

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #30: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:15-16

סָפְקוּ עֲלֶיךָ כְּפִימָם
כָּל-עֹבְרֵי דָרֶךְ

שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּנְעוּ רֹאשָׁם
עַל-בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם

הַזֹּאת הַעִיר שִׁיאָמְרוּ
כָּל־לֵיל יִפִּי מְשֹׁשׁ לְכָל-הָאָרֶץ

פָּצוּ עֲלֶיךָ פִּיהֶם
כָּל-אֹיְבֶיךָ

שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּחְרְקוּ-שֵׁן
אָמְרוּ בַלְעֵנוּ

אֶךְ זֶה הַיּוֹם שִׁקְוִיגָהוּ
מִצָּאֵנוּ רְאִינוּ

They clapped their hands at you
All the passersby

They whistled, they wagged their heads
About the daughter of Jerusalem

“Is this the city [about whom] they said,
‘Perfect of beauty, a joy to all the land’?”

They opened their mouths against you
All of your enemies

They whistled, they gnashed their teeth
They said, “We have swallowed!

This is the day for which we waited!
We found it! We saw it!”

As Jerusalem persists in her muteness, the narrator fills the silence by peering outward, scrutinizing the surroundings for reactions to Jerusalem's downfall. Some scholars read these verses as the narrator's continued (futile) search for someone who can heal Jerusalem.¹ More likely, the narrator looks outward because he cannot bear to look inward at the frightful sights that pervade the ruined city.

Two remarkably parallel verses direct our gaze away from Jerusalem's populace to observe how outsiders respond to her wretched state. Each of these verses name a different group (passersby and enemies), noting their physical non-verbal gestures (clapping, whistling, head-wagging, teeth-gnashing), followed by a direct citation of their speech.

The Malicious Enemies

We will begin by turning our attention to verse 16, which recounts the unambiguous gloating response of Jerusalem's enemies. They do not even attempt to conceal their hatred and pleasure in Jerusalem's downfall and humiliation. While the passersby in verse 15 gesticulate with their hands, mouth, and head, all of the gestures of the enemy involve their mouths. Like a savage animal, Israel's adversaries open their mouths, threatening to consume their prey.² They whistle and gnash their teeth viciously, delighting in Jerusalem's pain.³ While these oral movements do not actually harm Jerusalem physically, they portray Jerusalem's foes as beastly and inhuman, avidly devouring the news of her calamity. The focus on the violent movements of their mouths also prepares the reader for the cruel vitriol that issues forth once the enemies begin to speak.

Unsurprisingly, the first word (*bilanu*) that the enemy pronounces also invokes the animal-like oral imagery: "We have swallowed!"⁴ Taking credit for God's punishment of His nation, the enemies crow triumphantly that they have swallowed, recalling the very word that described God's actions at the beginning of the chapter (*Eikha* 2:2, 5).

"This is the day for which we waited! We found it! We saw it!" Framed in the first person plural, the gleeful words of Jerusalem's adversaries illustrate the personal nature of their enmity. Israel's loathsome foes are the only ones in the book who find that which they seek. Indeed, the word *matza* (to find) appears four times in the book of *Eikha*. The first three times, the word appears in the negative,

¹ See e.g. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 97; House, *Lamentations*, p. 389; Gottwald, p. 65. This reading is especially difficult given that *Eikha* 2:16 features the enemies. Why would the narrator turn to Jerusalem's enemies in search of a healer?

² See *Tehillim* 22:14 for a similar context.

³ See *Tehillim* 35:16 and *Job* 16:9-10.

⁴ The one Hebrew word translates into three words in English.

illustrating the obstructions that Israel has incurred during the catastrophe: Judah cannot find rest (1:3), the officers cannot find pasture (1:6), and the prophets cannot find visions from God (2:9). Only the enemies find gratification for their aspirations during the calamity. These malevolent forces wish for disaster; misfortune is their goal. They have found that which they sought.

The Gestures of the Passersby

The meaning of gestures and non-verbal communication varies from one culture to the other, and they are notoriously difficult to interpret. While the hostility of the enemies is not in doubt, and their whistles and teeth-gnashing are therefore undoubtedly rancorous expressions of spiteful glee, the nature of the passersby's reaction in verse 15 remains ambiguous.

Modern scholars tend to blend the reactions in these two verses, assuming that the passersby's gestures likewise reflect antagonism toward Jerusalem and that their words manifest their contempt.⁵ This view is supported by the fact that the passersby and the enemies perform an identical action (*sharku*), implying shared sentiments. Moreover, several scholars interpret the word *sharak* to mean a hiss, which is surely a malevolent sound.⁶ If this is so, then these verses appear to be pointlessly redundant; the passersby in verse 15 are just as much the enemy as those termed so in verse 16.⁷

Perhaps this is the point. All outsiders mock and disdain Jerusalem. Even those who seemed neutral prove to be otherwise in the aftermath of Jerusalem's disgrace. This fulfills Ezekiel's prophesy that Jerusalem would become friendless, that neighboring nations and passersby would observe her with disdain:

And I will place you as a ruin and a shame among the nations who surround you, **in the eyes of every passerby**. And she will be a shame and a mockery, a rebuke and a horror for the nations around you, when I enact against you judgments in anger, wrath, and wrathful rebukes, I am God who spoke this. (*Ezekiel 5:14-15*)

Nevertheless, the reaction of the passersby remains open to interpretation. Why assume that their attitude is gloating and scornful? The interpreters seem to

⁵ For example, Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 46, interprets their gestures as an expression of contempt; Gottwald, *Lamentations* pp. 40, 57, 93, avers that the passersby mock and despise Jerusalem; O' Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 40, describes the passersby mocking and gloating, while Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 97, maintains that the passersby act no better than the enemies. House, *Lamentations*, p. 389, terms this group of passersby "the mockers," while Gerstenberger, *Lamentations*, p. 489, notes their disdain. Davidson, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, p. 180, refers to them as the "jeering sneering enemy," who pour scorn on Jerusalem.

⁶ Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 137; O' Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 40; House, *Lamentations*, p. 389; Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 79.

⁷ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 97, explicitly makes this point, claiming that the passersby "act no better than the enemies."

commit a grave injustice to the passersby by not raising the possibility that they genuinely empathize with Jerusalem and grieve over her destruction.⁸ Indeed, Jeremiah depicts a scenario in which nations will pass by Jerusalem's ruins, asking a seemingly innocuous question that appears to express bewilderment, astonishment, and possibly genuine regret:

And many nations will pass by this city and they will say, each man to his friend, "Why did God do this to this great city?" And they will say, "It is because they forsook the covenant of their God, and they bowed to other gods and they served them." (*Jeremiah* 22:8-9)

If we examine the nature of the three physical gestures that characterize the reaction of the passersby who traverse Jerusalem's roads, an ambiguous picture emerges. They clap their hands, whistle, and wag their heads. Elsewhere in *Tanakh*, these gesticulations can express a range of emotions. Balak claps his hands to express rage at Balaam's failure to curse Israel (*Numbers* 24:10). A similar phrase in *Job* 27:23⁹ (along with whistling) seems to communicate mockery, or possibly astonishment.¹⁰ The word *sapak* (slap or clap) appears in conjunction with the thigh in *Ezekiel* 21:17 as an expression of grief and mourning. *Jeremiah* 31:18 uses this gesture as a parallel to the word *nichamti*, conveying remorse. The nature of hand clapping remains ambiguous; those who pass Jerusalem may clap their hands in shock, horror, disdain, grief, and even anger.

Despite the tendency of some scholars to translate the word *sharak* as a hiss, translating it as a whistle allows for a more neutral interpretation.¹¹ The verb *sharak* appears quite frequently to describe a physical reaction to devastation (e.g. *Zephaniah* 2:15). Sometimes the word appears alongside the word humiliation in a negative context (*Jeremiah* 29:18), but often it is in conjunction with the word *yishom* (*I Kings* 9:8; *Jeremiah* 19:8; 49:17; 50:13), which appears to express horror. In this context, the whistling does not express hostility or contempt, but rather disbelief and even dismay.

The final gesture associated with the passersby involves a movement of the head, although the nature of that movement is unclear. While I have translated this as a wag, it could be a nod, a shake or a quivering, or perhaps something

⁸ Unlike many of the modern interpreters Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 74, recognizes the ambiguity of the passersby's reactions, allowing for the possibility that the passersby express genuine amazement, rather than hostility. Moshkovitz, *Lamentations*, pp. 15-16, likewise regards the passersby as empathetic and pained by Jerusalem's state. See also Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 288-291.

⁹ *Job* 27:23 has the same expression, substituting a *sin* for the usual *samekh* in the word *sapak*.

¹⁰ Varying exegetical interpretations of *Job* 27:23 represents the ambiguity of its precise meaning. Malbim, for example, regards these as derisive gestures, while Metzudat David implies that it conveys astonishment.

¹¹ Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 74, cites a verbal communication with Moshe Greenberg in which he opined that the correct translation is whistle, not hiss.

else. This phrase (*va-yaniu rosham*) implies mockery in other biblical contexts (e.g. *II Kings* 19:21; *Tehillim* 22:8; 109:25).¹² However, a similar phrase involving a movement of the head (*nod rosh*, *Jeremiah* 18:16) and describing a response to Jerusalem's destruction (along with whistling), could likewise convey an array of emotions, ranging from grief to mockery.

The Speech of the Passersby

By accompanying (and reinforcing) their non-verbal gestures with speech, the verse offers another path to clarify the meaning of the passersby's elusive gesticulations. The query of the passersby who scrutinize Jerusalem's collapse is clearly articulated: "Is this the city [about whom] they said, 'Perfect of **beauty, a joy to all the land?**'" Nevertheless, because we do not actually hear the spoken words, it is difficult to discern their tone. Do the passersby recall Jerusalem's elapsed glory with kindness, sorrow, regret, pity, contempt, glee, or satisfaction?

To understand the passersby's words, we note the similar description of Jerusalem in *Tehillim* 48:3: "**Beautiful** in elevation, **joy of all the land.**"¹³ Further cementing the parallel, that psalm describes kings assembling to pass through the city (*avru*, recalling the passersby, the *ovrei derekh*) to witness the presence of God in its midst.¹⁴ These regal passersby exhibit an intense reaction to the sight of Jerusalem: They are amazed, terrified, and panicked. Seized by a trembling, the kings eagerly proclaim their newfound belief in God and His city (*Tehillim* 48:9): "Just as we heard, so we have seen, in the city of God, in the city of **our** God! God shall establish this city for eternity!"

The precise background of this scenario remains elusive. It is possible that *Tehillim* 48 describes the aftermath of Sennacherib's failed attempt to conquer Jerusalem in 701 BCE, an unprecedented narrative of successful resistance against the voracious and inexorable Assyrian empire.¹⁵ Local kings arrive in Jerusalem to confirm the rumors of the extraordinary salvation of the city. It turns out that Jerusalem indeed remains unscathed, her beauty and structural integrity intact. The royal observers respond with astonishment, recognizing that only God's direct intervention could have brought about Jerusalem's deliverance.

Although the context of the event in *Tehillim* 48 remains uncertain, its tone most certainly does not. Awed and overcome by evidence of God's presence in His

¹² Ibn Ezra suggests that the passersby are not unified in their response. Some of them moan sadly over Jerusalem's state, while others wag their heads in mockery. Ibn Ezra seems to recognize that while some of these gestures appear likely to express sympathy, the wagging of the head conveys scorn in *Tanakh*.

¹³ Scholars note this as well. See e.g. Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 165.

¹⁴ Elsewhere in *Tanakh*, the perfect beauty of the holy city indicates God's immanence in it (*Tehillim* 50:2).

¹⁵ Ibn Ezra (*Tehillim* 46:1) cites an opinion that a nearby psalm (46) was written on the backdrop of the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem from Sennacherib. To examine this idea further, see my historical introduction on the book of *Eikha*.

city, these kings accept upon themselves God's rule, proclaiming their faith that God will establish Jerusalem for eternity. *Eikha* 2:15 records the reversal of the inspired reaction to Jerusalem recorded in *Tehillim* 48. The passersby who now observe the damaged city must attempt to reconcile the dreadful sight with their long-held notions about Jerusalem. Those who believed in Jerusalem's invincibility as the special protectorate of God surely experience a great blow when they observe her in her present state. By evoking *Tehillim* 48 in their query, the passersby seem to express their great disillusionment and incredulity, alongside their personal loss of a belief in an unconquerable city, secured by an omnipotent God.¹⁶

There are several advantages to a more positive portrayal of the relationship of the passersby to Jerusalem. First, it mitigates the exaggerated isolationist approach offered by many biblical scholars. Instead of a portrait in which Jerusalem stands alone, surrounded by hostility and enmity, these verses in *Eikha* offer a more realistic and compassionate picture, in which Jerusalem's downfall produces two different reactions – that of those who celebrate her misfortune and those who truly regret her downfall.

This balanced portrait also contains an important moral message. Biblical passages do not construct a one-dimensional portrait of Israel's relations with the nations. Although in the book of *Eikha*, Israel often harbors justified resentment toward her enemies, her betrayers, and those who rejoice in her downfall, it carefully distinguishes between different factions of non-Israelites. There are the actual enemies, who jeer, gloat, and revel in Jerusalem's misery, but there are also non-Israelites who empathize and even participate in Jerusalem's tragedy. Some of these outsiders appear to be righteous, preserving a vision of a holy city that contains God's presence. This distinction imparts a moral imperative to distinguish between good and bad, to ensure that we judge people by their actions and not by their status as outsiders.

A similar message arises in several biblical narratives. The book of *Shemot*, for example, juxtaposes the story of Israel's archetypal foe, Amalek (*Shemot* 17), with the narrative of Jethro, the righteous Midianite who sets up Israel's judicial system (*Shemot* 18).¹⁷ Saul later distinguishes between them, carefully instructing Jethro's descendants to separate from Amalek before he fulfills God's instructions to destroy them (*I Samuel* 15:6-7). Similarly, chapter 4 in the book of *Ezra* records the successful attempt of Israel's foes to petition the Persian king to thwart their attempt to rebuild the Temple. However, the next two chapters of *Ezra* (5-6) offer a narrative of a very different type of Persian king (Darius and

¹⁶ See R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 2:15, where he describes the genuine sorrow and pain of the nations over the loss of the Temple.

¹⁷ Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 18:1) maintains that this is an artificial juxtaposition, taken out of its chronological order in order to juxtapose these two narratives. As evidence, Ibn Ezra points to the deliberate linguistic parallels that draw our attention to the similarities (and consequently the differences) between these narratives. Cassuto, *Commentary on Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), p. 211-212, offers a lengthier set of linguistic parallels between the narratives.

Cyrus), illustrating how they each facilitate the Temple's rebuilding. The juxtaposition of these chapters highlights the distinction between good foreign kings and bad, cautioning us implicitly not to treat all outsiders as antagonists.

In *Eikha*, this message is especially critical. Facing an existential crisis, Israel could easily hunker down in an isolationist posture, regarding all foreigners with suspicion and hostility. The ability to rise above that defensive position and recognize that some outsiders remain allies necessitates a high degree of restraint and self-possession.

Finally, if the passersby's words evoke *Tehillim* 48, the narrator has contrived a way to offer Jerusalem a brief respite from her misery in the midst of her terrible pain. Through echoes of Jerusalem's glorious past, the narrator reminds the reader of a time when the city's enduring magnificence fostered hope and faith throughout the land.