YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

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**PLEASE PRAY FOR A REFUA SHELEIMA FOR OUR ALUMNUS
CHAIM BINYAMIN BEN RIVKA HINDA, RABBI CHAIM STRAUCHLER,**

**INJURED BADLY IN A CYCLING ACCIDENT.**

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**Shiur #28: Eikha Chapter 2** (continued)

**Eikha 2:11-12**

**כָּל֨וּ בַדְּמָע֤וֹת עֵינַי֙**

**חֳמַרְמְר֣וּ מֵעַ֔י**

 **נִשְׁפַּ֤ךְ לָאָ֙רֶץ֙ כְּבֵדִ֔י**

 **עַל־שֶׁ֖בֶר בַּת־עַמִּ֑י**

 **בֵּֽעָטֵ֤ף עוֹלֵל֙ וְיוֹנֵ֔ק**

 **בִּרְחֹב֖וֹת קִרְיָֽה**

**לְאִמֹּתָם֙ יֹֽאמְר֔וּ**

 **אַיֵּ֖ה דָּגָ֣ן וָיָ֑יִן**

 **בְּהִֽתְעַטְּפָ֤ם כֶּֽחָלָל֙**

**בִּרְחֹב֣וֹת עִ֔יר**

 **בְּהִשְׁתַּפֵּ֣ךְ נַפְשָׁ֔ם**

 **אֶל־חֵ֖יק אִמֹּתָֽם**

**My eyes are drained from tears**

**My innards churn**

**My liver spills to the ground**

**Because of the brokenness of the Daughter of my Nation**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**As the child and suckling faint**

**In the streets of the metropolis**

**To their mothers they say,**

**“Where is grain and wine?”**

**As they faint like corpses**

**In the streets of the city**

**As they spill out their souls**

**In their mother’s bosoms.**

The second part of this chapter shifts noticeably from an objective, detached third-person description of a ravaged city to a first-person description of human casualties. Jerusalem now tells the story not of ravaged buildings, but of human victims, of the brokenness of her nation.[[2]](#footnote-2) She focuses particularly upon the poignant image of the children collapsed in the street, seeking food, and finally expiring in their mother’s arms. This is not an emotionally neutral image; passion replaces dispassion as children emerge as the focus instead of the buildings. The enormous human tragedy comes sharply into focus.

The personified Jerusalem alludes to her physical ailments, describing her eyes, her roiling internal organs, and her liver spilled gruesomely on the ground.[[3]](#footnote-3) This self-depiction connotes the depletion of Jerusalem’s energy and strength. Her breakdown is also physical; Jerusalem churns, she spills her innards – buildings and people – outside of her walls. This depiction viscerally describes the upheaval, exile, and demise of the city’s population. Jerusalem has been devitalized, emptied of her critical constituents. Just as a human cannot continue to exist without its inner organs, Jerusalem cannot survive without her inhabitants.

To compound the equation between the disembowelment of the city and her inhabitants’ demise, the verb *shafakh* (to spill out) appears twice in these two verses. The first time it describes Jerusalem’s innards spilling on the ground (*nishpakh*). The same verb again appears (*be-hishtapeikh*) to describe the death of the children, who expire (“spill out their souls”) as they lay cradled in their mothers’ bosoms.[[4]](#footnote-4) Once again, we observe how the city merges with her inhabitants, their fates intertwine, and their separate identities blur as the misfortune of the city and the people fuse. Their destinies inextricably linked, Jerusalem’s fortune corresponds with that of her nation. Thus, Israel prays for the restoration of Jerusalem and a rebuilt Jerusalem promises a propitious era for the nation.

***Kalu Va-Dema’ot Einai:* Blindness or Paralysis?**

**Tears that Blind**

Similar to previous passages, *Eikha* 2:11 appears to feature Jerusalem’s tears. *Eikha* 1:2 depicted Jerusalem crying throughout the eerie night, isolated in her agony, as her unwiped tears remain on her cheeks. Most scholars read our verse similarly, understanding the verb *kalu* with the meaning to destroy.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this reading, Jerusalem bemoans the ruin of her eyes, damaged by the tears that have flowed since the opening of the book. Copious amounts of tears harm her eyes, rendering them useless. This image of the destruction of Jerusalem’s eyes as they spill over with tears coheres with the portrayal of her innards spilling out. Both images suggest the undoing of Jerusalem’s physical self; Jerusalem unravels, and she no longer functions.

The idea of Jerusalem losing her eyesight maintains special resonance. Blindness, after all, suggests lack of insight or comprehension and may be a fitting consequence for Jerusalem’s spiritual blindness. Lack of sight, however, contains a disguised blessing. After all, does Jerusalem wish to continue to glimpse the scenes of horror that swirl around her? Perhaps it is better for her tears to liquidate her vision, thereby saving herself the pain of viewing the children’s demise.

**The Absence of Tears**

Jerusalem’s vision does not, however, appear to be impaired in the continuation of these verses. She vividly describes the fainting of the children, the way in which they languish on the street corners. Is Jerusalem reporting from memory, or does she continue to describe that which she sees with her own eyes?

Perhaps the verb *kalu* means completion.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although the prepositional letter attached to the word tears (***va****-demaot*) becomes somewhat awkward in this translation, it may be that Jerusalem describes the cessation of her tears: “My eyes have stopped [shedding] tears.” In this reading, Jerusalem has no more tears, no more strength for crying.[[7]](#footnote-7) This represents a new phase in her reaction to the horror. Paralyzed by the sights, Jerusalem becomes numb, unable to respond emotionally any longer.

Events later in the chapter bear out this reading.[[8]](#footnote-8) In verses 18-19, the narrator turns directly to Jerusalem,[[9]](#footnote-9) pleading with her to cry, to sob, to spill out her tears before God. These verses imply that Jerusalem has discontinued her wails – an act of withdrawal already indicated by our verse. Abrupt cessation of tears implies Jerusalem’s newfound numbness, her inexorable slide into a dull, impassive stupor, caused by a deliberate stoppage of emotion.

**Death of the Children**

Jerusalem’s initial observations settle upon the wretched children, presenting a dramatic close-up of their slow and excruciating death. First they collapse and languish, then they plead (to no avail), feebly flail, and finally they expire, taking their final breaths in their mother’s arms. A palpable and poignant spectacle, Jerusalem even allows us to eavesdrop on the actual entreaty of the dying child for food. These intense images elicit an emotional response from the reader, who cannot remain detached witnesses of a distant event. Instead, the reader vividly experiences the horror of watching as a child utters his final words before dying of starvation, as he lies cradled in his mother’s helpless arms.

Jerusalem’s focus on the children functions both as a metaphor and as a literal image. On the metaphoric level, *Eikha* cast Jerusalem in the role of mother, with Judah’s population assuming the role of her children (e.g. *Eikha* 1:5, 18). In this context, Jerusalem is the one who experiences the excruciating pain of the mother, as she impotently bears witness to the suffering and death of her beloved children, her populace.

Nonetheless, the scene of the mothers and children appears genuine, a concrete description of actual interactions. Jerusalem fixates upon the flailing children, omitting the starvation of the rest of Jerusalem’s population. Was not the entire city suffering from the siege? Perhaps Jerusalem notices the children first because the weak and small children are the first to die of malnourishment. For now, they may be the only ones dying on Jerusalem’s streets. It is more likely, however, that Jerusalem’s attention rests on the children because their suffering exacts an immense emotional toll. The agonizing picture of children expiring in their mother's arms as they beg for a morsel of food is appalling. The death of children is unnatural and bewildering. Children should outlive their parents. Their demise spells the loss of the future, the loss of name, continuity, and hope.

Finally, Jerusalem cultivates the image of the suffering children because it draws our attention to the theological core of this chapter – namely, the sense of profound confusion that it produces. Children, especially babes and infants, cannot incur blame. By painting a portrait of innocent victims, of the righteous that suffer inexplicably (*tzaddik* *ve-ra* *lo*), this chapter presents the atrocities as incomprehensible.

This theological problem surfaces repeatedly in this chapter, constituting its primary thesis. Unlike the previous chapter, chapter 2 features the manner in which humans suffer for inexplicable reasons; commoners are swept into the penalty incurred by their leaders and children die without having lived long enough to be culpable for their actions.

Jerusalem uses a strong verb (*hamarmaru*) to describe her ferment and the agitation of her innards (*mei’ai*). In the previous chapter, Jerusalem employed an identical phrase to describe the churning of her innards (*Eikha* 1:20: *mei’ai* *hamarmaru*). Appearing in two consecutive chapters, this rare phrase draws our attention to the different theological conclusions of each of these chapters. In chapter 1, Jerusalem’s anguish derives from her rebellion against God (*Eikha* 1:20): “Look, God, for I am anguished, my insides churn, my heart turns over within me, *for I have surely rebelled*!” Jerusalem turns directly to God in a desperate plea to find reconciliation despite her transgressions. This attitude characterizes that chapter, which moves steadily toward accountability and confession. In chapter 2, Jerusalem does not direct her address to God and does not assume responsibility for the catastrophe. Instead, she describes her physical and emotional turbulence, caused by the terrible sights of her shattered people and the blameless suffering children.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Mothers and Infants**

These verses do not solely focus on the children. Verse 12 begins and ends with the mothers; the lexical placement of the word *imotam* illustrates the manner in which the mothers enfold their dying children. Mothers are expected to surround their children, to shield them protectively from all harm, including (perhaps especially) starvation. Infants cannot obtain food on their own; they rely on others. Under normal circumstances, mothers take responsibility for their children’s welfare. Indeed, maternal instinct lies at the core of human compassion.[[11]](#footnote-11) Even when humanity fails to maintain social cohesiveness, mothers continue to sustain their children. The failure of the mothers here suggests the severity of the situation. If the mothers cannot save their children from starvation, there must be no food left; food supplies are surely depleted from the storehouses.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, we will see that this chapter later records the violation of the norm of maternal compassion. Mothers consume their children, rather than protect and nurture them (*Eikha* 2:20). Perhaps the mothers in our verse are not as innocent as they seem. While we suggested that the mothers in 2:12 simply cannot provide food in response to their children’s pleas, it is possible that they actually deny their final stores to their own children. The death of the children in their mother’s bosom (*cheik* *imotam*) hints to the possibility that their mothers do not nurse them.[[13]](#footnote-13) This reading is supported by the word *yonek* (suckling), used to describe the child. While it is possible that their milk has dried up for lack of nourishment, it is also possible that the mothers simply refuse to nourish their children, as this would deplete them of their own vital resources. This foreshadows the mothers’ cannibalistic behavior described at the conclusion of the chapter (2:20). These verses also prepare us for the cruel Judean mothers in *Eikha* 4:3-4, who refuse to suckle their infants. These images depict the dissolution of compassion, the failure of maternal instinct to nurture, which results in the horrific death of the hapless children.

**Chiasms and the Children in the Streets**

Verses 11-12 form the epicenter of chapter 2. Just as we saw in the previous chapter, these two middle verses contain a linguistic chiasm.[[14]](#footnote-14) Verse 11 describes Jerusalem’s innards spilling to the ground (*nishpakh*) as she observes the children languishing (*be*-*atef*) on the streets (*be*-*rechovot*) of the metropolis. Verse 12 depicts the continuation of Jerusalem’s contemplation of the miserable children in reverse linguistic order, as they languish (*be-hitatefam*) like corpses in the streets (*be-rechovot*) of the city, as they spill out (*be-hishtapeckh*) their souls in the bosom of their mother:

**נִשְׁפַּ֤ךְ** לָאָ֙רֶץ֙ כְּבֵדִ֔י...

**בֵּֽעָטֵ֤ף** עוֹלֵל֙ וְיוֹנֵ֔ק **בִּרְחֹב֖וֹת** קִרְיָֽה

...**בְּהִֽתְעַטְּפָ֤ם** כֶּֽחָלָל֙ **בִּרְחֹב֣וֹת** עִ֔יר

**בְּהִשְׁתַּפֵּ֣ךְ** נַפְשָׁ֔ם אֶל־חֵ֖יק אִמֹּתָֽם

The chiasm at the focal point of the chapter draws attention to its central idea: the appalling death of the children. The chiasm also draws our attention to the parallel that it constructs. Jerusalem’s spilling of her liver on the ground parallels the children spilling out their lives in their mother’s bosom. City and people surrender to their fate, returning their lives to its origin.

Appearing twice in rapid succession at the focal point of the chapter, the predominant image of the chapter sears itself into the reader’s mind and soul. The chaotic scene features vulnerable youngsters, whose lives ebb away in the public streets of the city.[[15]](#footnote-15) They lack food and shelter. No one can aid the children; neither their family nor their society has the resources or the aspiration to keep them alive.

This bleak scenario calls for rectification. Streets crammed with children, the future of Israel, swaying and fainting, falling, flailing and expiring. Will Jerusalem’s streets ever again overflow with young people, with sounds of joy, with a promising optimism? The prophet Zechariah offers a vision that consciously echoes the dismal picture of *Eikha*, replacing the wretched picture with a delightful one, in which Jerusalem’s streets fill with the sights of the dignified elders and the joy-filled sounds of the playful youth:

So says God: Once again, elderly men and women will sit in the streets (*be-rechovot*) of Jerusalem, and each person will have a staff in his hand because of his advanced years. And the streets (*rechovot*) of the city will fill with boys and girls playing in the streets (*be-rechovoteha*). (*Zecharia* 8:4-5)[[16]](#footnote-16)

When read within the broader canon, it becomes clear that the calamity of *Eikha* will be rectified; Judah will return from exile, rebuild her city, and reassume the charge of the nation of Israel. Jerusalem’s destruction and the exile of her inhabitants is not the end of the story. Biblical history continues, illustrating Israel’s remarkable fortitude and reaffirming God’s ongoing covenantal commitment to His nation.

1. Jeremiah uses similar phraseology (*shever* *bat* *ammi*) in several contexts in his prophecies (see e.g. *Jeremiah* 8:11, 21). *Jeremiah* 14:17 employs this phrase in a very similar linguistic and thematic context to *Eikha* 2:11-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The chapter does not specifically identify the first person speaker as Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that the speaker is God or the prophet, who identifies strongly with Israel’s pain (see e.g. Gerstenberger, pp. 487-489; O. Kaiser, p. 143; House, *Lamentations*, p. 385). Others maintain that this is the narrator, who shifts into first-person after he concludes his third-person narration of Jerusalem’s destruction (e.g. Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 67, 72; Moshkovitz, *Eikha*, p. 14). I find these approaches unlikely, considering God’s hostile role in the chapter, and especially due to the first-person speaker’s angry address to an adversarial God in 2:20-22. While the anonymous voice here may be the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah’s role in the book is strikingly absent. It is more likely that, similar to the last chapter, *Eikha* offers Jerusalem the opportunity to speak in the second half of the chapter. This allows Jerusalem to represent the emotional perspective of the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a similar description, see *Job* 16:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In several biblical passages, this phrase (*shefokh* *nefesh*) means to pour out their profound distress (*I Samuel* 1:15; *Tehillim* 42:5). The context here nevertheless suggests that this is a physical image of the children’s lives draining from them, as they take their final breaths in their mother’s bosom. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g. Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 136; Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 32; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 63; House, *Lamentations*, p. 368; O’ Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 36; Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 142. In my translation above, I do not adopt this meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 10, translates: “My eyes are spent with tears.” I have adopted a similar meaning in my translation above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Tehillim* 69:4 contains an identical phrase (*kalu* *einai*). Exhausted by a sense of imminent annihilation, the narrator describes his weariness, the failure of his voice and the cessation of his eyes (*kalu* *einai*) while he waits for an answer from God. It is unclear whether the eyes fail to give sight or to proffer tears, preventing us from drawing any direct conclusion from this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Significantly, the verse that begins with the letter *ayin* in our chapter (2:17) contains no reference to eyes. This seemingly insignificant omission becomes glaringly important when viewed in comparison to the other chapters of the book. The *ayin* verses of both chapters 1 and 4 (1:17, 4:17) contain an explicit reference to eyes. Two out of the three *ayin* verses in the triple acrostic of chapter 3 open with the word *eini* (my eyes), and the middle verses refers to God’s sight. Even in chapter 5, which lacks an acrostic but still retains the 22 verse structure, what would have been the *ayin* verse (5:17) intriguingly contains the word *eineinu* (our eyes). Perhaps the omission of the eyes from the *ayin* verse in our chapter suggests that they have ceased their function. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Literally, “the wall of the daughter of Zion.” We will discuss this unusual appellation when we examine *Eikha* 2:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Prophets did, however, repeatedly admonish the people that their fate would devolve upon the children if they refuse to cease their sinning. See, for example, *Jeremiah* 6:11, 9:20; both passages share several notable features with the descriptions in *Eikha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is indicated by the etymological connection between the word *rechem* (womb) and the word *rachamim* (compassion). We will explore this idea at greater length in our examination of *Eikha* 4:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 72, notes that the common (propitious) phrase, “*dagan* *ve-tirosh*,” is replaced here by the children’s unique phrase requesting “*dagan* *va-yayin*.” Berlin suggests that this pair refers to food that can be stored. Thus, the mother’s silence in the aftermath of their children’s plea suggests the depletion of the storehouses. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 2:12, who notes the significance in this verse of the mother’s role as the one who *nurses* the child. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A chiasm is a literary device that involves a crosswise arrangement of words, repeated in reverse order, creating a ring structure (AB B´A´). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Jeremiah* 6:11-14 presciently warns of many aspects of this scenario. See also *Nachum* 3:10, where a similar scenario takes place on the streets of the city of blood, Nineveh. The parallel constructed between the dreadful punishment of Nineveh and Jerusalem does not speak well of Jerusalem’s sins. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This poignant scene was frequently cited by R. Yehuda Amital *z”l*, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion. Having personally witnessed the Holocaust of the Jews of Eastern Europe (including one million children), R. Amital often marveled at the “miracle” of Jewish children thriving and frolicking in the streets of the State of Israel, as prophesied by Zechariah. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)