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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)
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EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #32: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:20-21

רְאֵה יְקֹוָק וְהַבִּיטָה
לְמִי עוֹלַלְתָּ כֹּה

אִם־תֹּאכַלְנָה נָשִׁים פִּרְיָם
עֹלֲלֵי טִפֻּחִים

אִם־יֵהָרֵג בְּמִקְדַּשׁ אָדוֹן
כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא

שָׁכְבוּ לָאָרֶץ חוּצוֹת
נַעַר וְזָקֵן

בְּתוּלֹתַי וּבַחוּרַי
נָפְלוּ בֶחָרֶב

הָרַגְתָּ בְּיוֹם אַפֶּךָ
טָבַחְתָּ לֹא חָמָלְתָּ

Look God and see!
To whom have You done this?

When women consume their fruits,[1]
Their well-nurtured children!

When murdered in the sanctuary of God,
Are the priest and prophet!

They lie on the ground in the streets,

[1] The term for offspring in *Tanakh* is often "fruit" (e.g. *Bereishit* 30:2; *Devarim* 7:13). In our context, the use of the word fruit to mean children horrifically contrasts with its usual usage (edible produce of trees), illustrating the grim situation in which children substitute for food.

Young men and old

My maidens and youths
Fell by the sword

You murdered on the day of Your anger
You slaughtered, and You did not pity.

The narrator has achieved his aim, and Jerusalem at last resumes her speech. Tears are absent and the tone of her response is more outrage than supplication, but Jerusalem finally summons up her energy to address God: "Look God and see![2] To whom have You done this?" Hostile words, unyielding in their steely fury, these words are not designed to elicit divine sympathy but to express Jerusalem's anger at the atrocities in her midst. Jerusalem's pent-up pain surges and overflows, bursting forth with a harsh indictment generated by unadulterated horror. She demands that God witness the ghastly sights, remonstrates with Him over the death of helpless children and religious leaders. Yet, Jerusalem's aim is not merely for God to recognize the grim reality. Instead, she hurls these sights at God as an accusation ("To whom have You done this?"), implicitly challenging God regarding the way that He runs His world.

Once again, the sight of the innocent children particularly galls Jerusalem. The wordplay between the verb used to describe God's deliberate acts (*olalta*) and the word for young children (*olelei*) intertwines God's purposeful actions with the death of the innocent children.

Jerusalem brandishes before God a world that has come unhinged, a world where the inconceivable has occurred. Is it possible that mothers, who naturally possess a maternal instinct that protects and nurtures their progeny, could consume their own children, driven to madness by the grisly affliction of starvation? [3] This query draws attention to the moral unravelling of the populace.[4] Moreover, the sanctuary that once offered refuge and asylum, preserving purity and eschewing death,[5] now harbors the murder of its custodians. Can it be that

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[2] In our examination of chapter 1, we noted the importance and pervasiveness of the request that God "look and see" (*re'ei ve-habita*) throughout the book.

[3] As mother to her inhabitants (see e.g. 1:18), Jerusalem may subtly refer to her own guilt in cannibalizing her children, who are expiring in her streets.

[4] The horror of these sights is not mitigated by the fact that this appalling scenario is foretold in advance, a consequence of Israel's disobedience (e.g. *Vayikra* 26:29; *Devarim* 28:57; *Jeremiah* 19:9; *Ezekiel* 5:10).

[5] Although neither Jerusalem nor the *Mikdash* functioned as an official city or place of refuge, the story of both Adoniyahu (*I Kings* 1:50-53) and Yoav (*I Kings* 2:28-34) grabbing hold of the altar suggests that the altar was popularly treated as a place of asylum. However, while bloodshed is avoided in the *Mikdash* (e.g. *II Kings* 11:15), sometimes circumstances allow for it (as in the case of Yoav above).

God allowed the holy sanctuary to be desecrated by the slaying of its priests and prophets?[6] These rhetorical questions hang in the air. However, Jerusalem has not finished sketching her heart-wrenching litany of horror. Vigorous maidens and lads, filled with the vibrant buoyancy of youth, are cut down cruelly by the sword. Sprawled on every street lie the young and the old, fallen side by side, the past and the future intertwined in a macabre death posture.

Jerusalem concludes this survey of the absurd by pointing a finger at God and issuing a blazing, inexorable accusation, featuring four second-person words addressed to God: "**You** murdered on the day of **Your** anger, **You** slaughtered, **You** did not pity!" An especially violent word describing God's massacre, the verb *tavach* often describes the slaughter of animals for food.[7] The noun *tabach* can mean a cook (e.g. *I Samuel* 8:13; 9:23), further cementing the sense that this word describes preparation for eating.[8] The accusation that God "slaughtered" the human populace of Jerusalem fuses with the image of mothers consuming their children, implicitly saddling God with responsibility for that atrocity. The verb *tavach* also refers to the slaughter of people, although generally in the context of God's punishment of Israel's enemies (e.g. *Isaiah* 14:21; 34:2, 6; *Jeremiah* 48:15) or the behavior of especially wicked humans (e.g. *Tehillim* 37:14). In employing the word *tavach* to describe God's actions against His own people, Jerusalem assigns an especially incriminatory action to God, who slaughters His people like the enemy – or worse, like animals, without regard for the sanctity of human life.[9]

In this section, Jerusalem tests the limits of human discourse with the divine, as she hurls her fierce indictment against God. Accusation against God is not heresy; Jerusalem's anger does not deny God, but rather affirms the relationship, illustrating Jerusalem's belief in divine responsibility. Israel's rage against God emerges from a profound sense of God's authority and involvement in Jerusalem's fate.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Elie Weisel expresses a similarly intense, fury-filled accusation, fueled by a deep faith in divine accountability and power:

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[6] Many *midrashim* (e.g. *Sifra*, *Bechukotai* 2:6; *Eikha Rabba* 1:51) view this as an allusion to the stoning death of Zechariah ben Yehoyada, a priest and a prophet who was killed in the Temple by the orders of the Judean king Yoash (*II Chronicles* 24:20-21).

[7] E.g. *Bereishit* 43:16; *Shemot* 21:37; *Devarim* 28:31; I *Samuel* 25:11.

[8] Pharaoh's *sar ha**tabach**im* (*Bereishit* 37:36) functioned either as the royal chef (see Rashi, *Bereishit* 37:36) or the royal executioner (Targum, Ramban, and Hizkuni on *Bereishit* 37:36). The latter possibility finds support in the fact that the Babylonian military general, Nevuzaradan, is called the *rav tabachim* (*II Kings* 25:8.) See also *Daniel* 2:14.

[9] Biblical passages that employ the word to describe the projected punishment of the wicked ones in Israel, similar to our context, include *Isaiah* 63:12; *Jeremiah* 12:3; *Ezekiel* 21:15.

> Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar? (Elie Weisel, *Night*, Chapter 5)

Elie Wiesel's fury at God indeed belies his dependence upon God, his belief in Him. The passage in *Eikha* 2:20-21 portrays humans adopting a similarly audacious stance.[10] Expectation of God's compassion means greater disappointment and disorientation when God's punitive anger overcomes His promise of extrajudicial clemency. Jerusalem rages at a world lacking in mercy, directed and managed by God. The book of *Eikha* permits Jerusalem to rage, tempered by Jerusalem's commitment to maintaining a meaningful relationship with God, rather than rupturing it.

[10] Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (Ktav: New York, 1973), p. 68, avers that asking where God is during calamity is in fact the right question of those who retain faith in God: "Not to ask it would have been blasphemy… Faith, because it is trust in God, demands justice of God."

Eikha 2:22

תִּקְרָאׇ כְיֹום מֹועֵד
מְגוּרַי מִסָּבִיב

וְלֹא הָיָה בְּיֹום אַף־יְקֹוָק
פָּלִיט וְשָׂרִיד

אֲשֶׁר־טִפַּחְתִּי וְרִבִּיתִי
אֹיְבִי כִלָּם

Call for an appointed day (*mo'ed*)
Against my terrors all around

And there was not, on the day of God's anger
A refugee or survivor

Those whom I nurtured[11] and raised
My enemy obliterated

The final verse of chapter 2 is ungainly and difficult to translate. In the awkward translation above, I have tried to preserve the textual clumsiness for the purposes of understanding the upcoming discussion.

The most pressing problem of the verse remains its inconsistent tenses. The verse opens with a future tense, *tikra*, "call," in which Jerusalem petitions God to consecrate an appointed day – namely a day of God's judgement.[12] This day involves the destruction of His enemies (who seem to appear in this sentence with the elliptic phrase, *megurai mi-saviv*).[13] The verse continues by describing in

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[11] See Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 2:22, and Ibn Janach, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, on the word *tipuchim*.

[12] The word used here is *mo'ed*, which literally means an appointed day, but is usually used in *Tanakh* to refer to a festive day. On the ironic use of that word in this chapter, see our discussion on *Eikha* 2:7. For biblical passages in which God's destruction is likewise described as a celebration or festive sacrifice, see *Isaiah* 34:1-7; *Zephania*, 1:7-8; *Jeremiah* 46:10; *Ezekiel* 39:17.

[13] Because the phrase *megurai mi-saviv* lacks a preposition preceding it, it is unclear whether God is calling an appointed day against them or calling them to join the appointed day. To compound the textual confusion, the identity of the *megurai mi-saviv* is difficult to determine. (Similar confusion surrounds this same phrase in other passages where it appears: *Jeremiah* 6:25; 20:10; 46:5; 49:29; *Tehillim* 31:14. All appearances of this phrase seem to indicate a hostile context.) The word *magur* is particularly difficult to translate, given that the root *gur* can mean to reside, to stir up strife, or to fear (*BDB*, pp. 157-159). In accordance with this variety of meanings, the phrase *megurai mi-saviv* can indicate the encircling terrors (Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 2:22), the

past tense (*ve-lo haya*) that there was no survivor on the day of God's anger. If this day has not yet occurred, then why does the verse shift to the past tense, describing the results of this day?

Possibly, the shift to the past tense expresses confidence in God's inevitable punishment of the enemies; although it has not yet taken place, Jerusalem describes it as though it has. However, this reading does not cohere well with the general tone of the verse, whose intent is not to proclaim confidence in God.

Most commentators find it necessary to reinterpret one of the verbs. Some change the future tense (*tikra*) to a past tense (e.g. Rashi), while others read the past tense (*haya*) as a future tense (e.g. R. Yosef Kara). The verse may therefore describe what God has already done (called a festival to massacre Judah) or what Jerusalem calls on God to do (call a festival to massacre Judah's enemies). Thus, two completely different readings emerge from these rather drastic reinterpretations.

Verse 22 in the Past Tense

If the verse is in the past tense, then Jerusalem simply continues the demoralizing description of what God has done to Jerusalem's populace.[14] God called an appointed day of His anger (similar to 2:1, 7), a day in which God enacted His judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. The *meguray mi-saviv* are the human agents designated by God to carry out His task. In this schema, the verse reads: "You called for an appointed day those fearsome ones who surround me. And on that day of God's anger, there was no remnant or survivor. Those whom I nurtured and raised, my enemy obliterated!" Conveying a helplessness that is characteristic of the chapter, these concluding words do not invoke petition or energetic action. Following the numb silence that prevailed in *Eikha* 2:13-17, Jerusalem once again speaks. However, that does not mean that she springs to life and beseeches God to change her fortune. Instead, Jerusalem maintains her dull passivity, weakly describing her horrified outrage at the dismal sights that surround her. At no point in this chapter do the events spawn effective action or the optimism necessary to precipitate a bold request from God.

Verse 22 in the Future Tense

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enemies who strive with Jerusalem (Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 34; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 65), or the neighbors who dwell around Jerusalem (Rashi, *Eikha* 2:22; Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 12). Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 138, conflates these meanings somewhat, suggesting the translation, "my hostile neighbors roundabout." Note his explanation on p. 169.

[14] For this reading, see Rashi, *Eikha* 2:22; Moshkovitz, *Eikha*, p. 18; Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 138; House, *Lamentations*, p. 370; Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 34.

Alternatively, some interpreters read the entire final verse in a future tense.[15] In this schema, our chapter concludes similarly to the other chapters in the book, with a plea that God take vengeance against her enemies: "Call as a festive day against my enemies that surround me. And **do not let there be** on the day of God's anger a refugee or a survivor. For those who I bore and raised, my enemy obliterated!"[16] Although God is the primary cause of the destruction (verses 20-21), the human agents offer their services eagerly and unwittingly. Therefore, these human enemies deserve punishment; their enthusiasm and cruelty is unmitigated by the fact that they unknowingly execute God's will.[17] This petition expresses a request for justice. In order to begin rebuilding, God must first punish the evil enemies and restore a sense of fairness to the world.[18]

It remains impossible to select the better reading for this verse. Each translation is equally possible, and each contributes significantly to our understanding of the conclusion of chapter 2. I propose, therefore, that this verse contains a deliberate ambiguity, constructed with the express purpose of maintaining both meanings. On the one hand, the final verse of our chapter continues the despondent tone of the chapter, in which Jerusalem helplessly describes the terrible events and God's role in facilitating them. On the other hand, this verse describes Jerusalem's petition to take vengeance upon her enemies. Though the request is a minimal one, each chapter concludes with it, paving the way toward a new world order, in which Jerusalem can rebuild on the foundations of restored justice.

The Identity of the Enemy

Who is the enemy who has obliterated Jerusalem's offspring at the thunderous two-word conclusion of the chapter? While it could be the human enemy, we cannot forget that the chapter referred to God as an enemy three time (2:4-5). Portrayed in singular tense,[19] perhaps God is the foe who appears at the conclusion of this chapter, destroying those who Jerusalem tenderly nurtured and raised. Whether or not that enemy is God or His human agent, this act certainly harks back to God who, at the very least, has empowered these malevolent

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[15] See e.g. R. Yosef Kara.

[16] In *Eikha* 3:66, R. Kara maintains that every chapter concludes with a call for vengeance against the enemies. See also G. Cohen, *Five Megillot*, p. 164. Strikingly, chapter 5 has no concluding plea for revenge, which apparently is due to the unique nature of that concluding chapter, as we will discuss.

[17] For a discussion on the theology of God punishing those who He anointed to commit evil, see Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:5, and Raavad there.

[18] See Tamir Granot's VBM shiur on *Parashat Ha'azinu* (http://etzion.org.il/en/song-may-answer-them-forever): "Revenge on the wicked, even if the time is not yet ripe for a repealing of the decree, is God's signal that He is acting in history on our behalf, and that everything that happens to the world is just."

[19] Many translations (e.g. Greek, Aramaic. Latin) render the word enemy here in the plural form.

forces to strew misery among Judah's populace. The chapter concludes with Jerusalem's final statement of horror and helplessness at her enemy's pernicious acts, which have obliterated Jerusalem's future.

The Final Image: The Death of the Children

Unsurprisingly, the chapter concludes with its most haunting image, the death of the children. Jerusalem speaks in the first person, emphasizing the personal nature of the tragedy: "[Those whom] *I* nurtured and [whom] *I* raised, my enemies destroyed." By employing the word *tipachti* (nurtured), the final statement alludes back to the mothers who consume the children that they lovingly reared (*olelei tipuchim*). Despite the emotionally charged subject, this final sentence does not address the enemy in second person. If God is the veritable enemy of this sentence, the disappearance of the direct address mutes the intensity of Jerusalem's words. Previously, Jerusalem had unflinchingly pointed her finger directly at God in fierce accusation (2:20-21). Now, however, we hear the subdued whimpers of Jerusalem, almost as though she is mumbling to herself in dismay and incomprehension, "Those who I nurtured and made great, my enemy has destroyed."

Even if we regard this verse as a call for vengeance, its final words emit a moan of pain rather than the intense fury felt in previous verses. Jerusalem seems to have deflated; the chapter ends with a terrible absence of hope, a declaration of the enemy's triumphant destruction, described with the word *kilam*, meaning total annihilation. God's persistent silence is deafening, leaving Jerusalem's final words to reverberate in the hollow void. Israel may speak, but, unlike her words at the end of chapter 1, she refuses to admit to any sinfulness on her part. Instead, chapter 2 concludes with a tragic timbre, conveying its bewilderment: Why indeed does the world function in this incomprehensible way? The problem hangs in the air, defying an answer.