

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #27: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:9

טָבְעוּ בְּאֶרֶץ שְׁעָרֶיהָ
אֶבֶד וְשֹׁבֵר בְּרִיחֶיהָ

מִלְכָּה וְשָׂרֵיהָ בְּגוֹיִם
אֵין תּוֹרָה

גַּם־נְבִיאֶיהָ
לֹא־מָצְאוּ חֵזוֹן מִיְקוֹק

**Her gates sunk into the ground
He [God] shattered and destroyed her locks¹**

**Her king and officers are amongst the nations
There is no instruction**

**Even her prophets
Have not found a vision from God**

After eight active verses of destruction, God begins to recede into the background. The physical city has been obliterated, Jerusalem's gates sunk deeply into the ground, her defensive fortifications annihilated. Having completed His task, God issues one final blow, shattering the locks of the city, rendering her exposed and defenseless. God exits the scene, abandoning Jerusalem to her fate, with no further instruction. The verse closes by focusing our attention upon the loss of direction or guidance for the nation. Bereft of political leadership,

¹ See Ibn Ezra, who notes that God is the subject of this sentence.

religious instruction,² or prophetic visions, Jerusalem's inhabitants appear rudderless and disoriented.

Ein Torah

This verse describes the termination of divine communication, the cessation of prophetic visions.³ God will not instruct, He will not rebuke, and He will not comfort. This absence of divine direction likely comes as a startling blow to the brash nation, who confidently proclaimed that they can plot against the prophet Jeremiah without concern that it will impede their ability to obtain divine guidance: "For instruction will not desist from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor a word from the prophet" (*Jeremiah* 18:18). The nation should have known better than to assume this with their characteristic aplomb; after all, God has cut off communication with His nation in the past (*Judges* 10:14; *I Samuel* 3:1). Moreover, God's dire threat that He will discontinue contact with the errant nation rings ominously throughout the prophets (e.g. *Amos* 8:11-12; *Micah* 3:6), and particularly during the period prior to the *churban* (*Jeremiah* 7:16; 11:14; 14:11;⁴ *Ezekiel* 7:26⁵). The terrible calamity of this verse is far from unexpected.

In a different interpretation of the verse, the Targum suggests that the phrase "*ein torah*," constitutes an explanation for the catastrophic situation:

Her king and officers were exiled amongst the nation **because they did not guard the words of the Torah.** (Targum *Eikha* 2:9).

Prompted by the word *torah*, which literally means general instruction but tends to refer to the canonized Pentateuch, the Targum assigns blame to the leaders for their own exile.⁶ Indeed, biblical passages often describe the misdemeanors of Judah's kings and officers, whose errant behavior leads to their own downfall.⁷ Directing our attention to the behavior of the leadership also serves to deflect attention from the nation, who flail helplessly in the wake of the leaders' religious failings.

² The word "*torah*" simply means "instruction," but often refers to the Pentateuch, which contains religious directives. For this reason, many traditional commentaries interpret the word here as a specific reference to the Pentateuch or God's commandments, as we will see.

³ For a similar description, see *Tehillim* 74:9.

⁴ While these three verses in *Jeremiah* specifically describe God refusing to listen to Jeremiah's prayer, this appears to be a step toward cutting off communication. See *Jeremiah* 42:7, where God's response to Jeremiah's petition taken ten full days.

⁵ See Radak on *Ezekiel* 7:26, who compares the verse in *Ezekiel* to *Eikha* 2:9.

⁶ Rashi adopts this reading. Ibn Ezra suggests that the phrase "*ein Torah*" is a consequence of the calamity (as I have suggested above). However, Ibn Ezra maintains that the Torah is not general instruction, but the actual Torah scroll that the king wrote and carried with him at all times. According to this reading, when the king went into exile, he did so without the royal Torah scroll, a tragic and symbolic punishment.

⁷ While examples abound, especially in the narratives of the books of *Kings*, the prophet Jeremiah is especially concerned with the behavior of sinful kings and officers (see e.g. *Jeremiah* 1:18-19; 2:26; 37:16.)

Eikha 2:10

יִשְׁבוּ לָאָרֶץ
 יִדְמוּ זִקְנֵי בֵּית־צִיּוֹן

הֶעֱלוּ עֶפְרַיִם עַל־רֹאשָׁם
 סָגְרוּ שִׁקְיִים

הוֹרִידוּ לָאָרֶץ רֹאשָׁן
 בְּתוֹלֵת יְרוּשָׁלַם

**They sit on the ground
 The elders of the daughter of Zion fall still**

**They raise dust upon their heads
 They put on sackcloth**

**They bow their heads down to the ground
 The maidens of Jerusalem**

Frenetic destruction ends. The swirl of violent verbs ceases and the tempo slows. As the loud clatter of destruction settles, silence envelops the desolate city. This brief sketch of Zion's human figures focuses on the overwhelming despair, fatigue, and grief that has engulfed the city's inhabitants. In what appears to be sluggish motion (especially in contrast to the dynamism of the previous verses), the elders silently place dust on their heads and clothe themselves in sackcloth. Vibrant young women wanly incline to the earth, soiling their heads in dull imitation of their grief-stricken elders. As grave as the elders, the maidens' dispiritedness drains the scene of the potential vitality of youth, of optimism and hope. Young and old join, an unlikely alliance, drawn together to mourn the city's destruction.

Yidemu

The word *yidemu* (which I translated, "to fall still") connotes paralysis, a person stunned. This word can refer specifically to the cessation of speech (e.g. *Tehillim* 4:5; 30:13) or movement (see e.g. *Joshua* 10:12-13; *Iyyov* 31:34).⁸ In our verse, the word *yidemu* suggests the mourning and helplessness of the elders. What, in fact, can they say or do? Consolation is elusive, and wisdom is not forthcoming; words fail them, and actions have no effect. The silence of the elders recapitulates the absence of instruction described in the previous verse. Plunged in silence, these verses illustrate the ineffectiveness of Judah's leaders following the destruction.

Some scholars understand the word *yidemu* in an opposite sense, meaning to

⁸ See BDB, pp. 198-199.

howl and wail in lament.⁹ In this reading, the next verse (verse 11), describing the result of Jerusalem's abundant tears, follows directly from this one, which records the wails of the elders. The keening of the elders is accompanied by other formal gestures of mourning, such as sitting on the ground, placing dust on one's head, and donning sackcloth.¹⁰

This is the first description of formal acts of mourning in the book. Chapter 1 portrayed general tears and grief, but until there is a respite from the calamities that rage, the nation cannot properly process the grief or respond accordingly. Now that God has halted his unremittingly assault on the city, its inhabitants can begin mourning, contemplate their loss, and attend to their bereavement. Nevertheless, *Eikha* does not dwell on mourning. It will soon turn its attention to the clamorous theological questions that attend the destruction of the city.

Earth and Dust

The elders sit on the ground (similar to *Job* 2:12; *II Samuel* 13:31; *Joshua* 7:6; *Ezekiel* 26:16), indicating their exhaustion, their humiliation, and their degradation. Contact with the earth soils the respectable elders, who add to their filth by rubbing dust (*afar*) upon their heads.¹¹

The earth, and especially the dust (*afar*), recall both the creation of humans and humankind's inescapable mortality. God informed Adam, "For you are dust (*afar*) and to dust (*afar*) you shall return" (*Bereishit* 3:19). Contemplating the tragic fate of humans, mourners sag and sink downward, surrendering to nature's inevitable pull. The maidens perform a similar movement, inclining their heads towards the ground in pain, shame, and submission. Strikingly, redemption involves the opposite movement: "Shake yourself, arise from the dust (*afar*), captives¹² of Jerusalem!" (*Isaiah* 52:2), and, "Therefore he lifts up his head!" (*Tehillim* 110:7).

Situated on the ground, the city's inhabitants once again merge with its physical structures, as humans mimic the downward spiral of the city (verse 2) and her gates, which have plunged deeply into the earth (verse 9). The merger between city and people works in both directions: The metaphor animates material edifices with human characteristics (as previously noted), and simultaneously

⁹ Like the Akkadian word *damamu* (BDB, p. 199). See also *Isaiah* 23:1-2, 6, and Berlin, *Lamentations* pp. 71-72.

¹⁰ While many of the characteristic behaviors associated with mourning do appear, others do not. Shoes are not removed, clothes are not ripped, and no one fasts. (Of course, it makes little sense to fast when the city is beset by famine.) In fact, ceremonial mourning does not obtain a central role in this book, which will soon turn to the more important matter of considering God's role in these events.

¹¹ For other scenarios in which mourners rub dirt on their head, see *Joshua* 7:6; *I Samuel* 4:12; *II Samuel* 1:2; 15:32; *Ezekiel* 27:30; *Job* 2:12.

¹² In translating the word *shevi* as captives, I have followed Radak's explanation, which I believe fits best in the context of the verse. Targum, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra translate this word with the meaning, "to sit."

stifles human qualities by likening them to the inanimate city. This dehumanization of Jerusalem's inhabitants suggests that without their city, the human population no longer function as animate beings. Elders and maidens alike lack the human drive to continue to live, breathe, and energize their surroundings, replicating the abject movement of their disgraced city.

In Summation: 2:1-10

God enters the first half of this chapter as a dynamic force, fiercely and systematically destroying Jerusalem. Crashing sounds echo loudly, as the city splinters and shatters before our eyes. God is the enemy in this section (*Eikha* 2:4-5), purposefully demolishing His once beloved city. The third person narrative seems to adopt a detached demeanor, introducing a frightening depiction of God, as He methodically dismantles Jerusalem. Clouded by His anger (described six times in *Eikha* 2:1-5), God's resolve to punish His city does not abate. The destruction of Jerusalem is no human affair; Jerusalem is not the arbitrary victim of political happenstance, but a victim of its own sins and God's subsequent verdict.

Synonyms abound; verbs vie with one another to describe God's assault. God throws, swallows, destroys, kills, strips, spurns, plans, and shatters. Blows come from every direction, from every angle, battering the city unremittingly. Jerusalem cowers, crumbles, and collapses; the edifices of the city lie prostrate on the ground, no longer standing, no longer majestic, erect, or proud.

The chapter refers to a variety of Jerusalem's physical structures. Nothing is spared; habitations, fortifications, palaces, rampart, walls. Destruction rains down on Jerusalem. Everywhere you turn, Jerusalem's buildings teeter and collapse. The final blow comes when the gates plunge underground, leaving no outward indication that they ever existed. The chapter pays special attention to the Temple, dwelling on the destruction of its different parts (altar, sanctuary). Various terms portray different aspects of the Temple; it is termed God's footstool, Israel's glory, God's *sukka*, His meeting place, and the house of God.¹³

Destruction seems to go in the wrong direction. The actual Babylonian attack surely began at the external perimeter of the city, breaking the locks, shattering the gate, and breaching the wall. Most likely, it then proceeded into the city, reaching the Temple at its core only after destroying the bulk of the city. Nevertheless, the chapter proceeds in the opposite manner. God refuses to pity His footstool in the opening verse. Demolition of the city continues outward (but repeatedly returning to the terrible sights of the destroyed Temple) until it reaches the external walls, gate and lock. Rejecting a chronological approach to destruction, the chapter chooses instead to focus on the heart of the crisis, opening with the most critical event. The Temple, the sacred center of the relationship between God and His people, lies in ruins, leaving the people dismayed and shocked, hopeless and floundering. Physical destruction reflects the disruption of the relationship between God and His people; the section ends with the severance of all communication between them.

¹³ Not all of these terms necessarily refer to the Temple. Nevertheless, each of these terms do refer to the Temple in other biblical passages. The Temple is termed Israel's glory (*tifarteinu*) in *Isaiah* 64:10, "God's *sukka*" in *Tehillim* 76:3, and God's footstool in *Tehillim* 132:7.

Loss of relationship with God is compounded by the dysfunction of Israel's leadership. This section repeatedly focuses on the leaders. King (2,3,6,9), officers (2,9), priests (3,6), and prophets (9) fall victim during Jerusalem's destruction. Yet they are not quite innocent victims, for they shoulder responsibility for the sinful nation. Prophets often rebuke Judah's leaders for their spiritual deficiencies as well as their ineffective leadership, who fail to guide Jerusalem to avoid her unfortunate fate. This loss of authority nevertheless leaves Judah flailing, with no one to direct the people, to alleviate their pain, or to help them to rehabilitate.

By focusing on the leaders, this chapter overlooks (but does not deny) the responsibility of the general populace. Although the chapter does not yet suggest that the righteous and innocent have suffered wrongly (*tzaddik ve-ra lo*), this focus on the leaders leaves room for that claim to arise in the second half of the chapter. After all, if the leaders shoulder responsibility for the calamity, why should others suffer the same fate as them?