

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #31: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:17

עֲשָׂה יְקֹנֶה אֲשֶׁר זָמַם
בַּצֵּעַ אִמְרָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִימֵי-קֶדֶם

הָרַס וְלֹא חָמַל

וַיִּשְׂמַח עֲלֵיךָ אוֹיֵב

הָרִים קֶרֶן צְרִיף

**God did that which He planned
He executed His word that He commanded in days of old**

He destroyed and did not pity

**And your enemy rejoiced over you
Your adversaries raised a horn!**

Having completed his panoramic exploration of those who stand outside of Jerusalem, the narrator's attention finally rests on God, the actual architect of these events. The narrator's assertion quashes the triumphant and exultant cries of Jerusalem's foes (verse 16), who eagerly sought credit for the city's disaster. In fact, God choreographed these events, not the enemies. In spite of their confident proclamation, this is not their day, but rather the day of God (*Eikha* 2:1, 21, 22). It is not they who swallowed, but God (*Eikha* 2:2, 5). The enemies' arrogant assertions are patently false; they should not receive attribution for God's punitive actions.¹

¹ The alphabetic reversal of the letter *ayin* (which opens verse 17) and the letter *peh* (which opens verse 16) in this chapter has generated different explanations, both homiletic (see e.g. *Eikha Rabba* 2:20) and historical (see e.g. A. Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), pp. 14-27). O' Connor, *Lamentations*, pp. 40-41, suggests that this reversal of letters is a deliberate literary device designed to allude to the reversal of God's affections. I propose that it draws our attention to the attempt of Israel's adversaries to assume credit for the devastation. In a deft literary flourish, the *peh* verse jumps in before its turn, illustrating the enemy's bid to usurp

Planned and executed by God, the catastrophe is neither an act of baseless hatred nor impulsive divine wrath. In fact, God warned Israel that this would be the result of their disobedience. Several lengthy passages in the Torah delineate the consequences of violating the covenant between God and Israel:

I will place your cities in ruins and I will make your sanctuaries desolate and I will not savor your pleasing odors. And I will make the land desolate and your enemies who dwell there will be horrified over her. (*Vayikra* 26:31-32)²

Israel has known the price of disobedience from the inception of the relationship. Indeed, God's patience with His nation has been remarkable; after years of sustained sinning and repeated prophetic admonitions, God has finally implemented the terms of the covenant. Following the exile, the nation appears to acknowledge that the catastrophic events of the destruction were fair and anticipated:

And [the people] returned and said, "Just as God planned (*zamam*) to do to us because of our ways and our deeds, so He has done with us." (*Zechariah* 1:6)

The word *zamam* recalls our verse, in which the narrator explains the theology of Jerusalem's destruction. Ultimately, the Jewish nation will accept the justness of these terrible events by placing them within the broader context of biblical history.

The implied acknowledgement of God's justness lasts briefly, for just one short sentence, before returning to the bewilderment that prevails in this chapter. Similar to the structural anomaly in *Eikha* 2:4 (see our explanation there), the first and third sentences of our verse conform to the customary binary sentence structure, whereas the middle verse consists of a single, stark line:

He destroyed and did not pity.

This middle sentence thus stands alone, drawing attention to its dreadful content. This blunt statement shocks the reader, acting as a grim contrast to the previous sentence that implied God's justice. The text shifts abruptly from God's logical, well-planned execution of the covenant to His merciless destruction. In accordance with the general tenor of the chapter, this verse veers sharply back to

God's role. We will examine the historical explanation relating to the order of the alphabet in a brief excursus following this chapter.

² See the *midrash Pesikta Zutrata (Lekech Tov) Eikha* 2:17, which cites this verse in *Vayikra* in seeking to establish which words God fulfills according to *Eikha* 2:17.

its characteristic outrage and discomfiture, drawing on the language of the first part of the chapter. Once again, God does not pity (*lo chamal*, 2:2). Once again, the verb *haras* describes God's assault (2:2).

Following the description of God's absent mercy, the verse turns its attention to the triumph of the enemy. God aids and abets the wicked enemy; in His pitiless determination to fulfill His word, the enemies become the beneficiaries, raising their horns in exultant triumph. The enemy's celebratory horns recall the absence of Israel's horn, hewn down by God in His wrath (2:3). In this chapter, God functions both as Israel's enemy (2:4-5) and as an adjunct to Israel's foes. The theological conclusions are the same; in both representations, God emerges as Israel's primary adversary.

To compound the confounding portrait of God's enmity in this chapter, we observe the manner in which it employs language that contrasts with *Tehillim* 37. A psalm of theological harmony, *Tehillim* 37 paints a picture of an ideal world, in which all humans receive just recompense. God thwarts and punishes evildoers and rewards those who trust in Him. In that psalm, the wicked ones plot (*zomem*) against the righteous, gnashing their teeth, poisoning their bows and preparing to massacre (*le-tvoach*) the virtuous people (*Tehillim* 37:12, 14). God intervenes, ensuring that their plot comes to naught and that the upright ones prevail. Our chapter perceives a very different world, questioning *Psalms* 37's image of a perfect and harmonious theological world. In our chapter, God Himself plots against His people (*zamam*, 2:17), poisoning His bow (2:4) and massacring without pity (*tavachta*, 2:21).

Perhaps Jerusalem's sinful inhabitants at this time are not similar to the righteous described in *Tehillim* 37. However, when viewed on the backdrop of the linguistically parallel *Tehillim* 37, the sharply contrastive portrait of God in *Eikha* 2 emerges as a vexing theological quandary, one that reverberates shockingly throughout the chapter. How could God destroy without mercy? Why would God bolster the hands of the gleeful, malevolent enemy? How could God Himself behave as an enemy toward His nation?

Eikha 2:18-19

**צָעַק לִבָּם אֶל־אֲדֹנָי
חֹמַת בֵּת־צִיּוֹן**

**הוֹרִידִי כְנַחַל דְּמָעָה
יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה**

**אֶל־תִּתְּנִי פּוֹגַת לְךָ
אֶל־תִּדְדַם בֵּת־עֵינֶיךָ**

**קוּמִין רַבִּי בַלַּיְלָה
לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֶׁמְרוֹת**

**שִׁפְכִי כַמַּיִם לַבַּיִת
גָּחַח פְּנֵי אֲדֹנָי**

**שָׂאֵי אֵלָיו כַּפְּיךָ
עַל־נֶפֶשׁ עוֹלְלֶיךָ**

**הַעֲטוּפִים בְּרַעַב
בְּרֹאשׁ כָּל־חוֹצוֹת**

**Their hearts cried out to God
Wall of the daughter of Zion³**

**Let your tears flow like a stream
Day and night!**

**Do not let yourself cease,
Do not stop up your eyes!**

**Get up! Cry out in the night!
At the top of each watch**

**Pour out your heart like water
Before the face of God!**

**Lift up your hands to Him
Because of the lives of your children**

³ I will attempt to explain this difficult verse in the explanation below.

**Who are fainting from hunger,
On every street corner.**

Identified in the previous verse as the primary perpetrator, God is also Israel's only address, and therefore her sole hope. This galvanizes the narrator, who summons up his energies and passionately addresses Jerusalem, whose tears seemed to have ceased abruptly in verse 11. In a series of five successive imperative sentences, the narrator urges Jerusalem to cry, to direct a torrent of tears to God.

An energetic and poetic passage, the narrator employs several literary tools to beseech Jerusalem to weep. In a cogent metaphor, the narrator exhorts Jerusalem's eyes to flow like a stream, day and night.⁴ Time is of the essence; she cannot afford to sleep. The narrator further presses Jerusalem to rise at the beginning of every night watch to cry out her pain.⁵ In this way, Jerusalem must assume a role as the custodian of her people. She must act as a sentry who defends and shields her people without slumber.

In accordance with Jerusalem's own self-perception (e.g. 2:11), the narrator portrays her as a corporeal being; he appeals to her eyes, heart, hands, and, implicitly, her mouth, to advocate on behalf of her children. The assumption that Jerusalem can continue to function reverses and repairs Jerusalem's own self-portrait, as she described her physical body churning, breaking down, and emptying her innards onto the ground (2:11). It also empowers Jerusalem to assume control over her own destiny, instead of allowing the outsiders to use their bodily parts (hands, mouth, head, teeth) to define her condition (2:15-16).

Addressing Jerusalem's heart, the narrator proposes that she pour out her heart like water before God. While this is a unique phrase,⁶ both the word pour (seven times) and heart (ten times) appear as key words in the book of *Eikha*. In chapter 1, Jerusalem describes her physical response to her misery (1:20): "My insides churn, my **heart** turns over within me." Two verses later, the chapter concludes with the words (1:22), "For my groans are many, and my **heart** is sick." In our verse, the narrator presses Jerusalem to revive her wretched and feckless heart, to direct her heart effectively toward God. The word *shafakh*, to pour or spill over, appears four times in this chapter, in a variety of contexts. In verse 4, God pours out His wrath like fire. In verse 11, Jerusalem spills out her innards onto the

⁴ For a similar image, see *Jeremiah* 8:23.

⁵ For this translations, see Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 168.

⁶ The metaphoric description of the heart spilling over appears only here and in *Tehillim* 62:9. Chana describes her prayer similarly as pouring out her soul (*I Samuel* 1:15).

ground. In the central image of the chapter, the children spill out their souls into their mothers' bosoms (verse 12). On the backdrop of these frightful images, Jerusalem must yield her stubborn silence; in light of the dire situation, she must allow her heart to spill over as she addresses God (verse 19). Because God has poured out His wrath like fire (verse 4), it is especially important for Jerusalem to spill out her heart like water (verse 19). Water quenches fire, effectively extinguishing God's formidable rage.

What is the ultimate goal of these tears? Is it supplication or lamentation? Are these tears designed to change the decree or simply to urge Jerusalem to grieve again? If Jerusalem's tears could actually save the children's lives and restore some dignity to the city, we can well understand the urgency of the narrator's tone; there is very much at stake in this appeal and there is no time to lose. However, Jerusalem already lies in ruins, depleted of her vibrancy. Perhaps, then, the goal is simply to revive Jerusalem, to ensure that she weeps therapeutic tears, that she desists from her chosen state of mute numbness. Though Jerusalem (mirroring her populace in 2:10) lay dormant on the ground following the catastrophe (2:11), the narrator calls on her to arise (*kumi!*), to cry out in the dark night, thereby setting in motion the process of rehabilitation.⁷ In this way, the narrator prods Jerusalem back to life, reminds Jerusalem that she still exists, and offers her meaningful actions and a path to recovery.

Finally, it is possible that the narrator aims to reinstate communication between Jerusalem and God. God's destructive mission concludes with a calamitous crash of silence; even prophets cannot find a vision from God (2:9). As noted in the previous chapter, the state in which God withdraws from His people, "hiding His face" (*hester panim*) is an anticipated penalty for Israel's sins (see *Devarim* 31:15-18). By requisitioning Jerusalem to advocate for her populace before "the face (*penei*) of God," the narrator prods the city to attempt to reconnect with God and reestablish lines of communication.

As the narrator's speech begins to reach its climax, a structural anomaly draws our attention to his final words. Instead of three sentences, verse 19 has four sentences.⁸ As is customary, some scholars recommend removing a line in a bid to conform to the general structure of the poem.⁹ However, as I have already noted, I eschew emendations of this sort, preferring to seek out a meaningful idea that underlies the textual irregularities. In this case, the elongated verse

⁷ In a similar vein, Isaiah urges Israel several times to arise (*kumi*) and rejuvenate following her suffering and destruction (Isaiah 51:17; 52:2; 60:1).

⁸ We discussed a similar variance in our discussion of *Eikha* 1:7.

⁹ See e.g. Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 40, who recommends removing the fourth line because it is not an imperative beseeching the city to cry. As I will attempt to demonstrate, by removing this line, Hillers has removed the linchpin sentence of this passage.

illustrates the extra effort that the narrator invests in inducing Jerusalem's cries. It also draws our attention to the final sentence in the verse, the "surplus" sentence. Instead of giving up on Jerusalem, the narrator makes one final bold attempt to provoke Jerusalem's tears by recalling the image of the children collapsing from hunger on the street. By reviving the appalling scenario that lies at the core of this chapter, the narrator harks back to the very reason that Jerusalem chose to become mute, the vision that precipitated her stony, numb silence. After seven long verses of Jerusalem's paralysis, the narrator's speech draws to a resounding conclusion, as he finishes making a case for Jerusalem to resume her speech. His final argument rests on the final crucial sentence, where the narrator draws Jerusalem's attention back to the hapless children. For the sake of the children, implores the narrator, Jerusalem must resume her cries!

Their hearts cried out to God, wall of the daughter of Zion

The opening statement of these impassioned verses contains many difficulties, confounding commentators. The subject whose hearts cried out to God remains uncertain,¹⁰ as does the identity of the "wall of the daughter of Zion."¹¹ The fact that this sentence is not formulated as an imperative also sets it apart from the rest of verse, leaving its role in the verse open to interpretation.¹²

The "wall of the daughter of Zion" likely refers to a part of the city in an attempt to represent the whole.¹³ This expression hints to the protective barricade of the city, one that no longer functions to protect or defend it. The wall's failure arose earlier in the chapter, which described the wall mourning alongside the rampart (2:8). The reference to the wall may also function to prepare us for the narrator's

¹⁰ Ibn Ezra assumes that the subject is the enemies, who are mentioned at the close of the previous verse. In this reading, the shouts are not in supplication, but in triumph against God. This reading is difficult within the context of this verse. Moreover, Ibn Ezra (like the Aramaic Targum) separates between the first half of the sentence, describing the enemies' cries, and the second half, which addresses the wall of the daughter of Zion. He connects the second half of the verse to that which follows it, assuming that the narrator beseeches the wall of the daughter of Zion to let her eyes flow like a stream day and night.

¹¹ Because *tza'ak* (cry) is masculine singular and *choma* (wall) is feminine singular, it seems unlikely that the narrator describes the wall crying out here. Moreover, the hearts are plural, deepening the confusion that prevails in this sentence.

¹² Some interpreters emend the word *tza'ak* to *tzaki*, rendering, "Pour out their hearts to God, wall of the daughter of Zion" (e.g. Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 166-167). In this way, the sentence conforms to the rest of the passage, a sixth imperative sentence that presses Jerusalem to beseech God on behalf of her people. Alternatively, it could be *tza'aki*. In either case, the word *libam* requires explanation (see Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 40). Gordis brings a list of emendations proposed by other scholars.

¹³ This figure of speech, known as a synecdoche, refers to a thing by the name of one of its parts – for example, using the word "suits" to refer to businessmen or "sails" to refer to a ship. In this case, the wall becomes a synecdoche for the city. Some scholars conclude that God is the wall or defensive shield of Zion, based on *Zechariah* 2:9 (see e.g. Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 12; Renkema, *Lamentations*, 311).

call to Jerusalem to cry out at the beginning of the night watches.¹⁴ Sentinels stand on the wall, and these verses implore Jerusalem to resume her role as guardian of her people, looking out for them, protecting them, and advocating on their behalf.

As noted, the opening sentence of verse 18 is the only sentence in verses 18-19 that lacks an imperative. “Their hearts cried out to God, wall of the daughter of Zion” may instead describe the problem that the narrator must fix – namely, the frozen silence that prevails following the catastrophe. The narrator bemoans the situation, in which the hearts of the people in the city certainly cry out to God but their lips remain sealed, their voices stifled (as symbolized by the wall that closes around their cries, prevented them from exiting). The opening of the verse describes the paradox between Jerusalem’s deep desire to reconnect with God and her resistance to participate, her paralysis. In this context, the wall functions as a symbol of Jerusalem’s emotional barrier, the impermeable shell that she has built around herself. In the continuation of this passage, the narrator pleads with Jerusalem, whose heart is like a sealed wall, to pour out her heart like water before God.

In his prophecies of Israel’s renewal, Isaiah presents an opposite scenario:

For the sake of Zion I will not hush, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be silent... Upon your walls Jerusalem, I have appointed guards all the day and all the night, they will never be hushed. Those who mention God, do not become silent! And do not let Him become silent,¹⁵ until He establishes and places Jerusalem as a glory in the earth! (*Isaiah* 62:1, 6-7)

In Isaiah’s prophecy of comfort, he has restored the voice of the people, the sentries on the wall, and Jerusalem herself, in an aim to reinstate Jerusalem’s glory and fortunes.

¹⁴ See Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 75, who makes this observation.

¹⁵ This reading is like that of Metzudat David and the NJPS translation of the verse. The Malbim suggests that it refers to the righteous in the generation who cannot remain silent until Jerusalem’s glory is restored.