nicely represents the trajectory of fire and also coheres well with the general downward movement depicted throughout the chapter.

backward.⁵ Twisted into a thick rope,⁶ God wraps Jerusalem's transgressions around her neck like a yoke, draining the city of its potency. Like a winepress, God tramples upon Jerusalem,⁷ squeezing out its vigor, as wine bleeds out of grapes. Depleted of her strength, Jerusalem collapses, without energy to rise.

In the span of just three verses, God employs a wide range of actions – scorching, trapping, choking, and crushing the people. The afflicted city retreats, languishes, and falls, battered mercilessly from all directions.

⁵ God often spreads a net to punish humans (e.g. *Jeremiah* 50:24; *Ezekiel* 12:13; 17:20; 19:8; 32:3; *Hosea* 7:12; *Tehillim* 94:13. On the flip side, God props up the feet of those who are loyal to Him (e.g. *I Samuel* 2:9; *Tehillim* 18:34).

⁶ The difficulty of properly translating the *hapax legomenon* (singular word) *niskad* (which I have translated as “twisted,” based on the context) constitutes one of the primary challenges in understanding this difficult verse. Indeed, in his commentary on this verse, Ibn Caspi offers a despairing remark on translating Hebrew words that appear only once in the Bible: “And how can we prophesy when we find a root and word once in all of the holy books?” He offers a possible suggestion for the word *niskad* (“to cleave”), but quickly retreats from this interpretation, stating that it is not necessarily a correct reading.

Some interpreters offer a slightly different orthography of the word, writing it with a *shin* instead of a *sin*. (See *Eikha Rabba* 1:42, which may regard this as a wordplay, rather than an orthographic emendation.) The word *nishkad* with a *shin* means to pay attention, generally with the intent of punishment (see e.g. *Jeremiah* 1:12.) In other words, “God took notice of my weighty sins in His hand,” a reading in which God's actions are preceded by His measured observations and premeditated decision to punish. The Greek translation has this reading, also rereading the word *ol* (yoke) as *al*, a preposition indicating that God pays attention *to* the sins). Rashi appears to remove the *sin*, suggesting that the root is n.k.d., meaning marked. He suggests that God marks Jerusalem's sins, remembering them and administering retribution. The Aramiac Targum translates the word as “heavy,” which seems to both switch the order of the letters and change its consonants: *niksha*, rather than *nishkad*. The breadth and variety of explanations makes it nearly impossible to offer a definitive translation.

⁷ *Silla* is an active verb describing what God did to the young strong men of Jerusalem. Rashi and Ibn Ezra explain the word to mean trample (from the root s.l.l.). A cognate word would be *mesila*, denoting a road that people traverse (e.g. *Isaiah* 11:16; 62:10). This explanation coheres well with the end of the verse, in which God treads on Judah as if she is in a winepress, although it renders the verse somewhat repetitive. Possibly, the verb *silla* relates to the word *solela*, meaning a piled up mound (e.g. *Jeremiah* 50:26) or siege ramp (*solelot* in *Jeremiah* 32:24). In this reading, God piles up the bodies of Jerusalem's warriors, allowing the enemy entrance into the walled city. In *Jeremiah* 50:26, a similar verb evokes harvest (Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 74, and Renkema, *Lamentations*, p. 168), mirroring the winepress image at the end of the verse. In this context, the verse recalls plentiful food, even as it depicts scenes from a besieged (and starving) city.

God's acts seem premeditated; nets suggest foresight and planning. Moreover, verse 15 depicts God planning the events in advance, by designating an appointed time (*mo'ed*)⁸ to break Jerusalem's young strong men.

Who is Responsible for Jerusalem's Destruction?

The description of Jerusalem's afflictions evokes the typical manner in which enemies conquer and destroy a city. They set fire to the buildings, capture the inhabitants, place a yoke on their neck,⁹ kill the young strong men, and trample on the ruins of the razed city. In Jerusalem's account, the human intermediary vanishes; Jerusalem identifies God as the sole agent of her destruction.

Events that the narrator had previously attributed to human agency reappear in Jerusalem's description; the city, however, shifts the responsibility from the human enemy to God. In contrast to the narrator's account, Jerusalem maintains that **God** causes Jerusalem's desolation,¹⁰ her failing strength,¹¹ her downward fall,¹² and the abuse of her young people.¹³ Even Jerusalem's recoil backwards, previously (in verse 8) ascribed to her own self-loathing, is here recast as God's doing (verse 13). The word *paras*, previously used to describe the enemy's hand closing in on Jerusalem (verse 10), now features God, carefully spreading the net that will entrap Jerusalem's feet (verse 13).

God and Israel: A Changed Reality

God's affliction of Jerusalem linguistically (and ironically) evokes the ideal biblical relationship, in which God protects Israel from these specific travails and uses them to punish Israel's enemies. In this section, God makes Jerusalem desolate (1:14); in *Isaiah* 49:8, God repopulates Israel's desolate areas.¹⁴ Instead of spreading out a

⁸ The irony of using the same word that formerly designated the appointed time to serve God emphasizes the stunning reversal that has taken place. We will note this again in a similar passage in *Eikha* 2:7.

⁹ Several *midrashim* explain that this yoke represents the subjugation of Israel by other kingdoms. See e.g. *Eikha Rabba* (Buber) 1:3.

¹⁰ Compare the word *shomema* in verses 4 and 13.

¹¹ Compare the word *ko'ach* in verses 6 and 14.

¹² Compare verses 7, 9, and 14.

¹³ Compare verses 5 and 15.

¹⁴ See also *Isaiah* 49:19.

net to trip Jerusalem (1:13), *Tehillim* 25:15 and 31:5 describe God delivering individuals from the nets that entrap them. *Isaiah* 9:3 and *Jeremiah* 2:20 portray God breaking the yoke that has been placed on Israel, instead of twisting a yoke around their neck (1:14). God elsewhere deploys measures that he wields here against Jerusalem in a different protective context – to punish Israel’s enemies. God uses fire to destroy Israel’s adversaries (e.g. *Amos* 1:3-2:5; *Ezekiel* 39:6), sends Israel’s enemies reeling backward (e.g. *Tehillim* 9:4; 56:10), and crushes Israel’s foes by stomping on them like a winepress (e.g. *Isaiah* 63:3; *Joel* 4:13). The day of God’s anger is often depicted as a day of punishment for Israel’s enemies (e.g. *Isaiah* 13:13; *Tehillim* 110:5). In this way, the book ominously depicts the breakdown of the protective relationship between God and His nation.

It is particularly noteworthy (and unsettling) that Jerusalem does not address God directly in this passage; she does not implore Him to rectify the situation. Instead, Jerusalem speaks about God in the third person, underscoring the alienation that prevails between Jerusalem and God.

Nevertheless, prophets often warned that God’s day of anger threatens a sinful Israel as well.¹⁵ Undoubtedly then, if these punishments are brandished against Israel, they must be somewhat responsible. Despite Jerusalem’s tone of outrage (and her difficulty in assuming responsibility, as noted above in our examination of verse 12), one glimmer of self-accountability disrupts Jerusalem’s litany of God’s excessive torments. God depletes Jerusalem’s strength by winding a twisted rope around her neck. Jerusalem’s transgressions (*peshā’ai*) constitute the material used in weaving this cord; had she been blameless, God would not have had the means to manufacture this instrument of torture. In fact, the word *peshā* is the very word omitted by Jerusalem in verse 12, as noted above. Although Jerusalem does not properly confess, her description of this cord of twisted sins gives us pause to consider its implications. The ruined city may well suffer beyond reason, but she cannot pretend to be entirely innocent of sin. Jerusalem moves steadily toward the goal of this chapter: admission of sinfulness.

Grapes of Wrath

¹⁵ See, for example, *Zephaniah* 2:2-3. In a particularly poignant moment, *Amos* 5:18 lambasts those who yearn for the day of God, erroneously assuming that it will not affect them negatively.

The metaphor of God trampling on Judah like grapes in a winepress is vivid and violent. The color and viscosity of the liquid that emerges from the crushed grapes pictorially evokes the blood of the victims. It also (as noted) recalls similar metaphoric language used to describe the punishment of Israel's enemies. *Isaiah* 63:1-6 employs this image to depict God crushing Edom like one tramples on grapes in a winepress; Edom's red blood splatters, soiling the environs.¹⁶ Similarly, *Joel* 4:13 describes a winepress overflowing with the blood of unnamed nations, evil enemies of Israel. Now, Israel experiences a stunning blow, as God directs against Israel the punishments that He previously aimed at Israel's enemies.

The wine image, however, recalls other, more promising biblical metaphors.¹⁷ Often described as a grapevine, a vineyard or grapes, the Bible uses this metaphor to hint to Israel's ultimate objective:¹⁸

You transmitted a vine from Egypt, You expelled nations and You planted her.¹⁹ You cleared her way, and You gave her roots, and she filled the land. Her shade covered the mountains and her branches, [are like] the cedars of God. You conducted her fruits until the sea, and her produce until the river. (*Tehillim* 80:9-12)

Israel's likeness to a vine contains several layers of meaning. The vineyard produces wine, a highly desirable product.²⁰ It has a regal association and may suggest Israel's princely status among nations.²¹ It is also associated specifically with Judah (*Bereishit* 49:11), the kingship tribe whose ancestral land produces grapes. Although the crushed grapes in the winepress is undoubtedly a punitive image, it implicitly recalls hopeful times, a national ideal.

Wine intoxicates, and while it can create a higher state of consciousness, it often reduces humans to a state of crudeness and impropriety (e.g. *Hosea* 4:11). In fact, the vineyard retains the potential to produce greatness or baseness, nobility or

¹⁶ There is little doubt that the prophet intends a wordplay between Edom and the orthographically identical word for the color red (*adam*). See also *Genesis* 25:25, 30.

¹⁷ *Vayikra Rabba* 36:2 develops the metaphor of the nation of Israel as a vineyard at great length.

¹⁸ One of the dominant images of the *Song of Songs*, the bucolic vineyards and the resulting wine echo throughout the book. See also *Hosea* 9:10.

¹⁹ The word for vine (*gefen*) is feminine in Hebrew.

²⁰ See the blessing of Judah in *Bereishit* 49:11.

²¹ See *Eikha* 1:1.

vulgarity. Thus, the vineyard image frequently becomes negative, and prophets bemoan the manner in which the metaphoric vineyard betrays its owner. Despite the favorable conditions and God's tireless labor on behalf of His vineyard (Israel), the vines sometimes produce inferior fruit. Several prophets employ this metaphor to describe Israel's failure:²²

My Beloved had a vineyard in Keren Ben Shemen. And He ploughed it and He removed the stones from it and He planted a choice vine in it. And He built a tower inside of it and He hewed out a vat in it. He had hoped to produce grapes but it produced sour grapes... What shall I do more for My vineyard that I did not do for it? Why did I hope to produce grapes and it produced sour grapes? (*Isaiah* 5:1-4)

And I planted a choice vine, an altogether faithful seed. How did you turn before Me into a corrupted foreign vine? (*Jeremiah* 2:21)

As punishment to the vineyard, God opens its protective barriers, allowing the enemies inside to trample the ground and consume the fruits (*Isaiah* 5:5; *Tehillim* 80:13-14). A related punishment emerges in *Eikha* 1:15, where God tramples Judah in a winepress, evoking Israel's failure as a vineyard.

Nevertheless, the trampling of grapes may hint to a positive aspect to this punishment. In the ancient world, the process of making wine involved stepping carefully on the ripened grapes, thereby releasing the red liquid without crushing the seeds. Rather than an image of wanton, unmediated violence, this image may suggest a careful balance of delicacy and clout. God tramples Judah, administering His punishment on the day of His anger. Nevertheless, it appears to be a measured act, designed not to crush the people entirely. Isaiah's prophecy hints to a similar idea:

So says God: Just as you find wine in every grape cluster, and you say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it!" so I will do for my servants, [and I will] not destroy everything! (*Isaiah* 65:8)

When viewed within its broader biblical context, the metaphor in which God crushes Israel like grapes recalls the vineyard that God planted in the land, the

²² See also *Hosea* 10:1.

hopes that it will produce fine grapes, and the bid to construct a regal and noble society. We also recall the poignant plea of *Psalms* 80, expressing the hope that God will return to favor His beloved vine:

God of hosts! Return please, and look from the heavens and see, and remember this vine! (*Psalms* 80:15)