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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #29: Eikha Chapter 2** (continued)

**Eikha 2:13**

**מָֽה־אֲעִידֵ֞ךְ**

 **מָ֣ה אֲדַמֶּה־לָּ֗ךְ הַבַּת֙ יְר֣וּשָׁלִַ֔ם**

 **מָ֤ה אַשְׁוֶה־לָּךְ֙**

 **וַאֲנַֽחֲמֵ֔ךְ בְּתוּלַ֖ת בַּת־צִיּ֑וֹן**

 **כִּֽי־ גָד֥וֹל כַּיָּ֛ם שִׁבְרֵ֖ךְ**

 **מִ֥י יִרְפָּא־לָֽךְ**

**How can I bear witness about you?**

**To what can I compare you, daughter of Jerusalem?**

**To what can I equate you, so that I can comfort you?**

**Maiden of the daughter of Zion**

**For as great as the sea is your brokenness!**

**Who can heal you?**[[1]](#footnote-1)

As the snapshot of the dying children fades, Jerusalem’s speech abruptly ends. Words cannot adequately represent the horror. Jerusalem has no more tears, no more strength, and no more words. Numbed by the horror, Jerusalem becomes frozen and mute, unable to continue her narration of the events.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The narrator steps in to fill the hollow chasm carved out by Jerusalem’s silence. Speaking directly to Jerusalem, the narrator presents a series of rhetorical questions. Will I bear witness to Jerusalem’s suffering? Can anything be compared to Jerusalem’s pain? Is there anything that can console the ruined city? The answer implied by these rhetorical questions is a resounding no. These events seem unprecedented, the suffering incomparable. A barrage of rhetorical questions conveys the narrator’s profound sense of helplessness, his inability to provide consolation or a path to recovery.

**“How can I bear witness about you?”**[[3]](#footnote-3)

Scholars struggle to explain this peculiar rhetorical question: Why is it necessary for the narrator to bear witness to Jerusalem’s ruin?[[4]](#footnote-4) Jerusalem’s devastation seems to augur total erasure. For the narrator to bear witness to Jerusalem’s pain means that he observes her and empathizes with her pain, thereby validating her existence. Bearing witness to Jerusalem means that she is not insignificant, that her story continues to interest others. This rhetorical query, of course, suggests the opposite: The narrator wishes to say that he **cannot** bear witness for Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s future remains uncertain, and she remains isolated in the enormity of her pain.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**To what can I compare you? To what can I equate you so that I can comfort you?**

The narrator’s questions imply that no city has suffered like Jerusalem. Is this an accurate representation of the events? After all, ancient cities frequently fell to their enemies, who demolished the city along with scores of innocent victims, including children. Another difficulty in the passage lies in the assumption that equating Jerusalem’s pain with the pain of another would provide some sort of solace for Jerusalem. Why should this be so?[[6]](#footnote-6)

While the exact sense of this verse remains obscure, the narrator’s queries seem designed to focus our attention on Jerusalem’s loneliness. The narrator searches in vain for anyone who has experienced Jerusalem’s pain, anyone who can identify with Jerusalem and empathize with her, offering her some measure of support and consolation. This recalls the loneliness theme of the previous chapter, often highlighted by the use of the word *nacham* (consolation). Employed five times in the negative in chapter 5 (“there is no comforter”), the sixth and final appearance of the word *nacham* appears in our verse in the guise of a rhetorical question, underlining the absence of consolation. The rhetorical questions suggest that nothing and no one can console Jerusalem. No one bears witness to her, and no one empathizes with her. She flounders in a vast, lonely sea with no one in sight and no help forthcoming. Jerusalem’s alienation is complete, her recovery elusive. Who, indeed, can heal her?

**Simile of the Sea**

The immense sea – roaring, terrifying, and relentlessly wild – functions as an apt simile for Jerusalem’s condition. Like the sea, Jerusalem’s turbulence crashes violently around her; there is no bottom, no anchor, and no way to cross it.[[7]](#footnote-7) This image also suggests the return to a state of primordial chaos, before God established boundaries for the sea, allowing the world to attain form (*Bereishit* 1:9-10).[[8]](#footnote-8) Jerusalem’s destruction recalls the era prior to Creation, when the world made no sense and had no order or structure, before God’s word began to regulate the earth.

Jerusalem’s brokenness is like the sea, made up of waves that doggedly collide with the shore, threatening to overrun its borders. Elsewhere in *Tanakh* (e.g. *Jonah* 2:4; *Tehillim* 42:8), these powerful waves are called breakers (*mashber*), a word that intertwines with the terrible brokenness (*shever*) of the city, which is comparable to the sea.[[9]](#footnote-9) The salty waters evoke tears, alluding perhaps to Jerusalem’s tears referred to in the previous verse. Perhaps this represents the narrator’s bid to prod a paralyzed Jerusalem to produce tears and allow herself to grieve as though her eyes are the swelling sea.

**Isaiah’s Restoration**

The narrator fails to offer comfort in the wake of Jerusalem’s unfathomable situation, leaving the reader submerged in the limitless depths of Jerusalem’s immeasurable pain. As the sea seems to stretch out to infinity, there is no foreseeable end to Jerusalem’s suffering.

Nevertheless, Isaiah’s prophecies of comfort seem to refer to these verses in *Eikha*, filling the void created by the narrator’s inadequacies. First, Isaiah calls to God, who can control the irrepressible sea, to restore order to a chaotic world:

Awaken, awaken, garb yourself with strength, arm of God,

Awaken like days of old, like ancient generations…

Are You not the One who dried up *yam* (the sea), the great depths of the waters? (*Isaiah* 51:9-10)

Isaiah then cites God, who promises Israel that He himself will offer them solace, and that He can absolutely control the wild sea:

I, I, am He who comforts you (*menachemchem*)… And I am your God, [Who] calms the sea and churns up its waves…[[10]](#footnote-10) (*Isaiah* 51:12, 15)

Following this, Isaiah addresses Jerusalem directly, recognizing her brokenness and her misery, due especially to the misfortunes of the wretched children, who faint and lie in the streets:

Awaken, awaken! Arise Jerusalem, for you have drunk from the hands of God the cup of His wrath… There was none to guide her from all of the children that she birthed, and there is none to support her hand from all of the children that she raised. Two [calamities] have befallen you. Who will show sympathy to you? Plundering and brokenness (*shever*), starvation and sword: Who can console you? Your children fainting, lying prone on every street corner… who are filled with the wrath of God, with the rebuke of your God. (*Isaiah* 51:17-20).

Finally, Isaiah promises the reversal of Jerusalem’s misfortunes, the recovery of her dignity and future:

Awaken, awaken! Garb [yourself] in strength, Zion!

Garb yourself in clothes of majesty, Jerusalem, Holy City!

For no longer will the uncircumcised and impure come against you.

Shake yourself off, arise from the dust,[[11]](#footnote-11) captives of Jerusalem.

Unfasten the chains on your neck, captives of the Daughter of Zion! (*Isaiah* 52:1-2)

Isaiah’s prophecy urges Israel to cease the dismal mourning of exile and captivity, and replace it with the joy and dignity of liberation, a celebration of the rectification of *Eikha’s* dreadful scene.

**Eikha 2:14**

**נְבִיאַ֗יִךְ חָ֤זוּ לָךְ֙**

**שָׁ֣וְא וְתָפֵ֔ל**

**וְלֹֽא־גִלּ֥וּ עַל־עֲוֹנֵ֖ךְ**

 **לְהָשִׁ֣יב שְׁבוּתֵ֑ךְ**

**וַיֶּ֣חֱזוּ לָ֔ךְ**

**מַשְׂא֥וֹת שָׁ֖וְא וּמַדּוּחִֽים**

**Your prophets prophesied for you**

**falsehood and triviality**

**And they did not reveal[[12]](#footnote-12) your transgressions**

**To return you to your former state[[13]](#footnote-13)**

**And they prophesied for you**

**False and misleading oracles**

The previous verse concluded with a seemingly rhetorical question directed toward the broken Jerusalem: “Who can heal you?” This verse directs our attention to the prophets, who may well provide the elusive cure.[[14]](#footnote-14) Requisitioning the prophets proves to be futile. The prophets cannot offer a remedy, for they have failed Jerusalem and led her astray with their false prophecies. In a verse redolent with linguistic allusions to ourverse, Jeremiah censures the false prophets for their ill-conceived and futile words:

And they healed (*va-yerapu*) the brokenness of the daughter of my people (*shever bat ammi*) fallaciously, saying, “Peace, peace!” But there is no peace. (*Jeremiah* 8:11)

Perhaps the query that concludes the previous verse (“Who can heal you?”) is, in fact, rhetorical, expressing Jerusalem’s terminal malaise. If that is the case, our verse functions differently: Instead of a quest to find a healer, this verse searches for the cause of Jerusalem’s dismal condition. In this schema, our verse lambasts the prophets, blaming them for Jerusalem’s catastrophe. To a degree, this functions as an exoneration of the populace, a deflection of their guilt. If the leaders bear primary responsibility, then the punishment of the commoners seems unnecessary or, at the very least, excessive. Once again, we see that this chapter shies away from condemnation of the people.

**False and Misleading Oracles**

The Torah warns against false prophets (*Devarim* 13:2-6; 18:20), acknowledging their immense power to sway the public. Part of the challenge with respect to these charlatans lies simply in identifying them.[[15]](#footnote-15) Biblical anecdotal narratives often present prophets without explicitly calling them false, even when the context clarifies that they have fabricated their oracle.[[16]](#footnote-16) This allows the reader to experience the complexity from the point of view of the Israelite, who encounters the prophet without knowing whether he is a prophet of God or a fraud. False prophets begin to emerge at the very beginning of the period of the divided monarchy,[[17]](#footnote-17) gaining significance as the monarchic period progresses toward self-implosion and catastrophe. The pervasiveness, power, and undue influence of the false prophets obligates God’s genuine prophets to address the danger, and both Jeremiah and Ezekiel devote a great deal of attention to the subject (e.g. *Jeremiah* 23, 27-29; *Ezekiel* 34).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Who are these false prophets? What is their aim and their objective? False prophets do not necessarily maintain a unified character. They tend to assume different guises, ranging from ingenuous to malevolent. Some false prophets appear to be political hacks, hired by the court to support the king’s policies.[[19]](#footnote-19) At times, a prophet appears to function as a political analyst, endeavoring to offer messages that adhere to his geopolitical projection or that of the king that he serves.[[20]](#footnote-20) He may simply be an optimist, offering the people a hopeful view of a promising future. Other false prophets appear to be evil charlatans, deliberately inventing false visions that contradict God’s message.[[21]](#footnote-21) Still others appear ideological, motivated by idolatry, insidiously devoted to their specious worship.[[22]](#footnote-22) Finally, it is possible that the false prophet is himself misled, wrongly believing that he has received visions or messages. The false prophet may be motivated by all or some of the above. One thing, however, is clear: The false prophet operates independent of God; his messages are not the product of divine revelation:

And God said to me: “Falsehood these prophets are prophesying in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them, nor did I speak to them!” (*Jeremiah* 14:14)

Immediately prior to the *churban*, false prophets wreak havoc in several related but distinct ways. Pretenders offer insipid visions of peace and good fortune. They proclaim, “Peace, peace!” with no peace in sight (*Jeremiah* 6:14; 8:11; 23:17; *Ezekiel* 13:10, 16), specifically promising that there will be security in Jerusalem (*Jeremiah* 14:13). These men shun the onus of condemning the people or the leaders (*Jeremiah* 28:8), thereby preventing the nation from seeking repentance or changing their behavior (*Jeremiah* 23:22). False prophets tend to prefer a vapid message, whose murky objective seems to be self-promotion rather than representing God. Even if these men mean well, by shirking their responsibility to warn of the possibility of disaster (*Jeremiah* 28:8; *Ezekiel* 13:6; 22:28-30), they doom the nation to apathy, preventing repentance and accelerating the disaster.

More egregiously, these prophets frequently openly contradict Jeremiah’s unpopular ominous forecasts. When Jeremiah warns of upcoming catastrophe, they declare, “No evil will come upon you” (*Jeremiah* 23:17), and when Jeremiah informs them of the upcoming famine and death, they assure the populace that they will not see sword or famine (*Jeremiah* 14:12-13). Fake prophets interpret specific political events in contrast to that of the true prophet, offering a more desirable prognostication of the outcome. Inevitably, their popularity far outweighs that of the genuine prophet, who cannot manipulate or improve the severe divine message that he has received. Thus, when Jeremiah tells the Judeans that God has decreed that they should accept Babylon’s rule (*Jeremiah* 27:11-13), false prophets contradict him, offering a message of resistance (*Jeremiah* 27:9, 14). When Jeremiah says that Babel will attack Jerusalem, the false prophets refute his prophecy (*Jeremiah* 37:19). Jeremiah’s hint that God will surely destroy the Temple is met with outrage, indignation, and a death sentence upon Jeremiah (*Jeremiah* 26:8-9, 11), all stemming from an obstinate, pervasive belief that God would not destroy His own house (*Jeremiah* 7:4).[[23]](#footnote-23) Hananiah ben Azur deflects Jeremiah’s prophetic advice that they should suffer the yoke of Babel with his dramatic pronouncement that the yoke of Babel will imminently be broken (*Jeremiah* 28:2-4). When Jeremiah prophecies that Babel will ransack the remaining vessels of Temple at God’s behest (*Jeremiah* 27:21-22), charlatans promise the return of those vessels already plundered (*Jeremiah* 27:16). Jeremiah foresees a lengthy stay in Babel, while false prophets roughly reject his prophecy, clamoring for Jeremiah’s imprisonment and punishment (*Jeremiah* 29:21-32).

These prophets make Jeremiah’s personal life difficult, often persecuting him physically in an attempt to punish him and prevent him from prophecy. More importantly, they make his prophetic task impossible to fulfill, undermining his every attempt to present God’s word to the people. Jeremiah cannot effectively have an impact upon the populace because no one listens to him. The nation prefers the soothing and vacuous words of the false prophets. Thus, these imposters do not foresee the upcoming disaster, nor do they prevent any possibility of change for the better. Their influence is unquestionable, the damage they wreak is immeasurable, and the spiritual repercussions abound. Indeed, the false prophets bear a large share of the responsibility for Jerusalem’s disaster.

1. *Jeremiah* 19:11 uses a similar phrase to prepare the inhabitants of Jerusalem for a calamity that has no remedy. See also the language of *Devarim* 28:35, which delineates the punishments that the nation will receive if they disobey God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tehillim* 77 describes a similar situation, in which the Psalmist cannot speak (v. 5b), and perhaps also cannot cry (v. 5a), as a result of his theological reflections (vv. 8-10). Lexical similarities connect this Psalm to *Eikha* in other ways as well. We will examine these similarities further in an excursus on chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On translating the word as witness, see Targum and Ibn Ezra. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As is common in biblical scholarship, scholars often prefer to resolve difficulties such as these by emending the text. Some scholars (e.g. D. Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 33, 39) following the Latin Vulgate, change the *daled* to a *resh*, with the meaning *e’erokh*, “to what can I compare you.” (It is possible that the Vulgate was translating from a text that had the word with a *resh*, which is easily confused with a *daled*.) The Vulgate’s emendation yields a series of three nearly identical rhetorical questions in a row, while the massoretic text produces a richer verse, containing a more diverse set of questions.

Another solution is to regard the *daled* in this word as doubled. The word would then meaning to strengthen or encourage (*Tehillim* 20:9, 146:9): “How can I strengthen you?” See Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 164. While this query makes sense in context, it is not plainly indicated by the form of the word, which lacks a *dagesh* (diacritical mark) in the *daled*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 96, observes that the book of *Eikha* itself bears witness to Jerusalem’s pain, thereby memorializing her and testifying to her continued significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rashi (*Eikha* 2:13) assumes that this is simply a psychological truth: when a suffering person hears of another person who suffers similarly, it provides solace for him. See also Rasag. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Tehillim* 104:25 and *Job* 11:9 allude to the vastness of the sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. God’s control over the seemingly uncontrollable waters is a common biblical trope (e.g. *Tehillim* 89:10; 104:6-7; *Isaiah* 51:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This wordplay works both in Hebrew (*shever* and *mashber*) and in English (brokenness and breakers). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. My translation follows Ibn Ezra’s explanation of *Isaiah* 51:15. See also *Jeremiah* 6:16, cited by Ibn Ezra to explain the word *roga*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Eikha* 2:10, where the elders place dust (*afar*) on their heads as a sign of mourning. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The word *gilu*, meaning to reveal, evokes the word *gala*, meaning exile. This wordplay links the prophet’s failure to reveal sin with the decree of exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The exact translation of this phrase, “*le-hashiv* *shevuteikh*,” remains unclear. A wordplay between the word *shuv* (return) and the word *shvi* (captive) is common (see e.g. *Ezekiel* 16:53; *Hosea* 6:11; *Amos* 9:14). Sometimes the phrase refers to returning captives (*Devarim* 30:3), while on other occasions the context suggests that it means to restore one’s fortune (*Job* 42:10), as I have translated above. It seems unlikely that accusation against the false prophets revolves around their inability to return the captives, given that the Judean exile and captivity occurs only now. Nevertheless, this double entendre hints to the responsibility that the prophets bear for the upcoming exile and captivity of the Judean population. Moshkovitz, *Lamentations*, p. 15, maintains that this phrase suggests the word *teshuva*, meaning repentance. In this schema, the failure of the prophets includes their incompetence in persuading the people to repent and return to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jerusalem’s remedy lies in revealing her sins and returning to God. See *Hosea* 6:10-11, whose lexical similarity to our passage supports this assumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Devarim* 18:21-22 acknowledges that recognizing a false prophet represents a difficult challenge. The complicated matter of identifying a prophetic oracle as false arises in several biblical contexts (see e.g. *I Kings* 22; *Jeremiah* 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For example, the elderly prophet from Beit El is never called a false prophet, even though the text informs us that he lied (*I Kings* 13:19). Nor does the text refer to Hananiah ben Azur as a false prophet. He is simply called “*ha-navi*,” (*Jeremiah* 28:5), which is the same title appended to Jeremiah in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The first story that revolves around a false prophet seems to be that of the elderly prophet from Beit El in *I* *Kings* 13:11-32. While he is consistently referred to simply as a prophet, as noted above, his connection to the errant shrine in Beit El, his clash with the Judean man of God, and the textual indication that he lies all cohere together to suggest that he is a charlatan. Most biblical interpreters assume this (e.g. Targum Jonathan, Rashi, Ralbag, Radak). Nevertheless, it seems that this prophet does receive a true prophecy in *I Kings* 13:20, and some biblical interpreters (e.g. Abravanel) therefore think otherwise. For more on this incident, see A. Israel, *I Kings: Torn in Two* (Maggid, 2013), pp. 171-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The description of the false and misleading prophecies in *Eikha* 2:14 coheres linguistically with several passages in these prophetic books. See e.g. *Jeremiah* 23:12-13 and *Ezekiel* 13:6-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. E.g. *I Kings* 22:5-14; *Amos* 7:12-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example, some of the prophecies issued with respect to Babel (e.g. *Jeremiah* 27:14, 16; 37:19) likely rely on the prophet’s assessment of current events and his analysis of Babel’s strength and power. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. E.g. *Jeremiah* 23:14, 26-27, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. E.g. *Jeremiah* 23:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It is unclear who exactly speaks the “false” words of *Jeremiah* 7:4. Words of *sheker* are often associated with false prophets (e.g. *Jeremiah* 5:31; 14:14). See also the role of the “prophets” in the continuation of *Jeremiah* 7, which takes place in *Jeremiah* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)