

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #25: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:6

וַיִּהְיֶה כְּגַן שָׂדֵה
שֶׁהָרַחֵץ מוֹעֵדוֹ

שֶׁכֶּחַ יִקְרַק בְּצִיּוֹן
מוֹעֵד וְשַׁבָּת

וַיִּנְאַץ בְּזַעַם-אֵפוֹ
מִלְךָ וְכֹהֵן

**And He stripped His hut (*sukko*) like a garden
He destroyed His appointed place**

God made Zion forget holidays and Shabbat

**And he spurned in his fiery anger
king and priest**

Swiveling fiercely, God's furious onslaught turns abruptly from the city to its religious institutions.¹ God seems to act against His own interests as He directs His assault toward all three dimensions of holy experience: sacred space (*kedushat ha-makom*), sacred time (*kedushat ha-zeman*), and sacred people (*kedushat ha-adam*). God crushes each one in turn, efficiently, methodically, systematically. Having failed to deliver the city from its religious failures, God dismantles the city's religious infrastructure, collapsing it alongside its constituents.

Even here, *Eikha* provides little by way of explanations; God does not elucidate or justify this assault on His sacred institutions, which were established to

¹ If we interpret the phrase "*ohel bat Zion*," "the tent of the daughter of Zion," as a reference to the Temple (see e.g. *Yalkut Shimoni, II Samuel*, 145), then *Eikha* 2:4 has already alluded to God's destruction of the Temple.

preserve national sanctity. The absence of explanation for God's actions does not leave the biblical reader without recourse for understanding the ruin. Set within the context of a broader biblical canon, the attack on Judah's religious institutions recalls the many prophetic censures that revolve around Israel's errant religious lifestyle and its misuse of sacred space, time, and people. Jeremiah, for example, describes the heinous acts that accompany Jerusalemites into the holy Temple, where they seek impunity from God in spite of their continued commitment to a decadent lifestyle:

Will you steal and murder and fornicate and swear falsely and bring incense to the Baal, and chase after other gods that you don't know? And then, you come and you stand before me in this house, which has My name called upon it, and you say, "We have been saved!" So that you can [continue to] do these abominations! Has this house that bears My name become a den of thieves?
(*Jeremiah 7:9-11*)

Jeremiah's prophecy suggests that the Temple's destruction is no more than the nation deserves; their own behavior in the Temple drives God to pour out His wrath upon it, causing it to cease its function. After all, the heinous crimes committed there undermine the very purity of the institution.²

Isaiah 1:13 cites God's impatience with the abuse of sacred time – namely, the false offerings that Israel brings to Jerusalem on both regular days and holy days, such as Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat. The fraudulent people are engaged in empty rituals, *Isaiah* claims; they are devoid of depth and sincerity, causing God to loathe the sacred days: "My soul abhors your new moons and appointed days. They have been a burden upon me, which I cannot endure" (*Isaiah 1:14*). *Isaiah's* strident censure anticipates the eventual outcome. Destruction of Jerusalem will terminate those insufferable sacred days, days of pretense and treachery, lacking any correlation with the goal of creating sacred time.

Later, the prophet Jeremiah denounces Jerusalem for a more direct violation of sacred time – their violation of the Sabbath:

So says God: "Guard your souls and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day and bring them in the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day and do no

² See also the corrupt actions of the High Priest's sons, as they feign service to God in the *Mishkan* (*II Samuel 2:12-17, 22*). These abuses, committed in the sacred precinct, lead to the dismantling of the *Mishkan* in Shiloh. During the continuation of Jeremiah's prophetic rebuke (*Jeremiah 7:14*), he indeed evokes Shiloh's destruction to illustrate divine intolerance and the ruinous consequences for defiling the sacred space.

work. Sanctify the Sabbath day as I have commanded your fathers.” And they did not listen and they did not incline their ears and they hardened their necks not to listen and not to accept rebuke... “And if you do not listen to me to sanctify the Sabbath day and not to bear a burden and come [with it] into the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, I will set fire to her gates and it will consume the palaces of Jerusalem and not be extinguished.” (*Jeremiah 17:21-23, 27*)

According to Jeremiah, God cautioned the people that He would destroy Jerusalem if they do not observe the Sabbath properly. Following the implementation of this punishment, God fittingly obliterates all memory of holidays and Sabbath from Zion. This is a deserved punishment for an errant population, who have willfully disregarded observance of these sacred days.

Finally, the verse portrays God’s rejection of His own anointed leaders, those imbued with extra sanctity and charged with the task of preserving and facilitating the sanctity of the nation.³ Prophets regularly condemn the kings and priests who fail to observe God’s law and properly care for His Temple:

Like the shame of the thief who has been caught, so is the house of Israel shamed, they, their **kings**, their officers, their **priests** and their prophets. (*Jeremiah 2:26*)

In that time, says God, the bones of the **kings** of Judah... and the bones of the **priests**... will be removed from their graves. And they will be exposed to the sun and to the moon and to all of the hosts of heaven, whom they loved and worshipped and followed and sought and bowed to ... (*Jeremiah 8:1-2*)

Characterized by backslides and blunders, Judah’s leadership has led the nation further into religious disarray. God scorns and punishes this leadership, whose lack of religious integrity and guidance leaves the nation in shambles.

This succinct verse succeeds in depleting the holy city of its official frameworks for maintaining sanctity. God’s rejection goes beyond the sinful people and her corrupt city. Divine repudiation cuts to the very core of the sacrosanct status of the city; God eliminates the city’s holiness, draining the city of its celebrated role as “Jerusalem, the city of holiness” (e.g. *Isaiah 48:2, 52:1*).

³ See Ibn Ezra’s commentary on *Eikha* 2:6, who explains that ideally, “the priest teaches the commandments and the king guards the Torah with his strength, and to these two were given the Torah.”

An Obscure Metaphor: Stripping the Sukka like a Garden

Deriving from the word *sekhakh*, meaning thickets or boughs (often woven together to cover or protect), a *sukka* is a hut or a booth that functions as a temporary shelter.⁴ This shelter may be for cattle (e.g. *Bereishit* 33:17), warriors (*II Samuel* 11:11), field hands (*Isaiah* 1:8), or travelers (*Vayikra* 23:43; *Jonah* 4:5). Popularly, the *sukka* is better known as the temporary lodging (with a woven protective covering of boughs, known as *sekhakh*) that God commands Israel to live in during the festival of Sukkot (*Vayikra* 23:42).

The word *sukko* contains a possessive pronoun, meaning God's *sukka*, or perhaps the *sukka* that God offers to His people. In this schema, it may refer to the Temple, as a place that offers shelter both to individuals seeking refuge under God's auspices (*Tehillim* 27:5) and generally to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who are shielded by God's Presence (*Tehillim* 76:3). *Eikha* 2:6 resonates with tragic irony, referring to the ravaged Temple as God's *sukkah* (*sukko*), a word that connotes God's protective function.⁵ No longer can God's Temple function as a shelter, as it falls victim to the collective tragedy that God has brought upon Judah.

An additional advantage to employing the word *sukka* here may be its double meaning – its association with both the Temple and the festival. God demolishes his *sukka* at the same time that He quashes celebration of the festivals, sabotaging Jerusalem's festive and hallowed ambience.

Stripping it Like a Garden: *Va-Yachmos*

The rarer verbal form of the word *chamas* (violence, see e.g. *Bereishit* 6:11; 49:5) means to act violently (e.g. *Jeremiah* 22:3).⁶ The sole biblical verse in which this vigorous verb modifies God's actions is here, lending special force to God's violence in this verse.⁷ In *Jeremiah* 13:22, the verbal form appears parallel to the word *gala*, meaning to reveal or expose. That is why I have translated here (like many translators), "And He stripped."⁸

⁴ BDB, pp. 606-697.

⁵ Rashi and Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 2:6 explain that *sukko* refers to the Temple. This seems to be the simple meaning of the word in this verse.

⁶ BDB, p. 329.

⁷ Based on this, Moshkovitz, p.12, suggests that we translate, "And He did violence to (destroyed) His *sukkah* like a garden." In this reading, the metaphor of the garden is even more obscure. Why would a garden be an object slated for destruction?

⁸ See Ibn Ezra's commentary on *Eikha* 2:6, where he translates in this way. See also R. Yosef Ibn Janach in his *Sefer Shorashim* on the word *chamas*.

But what does it mean to strip the Temple as one strips a garden? This metaphor lacks a clear meaning. Rashi explains that just as one plucks the vegetables from a garden, so God ransacks His Temple.⁹ While this particular metaphor does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, the Bible does often compare Israel's destruction to the devastation of a place that grows produce. Consider, for example, Isaiah's parable of Israel as a vineyard, meant to yield grapes and fine wine (*Isaiah* 5:1-7). Once the vineyard betrays its owner, the owner removes its protective gates, exposing it to animals and the elements, which destroy the vineyard and its produce. Likewise, Micah threatens that Zion will be like a ploughed field (*Micah* 3:12), and Jeremiah (12:10) warns that shepherds will destroy God's vineyard (again, a metaphor for His nation) and trample His field, rendering it a desolate wilderness.

On the simplest level, this metaphor suggests that God pillages the Temple, emptying it of all items, large and small. More significantly, the removal of produce from the garden evokes the Temple's life-giving functions, the manner in which its religious rituals provide food for the soul. Just as the garden without its fruits is no longer beneficial, so too, the ransacked Temple has lost its usefulness. Finally, it is possible that this alludes to the actual plundering of Jerusalem's food as the catastrophe unfolds. The result is hunger in Jerusalem, a prominent theme in the latter half of this chapter.

In the previous reading, the garden simply refers to a place that grows produce. Invariably, however, a biblical reference to a garden, especially in an obscure passage such as this, suggests an association with *the* Garden, namely the Garden of Eden:¹⁰

And he stripped his *sukka* like a garden... R. Shimon bar Nachmani said: Like Adam Ha-Rishon, as it says "And He expelled the man... (*Bereishit* 3)." (*Eikha Rabba* [Vilna] 2:10).

In several salient ways, the Temple mirrors the Garden of Eden, a sacred locus that contains a concentrated experience of God's immanent presence.¹¹ Constituting both a privilege and a responsibility, retaining God's intimate

⁹ See *Job* 15:33, as cited by Rashi and others.

¹⁰ Similarly, rabbinic commentary tends to interpret the references to an unidentified garden in *Shir Ha-Shirim* as allusions to the Garden of Eden. See e.g. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 14; *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 5:1; *Bamidbar Rabba* 13:2.

¹¹ *Tehillim* 36:8-9 suggests this connection by paralleling the word *eden* (which literally means refreshing) with a reference to God's house. See also *Ezekiel* 28:13-20. Perhaps the most obvious connection are the cherubs, which are associated exclusively with both the garden and the Temple in the Bible. For further development on this topic, see my article in Hebrew, "The Return to Gan Eden in *Shir Ha-Shirim*" *Be-Chag Ha-Matzot* (Tevunot: Alon Shevut, 2015), pp. 336-338. For more on this topic in English, see Ellen Frances Davis, "Reading the Song Iconographically," in *Scrolls of Love* (Fordham University: New York, 2006), pp. 172-184.

presence requires humans to exercise vigilance and obedience to God's Will. Disobedience to God precipitates divine anger and expulsion from God's proximity. Indeed, rabbinic literature often parallels the expulsion from the Garden with the Babylonian expulsion from the Temple and the land:

Everything that happened to Adam Ha-Rishon happened also to Israel. God brought Adam Ha-Rishon into Gan Eden and commanded him. [Adam] transgressed, and [God] sentenced him to ejection and expulsion, lamenting over him "*Eikha!*" "And [God] said to him, 'Where are you (*ayekha*)?'" (*Bereishit* 3:9).¹² From where do we know that He sentenced him to expulsion (*geirushin*)? As it is written, "And he expelled (*va-yigaresh*) the man (Adam)" (*Bereishit* 3:24). From where do we know that He judges him with ejection (*shiluchin*)? As it is written, "And God ejected him (*va-yishalcheihu*)" (*Bereishit* 3:23). Likewise, God did to Israel. He brought them into the land of Israel... and He commanded them and said to them, "This is what you shall do, so that you will live, and this is what you shall not do."¹³ And they transgressed His commands and He sentenced them to ejection and expulsion, as it says, "From My house I will expel them (*agaresheim*)" (*Hosea* 9:15). And He sentenced them to ejection (*shiluchin*), as it says, "Eject (*shalach*) from in front of me and they will exit" (*Jeremiah* 15:1), and He lamented over them, "*Eikha!*" "How does the city sit lonely (*Eikha* 1:1). (*Eikha Zuta* [Buber] 1:39)

In its use of the word garden in this obscure metaphor, *Eikha* 2:6 subtly alludes to the disastrous end of the original story in which humankind resided in its idyllic Garden, a story that anticipates and foreshadows the destruction of the Temple.

¹² This *midrash* is based on the orthographic equivalence between the word *eikha* and the word *ayekha*. In our discussion of *Eikha* 1:1, we saw a different *midrash* (*Eikha Rabba* [Vilna] 1:1) that was likewise based on the orthographic correspondence between these words.

¹³ This is not a direct citation of a biblical passage, although it echoes *Bamidbar* 4:19. (See also *Bereishit* 42:18, where a similar phrase appears, but God is not the speaker and Israel is not the addressee!) The passage in *Ezekiel* 18:9-32 reflects this general notion, although not the words.