

**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Shiur #19: Eikha: Chapter 1 (continued)**

**Eikha 1:18-19**

צָדִיק הוּא יְקוּק  
כִּי פִּיהוּ מְרִיתִי

שָׁמְעוּ-נָא כָּל הָעַמִּים  
וְרָאוּ מִכָּאֲבִי

בְּתוֹלְתִי וּבַחֲוָרִי  
הִלְכוּ בְּשִׁבִי

קָרָאתִי לְמַאֲהָבִי  
הִמָּה רָמוּנִי

כַּהֲנֵי וְזִקְנֵי  
בְּעִיר גֹּעוּ

כִּי-בִקְשׁוּ אֶכְלֵ לֶמֶן  
וַיִּשְׁיבוּ אֶת-נַפְשָׁם

**God is righteous  
For I have rebelled against His word**

**Listen all nations!  
And see my pain**

**My young maidens and youth  
Have gone into captivity**

**I called to my love ones  
They deceived me**

**My priests and elders  
Expired in the city**

## **For they sought food for themselves To restore their lives**

Jerusalem resumes her narration following the narrator's interjection, which appears to have triggered a remarkable transformation. In proclaiming God's righteousness, Jerusalem now assumes responsibility for the situation, shamefacedly admitting that she has rebelled against God's word.

Following this admission, Jerusalem turns to address the nations, entreating them to employ their hearing (*shim'u*) and sight (*re'u*): to *hear* her words and see her sons and daughters who have gone into captivity. To what end does Jerusalem turn to the nations? Why is she so determined that the nations become participants in her tragedy?

Perhaps, once again (see our explanation in 1:12), Jerusalem looks for someone, for *anyone*, to relieve her loneliness. Compounded by the exile of her young men and women, Jerusalem's hollow desolation compels her to look outward for consolation. Even an outsider's attention can help Jerusalem to cope in the face of her unbearable feeling of isolation.

Possibly, Jerusalem turns to the nations in order to educate them. As a continuation of the first part of the verse, Jerusalem calls on all of the nations (*kol ha-amim*)<sup>1</sup> to witness God's righteousness and internalize the consequences of rebellion against God.<sup>2</sup> Presented in a neutral manner, these nations do not appear to be Jerusalem's enemies, but rather the nations of the world, the potential recipients of the universal message of the Bible. In this schema, even at the moment of her great disaster, Jerusalem remains mindful of her role toward the nations.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is also possible that Jerusalem turns to the nations in reproach, to denounce them for their accountability. At the beginning of the verse, Jerusalem admirably shifts the fault from God onto herself. She may not intend, however, to shoulder all of the responsibility; her speech to the nations may indicate that Jerusalem lays partial blame for the situation upon them. Apart from Babylon, who is directly accountable for Jerusalem's destruction, there were nations who allied themselves with the enemy and others who were Jerusalem's erstwhile allies, but who failed to come to her assistance at her time of need. In demanding that all of the nations observe her pain and behold her children who have been forcibly marched into exile, Jerusalem compels these nations to recognize their

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<sup>1</sup> See similarly *Micah* 1:2. Some biblical interpreters (e.g. Radak, Malbim) understand Micah's address to the "nations, all of them," as a reference to the different tribes of Israel. Nevertheless, the simple meaning is that Micah's prophecy contains a universal message, addressed to all of the nations of the world. See also *Tehillim* 49:2, in which the similar opening of the Psalm ("Listen to this, all of the nations!") prepares the reader for its universal message.

<sup>2</sup> See Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 1:18.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah describes Israel as "a light unto the nations;" see *Isaiah* 42:6, 49:6.

role in Jerusalem's catastrophe.

The following verse (1:19) opens with the description of unnamed loved ones (*me'ahavai*), who deceive Jerusalem. Are these loved ones the same anonymous nations that Jerusalem addresses in the previous verse? Perhaps Jerusalem now describes former political allies who have betrayed her, abandoning Jerusalem's notables to a miserable death from starvation.<sup>4</sup> The deception itself remains unspecific. Have these loved ones actively betrayed Jerusalem, allying themselves with her enemies and revealing her confidences? Or have they simply left her plea unanswered, a passive betrayal of unfulfilled promises?<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the possibility cited above, the word *me'ahavai* ("loved ones") appears to allude to an emotional connection between Jerusalem and her addressee. The intimacy of the reference suggests that Jerusalem has called to her citizens, who have deceived her.<sup>6</sup> The nature of this betrayal, in which the Jerusalemites ostensibly have a personal stake, seems less clear. Perhaps it refers to the intransigent sinfulness of the populace – an indirect betrayal, to be sure, but one that is no less responsible for the ultimate collapse of the city.

These two verses retain several themes that echo previous verses. These include Jerusalem's request that outsiders see her pain (v. 12), the exile of her children (v. 5), and her desperate quest for food to survive ("to restore life," v. 11). Taken together, these repeated themes convey Jerusalem's loneliness and the certainty of her utter demise. Without food, she has no present; without children, she has no future.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ezra understands the syntax of the verse differently. Reversing the order of the verse, he explains that because Jerusalem's usual advisors (priests and elders) died from starvation, she turned to outsiders, who then betrayed her.

<sup>5</sup> See R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 1:19.

<sup>6</sup> See, similarly, our discussion on the word *ohaveha* in *Eikha* 1:2. Several *midrashim* (e.g. *Eikha Rabba* 1:54) suggest that *me'ahavai* refer to the prophets, false or otherwise. This also recalls one of the possible interpretations of *Eikha* 1:2.

**Eikha 1:20-22**  
**Jerusalem Addresses God**

רֵאָה יְקֹוֹק כִּי־צַר־לִי  
מֵעַי חֲמָרְמָרוּ

נִהְפָּה לִבִּי בְקִרְבִּי  
כִּי מָרוּ מַגִּרְתִּי

מִחוּץ שַׁכְּלֵה־חֲרָב  
בְּבַיִת כַּמָּוֶת

שָׁמְעוּ כִּי נֶאֱנַחָה אֲנִי  
אִין מִנְחָם לִי

כָּל־אֵיבֵי שָׁמְעוּ רַעְתִּי שָׁשׂוּ  
כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ

הִבְאֵת יוֹם־קִרְאָתָּךְ  
וַיְהִי כַמוֹנִי

תָּבֵא כָל־רַעְתֶּם לִפְנֵיךָ  
וְעוֹלָל לָמוֹ

כַּאֲשֶׁר עוֹלֵלָתְךָ לִי  
עַל כָּל־פְּשָׁעַי

כִּי־רִבּוֹת אֲנֻחֲתִי  
וְלִבִּי דָּוָה

**Look, God, for I am anguished**  
**My insides churn**

**My heart turns over within me**  
**For I have surely rebelled**

**Outside the sword kills**  
**Inside the house is death**

**They have heard that I groan**  
**There is no consoler for me**

**All of my enemies heard of my troubles and rejoiced**  
**For You have done it**

**Bring the day you called for**

**And let them be like me**

**Let all of their evil come before You  
And do to them**

**As You have done to me  
Because of all of my transgressions**

**For my groans are many  
And my heart is sick**

As the chapter draws to its conclusion, Jerusalem issues an emotional second person appeal to God, referring to herself with the personal pronoun, *ani*, and to God with the personal pronoun, *ata*. The bid to reconnect on a personal level illustrates Jerusalem's hope that she can reignite her relationship with God, thereby alleviating her loneliness.

Jerusalem opens this direct address with a request: “**Look** God, for I am anguished!” This is the third time in this chapter that lonely Jerusalem begs God to observe her (*re'eil!*) in her wretchedness. Recalling verses 9 and 11, this minimalistic request vividly illustrates Israel's feeling of abandonment. God no longer looks at them; He has detached from their lives and has left them to their miserable fate. Nevertheless, Jerusalem's desire for God's gaze may imply more than a nominal request for attention. God's gaze will surely facilitate His mercy and kindness; if only God would look at Jerusalem, He would surely take action to rehabilitate her and restore justice to the world.

Jerusalem's request contains a refreshing perspective. Verse 22 suggests that her misery is self-inflicted; a consequence of her sins: “Look, God, for I am anguished... For I have surely rebelled!” In this context, the word *re'ei* (look!) does not ask God to view her physical suffering, but rather to bear witness to her internal suffering, her shame, the pain that she herself has caused by her behavior.<sup>7</sup> Self-realization entails a newfound maturity, and Jerusalem develops into a more mature persona at the conclusion of the chapter.

### **“My Insides Churn, My Heart Turns Over Within Me”**

Jerusalem's physical body, her innards and her heart, respond to the crisis. Bodily movements convey the internal experience of torrential emotions, but they also convey the physical upheaval in Jerusalem. Jerusalem churns and seethes in a visual representation of the shattering of the city. R. Saadia Gaon suggests that the churning of the innards may be a description of the agonies of starvation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We suggested a similar reading for the word *re'u* in verse 18, which entailed a request to the nations to look at her pain that she caused by her rebellion.

<sup>8</sup> Rasag, *Eikha* 1:20.

## “Outside the Sword Kills; Inside the House is Death”

A common biblical phrase, echoing both *Shirat Ha'azinu* (*Devarim* 32:25) and several prophetic forewarnings (*Jeremiah* 14:18; *Ezekiel* 7:15), this curt expression (just five words in the Hebrew) underscores the inevitability of death during this calamity.<sup>9</sup> Exiting their houses, Jerusalem's inhabitants encounter death by the enemy's sword. An unspecified death, presumably starvation<sup>10</sup> or plague,<sup>11</sup> vanquishes those who remain in their houses.

The house may refer more generally to the besieged city. In this schema, the death inside the house refers to the starvation that afflicts the besieged residents, while the outside implies surrender to the enemy that has surrounded it.<sup>12</sup> This reading has several literary advantages. First, it continues the description of the city in the previous verse, where residents die as they scrounge for food (v. 19). This reading also maintains Jerusalem's metaphoric portrayal of herself as a physical body. Practically, however, there is little difference between the readings. In both readings, Jerusalem turns to God in desperation and misery, anticipating imminent, inevitable death.<sup>13</sup>

## Call for Vengeance

*Eikha* does not often look toward the future, concentrating instead on the trials of the present. This may be one reason that Israel rarely beseeches God to change her fortune in *Eikha*. Until the very last verses of the book, the book contains no request to return the captives from exile, to rebuild Jerusalem or the Temple, or to restore Israel's autonomy or monarchy. The nation seems reluctant to ask for anything beyond the first step of restoring communication; in beseeching God to pay attention, to look and see His suffering nation, she hopes to revive the faltering relationship.

Nevertheless, one request for action weaves throughout the book, appearing as the resounding conclusion of this chapter. That is the call for God to take vengeance upon Israel's enemies. Not predicated on the state of God's relationship with His nation, this entreaty entails a quest for justice. It indicates an abiding confidence in God's omnipotence, alongside the belief that God desires

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<sup>9</sup> A similar phrase appears in the Sumerian Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur (ANET, 618, lines 403-404): “Ur – inside it is death, outside it is death. Inside it, we die of famine, outside of it we are killed by the weapons of the Elamites.”

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. *Jeremiah* 14:18 and *Ezekiel* 7:15. See also Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 1:21.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ezekiel* 7:15.

<sup>12</sup> Berlin, p. 60, citing *Ezekiel* 7:15 (and *Jeremiah* 14:18) as proof texts. Nevertheless, the similar phrase in *Devarim* 32:25 seems to imply that it refers to the actual house.

<sup>13</sup> Prophets often threaten of God's impending punishment, from which there will be no escape. In particular, the prophet Amos wields this theme as a warning to the sinful nation, whose prosperity generates a sense of complacency and invulnerability. See, for example, *Amos* 2:14-16; 3:15; 5:18-19; 9:1-4.

the restoration of justice in the world. Less optimistically, this paltry request suggests Israel's inability to ask God to remedy her own fate. Moreover, in focusing outward, Jerusalem deflects attention from her own sinfulness, appealing to God to turn His attention instead to the evils of the enemies.

The mocking jeers of the enemies surfaced in verse 7, and their inexplicable success is the subject of verse 10. The problem of the wicked who prosper confounds and torments the suffering nation,<sup>14</sup> who again encounter the enemies' gloating elation at Israel's downfall (1:21). This finally propels the nation to appeal to God to bring retribution.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, according to verse 21, the source of the enemies' schadenfreude rests upon their understanding that **God** has brought punishment upon Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> They rejoice not mainly at Israel's downfall, but at the identity of the perpetrator, whose previous loyalty to Israel seems to have been abrogated. God, who had consistently saved Jerusalem, now crushes her, a fact that produces inordinate satisfaction for Israel's enemies.<sup>17</sup> By recalling that the God wrought these events, Jerusalem somewhat ironically shifts the blame from the enemy back to God. Despite this, Jerusalem entreats God to bring vengeance upon these enemies, thereby proclaiming her abiding confidence in God's justness and commitment to punishing Israel's adversaries.<sup>18</sup>

## The Final Sigh

Despite the positive developments examined above, chapter 1 concludes with a deep sigh of pain: "For my groans are many and my heart is sick." The sorrowful end is not substantially different from the opening of the chapter. Nothing in this chapter alleviates Jerusalem's pain. Admission of guilt increases her heartfelt shame, and the protracted plea for vengeance (spread out over two verses) compounds the sense that the quest for justice remains elusive.

Describing Jerusalem's profuse groans, which seem to multiply and swell as she

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<sup>14</sup> See Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 1:22.

<sup>15</sup> A common biblical trope, especially in the book of *Tehillim*, the call for vengeance against evildoers, even those who God commissions to punish Israel (e.g. *Isaiah* 10:5-12), remains a familiar element in biblical texts. See e.g. *Tehillim* 22:4; 74:18-23; 79:6, 12; 83:14-18.

<sup>16</sup> Based on *Eikha Rabba* 1:56, Rashi reads the words "for you have done it" as an accusation against God for originally separating Israel from the nations, thereby sowing the seeds of their enmity.

<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of the enemies, Israel's situation may imply God's rejection of His nation. This idea, unique here to *Eikha*, has a historical revival in Christianity's theological doctrine of supercessionism, in which the destruction of the Second Temple proves that God rejected the Jewish people, choosing Christians instead.

<sup>18</sup> The word *ra'ah* (evil) appears twice in these verses. Once it describes the evil that has been wrought against Israel – namely, her sufferings and tribulations. The second usage depicts the evils of the enemies – namely, their brutality and cruelties. This parallel deployment of the word *ra'ah* may imply that the evils of the enemy are more egregious than Israel's troubles and must be dealt with as the first priority.

absorbs the horror around her, the word *rabbot* marks the intricate movements of the chapter. It launches the chapter (1:1) by recalling the erstwhile greatness of the city. Its dual appearance in the opening verse conveys both the multitudes of Jerusalem's inhabitants (*rabbati am*) and its princely status among the nations (*rabbati va-goyyim*). In a devastating twist of fortune, the same word in *Eikha* 1:3 describes the heavy burden (*rov avodah*) that Judah suffers in exile. Later in the chapter (1:5), this word conveys Jerusalem's great sins (*rov pasha'eha*), which prompt God's punishment. The chapter closes with Jerusalem's great sighs (*rabbot anchotai*), an audible response to the progression from greatness to suffering, from sinfulness to destruction.

### ***Eikha* 1:18-22 and the Frame of Jerusalem's Account (1:12-22)**

Following the narrator's interjection (1:17), Jerusalem recovers her speech, assuming responsibility for her situation (1:18-22). Endeavoring to alleviate her loneliness, Jerusalem addresses both humans ("all the nations," 1:18) and God (1:20). Initially, Jerusalem turns to the nations, speaking of God in the third person, describing His righteousness and her rebelliousness (*mariti*). In her address to the nations, Jerusalem requests that they both listen to her (*shime'u*) and look (*re'u*) at her pain (1:18). In 1:20-22, Jerusalem turns directly to God, again admitting to her rebellious behavior (*maro mariti*). In this section, Jerusalem asks God to look (*re'ei*) at her misery (1:20), describing twice how the enemies have heard (*shame'u*) her groans and calamity<sup>19</sup> and have responded with apathy or, worse, with jubilation (1:21). Jerusalem concludes her speech by petitioning God to take vengeance on Israel's enemies.

Jerusalem's story closes parallel to its opening (verses 11c-12), in a manner that highlights her stunning transformation. There too Jerusalem addressed both God and the nations (but in the opposite order) in a bid to alleviate her terrible isolation. Her narration opens (1:11) by petitioning God to **look and see her** (*re'ei ve-habita*). Immediately following this appeal (1:12), Jerusalem gives up hope that God will acquiesce to her entreaty; instead, she spins around and spots the passersby, hailing them down and demanding that they **look at her and see** (*ve-habitu u-re'u*) **her terrible pain** (*machov ki-mach'ovi*). In this appeal, Jerusalem identifies God as the perpetrator who has actively caused her pain; God makes her groan on the day of His great anger.

In verse 18, Jerusalem first turns to the nations, requesting that they **look at her terrible pain** (*machovi*). These nations are not, however, random passersby who Jerusalem grabs in her desperate attempt to find someone who will see her pain. Instead, Jerusalem addresses these nations with careful deliberation. Born from the conscious acknowledgement of God's righteousness alongside her own guilt,

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<sup>19</sup> Increasing the parallel between the entreaty to the nations (v. 18) and to God (v. 21), some scholars (following the Syriac translation) prefer to read the first appearance of the word *shame'u* as a second person singular imperative directed to God, "Listen!" See e.g. Westermann, *Lamentations*, pp. 111, 114; O'Conner, *Lamentations*, p. 25; Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 14-15.

Jerusalem directs the nations to regard her pain, a result of her sin. This time, Jerusalem gives up hope that the nations will respond; instead, she turns to God, entreating Him to **look at her** (*re'ei*). At the conclusion of the chapter, God is the final hope, the ultimate address for human supplication.

The frame of Jerusalem's account (1:11-22) creates a chiastic structure:

Verse 11- Look and see, God!

Verse 12- See and look, passersby, at my pain!

Verses 18-19- Hear and look, nations, at my pain!

Verses 20-22- Look and see, God!

Several striking linguistic reversals contrast the concluding verse of the chapter with the verse that launches Jerusalem's account (1:12). At the outset (1:12), Jerusalem attributed God's punitive actions to indiscriminate divine wrath ("Is there any pain like my pain, that has been committed against me (*asher olal li*), when God made me grieve on the day of his burning anger?") By the end of the chapter, Jerusalem refers to God's punitive actions differently, acknowledging that God wrought punishment upon her because of her transgressions: "Do to them as You have done to me (*ka'asher olalta li*) because of all of my transgressions!"

Similarly, *Eikha* 1:12 does not explain why God made Israel grieve (*asher hoga Hashem*), noting simply that this occurred on the day of God's anger. This verse seems to ignore *Eikha* 1:5, which explains that God made Israel grieve (*ki Hashem hoga*) due to her great transgressions (*al rov pasha'eha*). By omitting any reason for God's fierce anger, *Eikha* 1:12 conveys a sense of injustice, reflecting her incomprehension of God's inexplicable rage. Jerusalem concludes her account of the events by evoking the transgressions of *Eikha* 1:5, omitted from *Eikha* 1:12: "Do to them as You have done to me because of all of my transgressions (*al kol pasha'ei*)!" At the end of the chapter, Jerusalem readily assumes responsibility, concluding with a clear pronouncement of God's justice.