YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #42: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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***Eikha* 3:48-51**

**פַּלְגֵי־מַ֙יִם֙ תֵּרַ֣ד עֵינִ֔י**

**עַל־שֶׁ֖בֶר בַּת־עַמִּֽי**

**עֵינִ֧י נִגְּרָ֛ה וְלֹ֥א תִדְמֶ֖ה**

**מֵאֵ֥ין הֲפֻגֽוֹת**

**עַד־יַשְׁקִ֣יף וְיֵ֔רֶא**

**יְקֹוָ֖ק מִשָּׁמָֽיִם**

**עֵינִי֙ עֽוֹלְלָ֣ה לְנַפְשִׁ֔י**

**מִכֹּ֖ל בְּנ֥וֹת עִירִֽי**

**My eyes gush streams of water**

**Over the brokenness of the daughter of my nation**

**My eyes flow and they do not stop**

**They refuse to cease**

**Until He looks and sees,**

**God from the heavens**

**My eyes do harm[[1]](#footnote-1) to my soul**

**Because of all the daughters of my city**

After a brief appearance of the plural voice, the dominant voice of the individual reemerges in this chapter. But now we encounter a completely changed individual. The *gever* who recounted his narrative at the opening of the chapter was self-absorbed and alienated from his community; this transformed individual expresses his consuming grief for the suffering of his nation. He does not look inward, but outward; it is concern for others that produces his tears. The experience of speaking as part of the community in verses 40-47 has kindled his empathy for them. Willingly assuming the role of representative of his people, he turns his grief-stricken sobs into an instrument, designed to force God’s attentions.

Eyes and eyesight emerge as the dominant image of this passage. Referring to his own eyes in three out of four of the verses,[[2]](#footnote-2) the individual describes the streams of tears that flow from his eyes, harming his soul and disabling him from accomplishing anything beyond his incessant weeping. Even should he seek a respite, his eyes seem to act independent of him, adamantly refusing to cease their torrential current. Two of the *ayin* verses (49 and 51) begin with the word *eini* (my eyes), surrounding the middle *ayin* verse (50), which focuses on God’s sight. In that verse, the word *ayin* (eye) is noticeably absent; God’s corporeality is omitted, even as the individual demands that God looks and sees. By surrounding this petition with his own tears, the individual’s use of his human eyes frame and encircle God’s divine sight. The speaker seems to surround God, creating a barricade of tears, designed to force God to respond to his request.

R. Yosef Kara explicitly links verses 49 and 50, resulting in an unrelenting posture of human determination: “My eyes flow and they do not stop, they refuse to cease until God looks and sees!” In an attempt to coerce God, the weeping individual declares that he will not cease his weeping until God agrees to look. This presumptuous declaration recalls the story of Choni Ha-Ma’agel:

Once it happened that the month of Adar had nearly finished and the rains had not fallen. They sent to Choni Ha-Ma’agel, “Pray, so that rains will fall!” He prayed and no rains fell. [Choni] drew a circle and stood in it, the same way that Habakkuk the prophet did… [Choni] said to Him, “Master of the Universe! Your children have placed their hopes in me that I am a [favored] member of Your household. I swear in Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children!” Rain began to drip [in small amounts]. His students said to him, “We believe that the rains have only come to free you from your oath.” [Choni] said [to God], “This is not what I requested. Rather, [I requested] rains that fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves.” The [rains then] fell with angry force… [Choni] said to Him, “This is not what I requested. Rather, [I requested] desirable rains, of blessing and bounty.” Rains [then fell] in a satisfactory way until all the nation went up [for shelter] to the Temple Mount because of the rains. (*Ta’anit* 23a)

Biblical passages often imbue humans with surprising audacity and boldness in their approach to God, especially within the context of the human attempt to contend with what appears to be divine injustice. Avraham boldly queries, “Will not the Judge of the earth do justice?” (*Bereishit* 18:25), while Moses demands that God erase him from His book if He does not forgive the nation’s transgressions (*Shemot* 32:32). The *gever*’s insistent position before God on behalf of his people coheres well with the actions of biblical leaders, especially those whose impertinent words are uttered by an advocate of the nation who works tirelessly to represent Israel.

*Will God see?*

A minimal request, the individual does not petition God to deliver his people from suffering or engage in any specific action to alleviate their grim reality. As we have seen on other occasions, the recurring request in the book is for God to *look* at His nation.[[3]](#footnote-3) This implies, of course, that God has turned His face away from His people, as He warned them that He would do if they sinned egregiously (*Devarim* 31:17-18). Reestablishing communication with God would seem to be the first necessary step in restoring a relationship with Him. Perhaps the assumption is that if God looks down from heaven and witnesses the terrible suffering of His people, then He will undoubtedly have compassion, inducing God to deliver His nation from their misery. After all, God is a merciful God. Moreover, this is precisely what occurred at the inception of God’s relationship with the nation of Israel, when they were enslaved in Egypt (*Shemot* 2:25; 3:7-10). Forcing God’s attention seems to be the first step in effecting change.

*The Missing Tears*

To understand properly the significance of this copious weeping, we turn our attention back to chapter 2, viewing our chapter as the continuation and progression from the previous one.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the last chapter, Jerusalem finds herself in a crucible of horror, as she bears witness to the starvation of the children who languish and die in the streets. She describes her paralysis and the cessation of her tears (2:11),[[5]](#footnote-5) a reaction that she attributes to the “brokenness of the daughter of my nation.” At the conclusion of her description, Jerusalem falls silent, lacking the energy or desire to speak or weep. The narrator, who invests his best efforts in inducing Jerusalem to revive and return to an active role, fills Jerusalem’s leaden silence (2:13-19). In verses 18-19, the narrator addresses Jerusalem’s paralysis directly, pleading with Jerusalem to cry and sob, to spill out her tears unceasingly before God. He also urges Jerusalem to resume speech and prayer, to shout in the night, spilling out her heart before God:

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!

The narrator’s persuasive urging achieves a modicum of success; in verse 20, Jerusalem does at last resume her speech. Nevertheless, Jerusalem declines the narrator’s insistent counsel that she weep; in chapter 2, Jerusalem does not cry. Jerusalem remains, therefore, in a state of partial, perhaps willful, paralysis. Chapter 2 concludes without resolving the problem of Jerusalem’s discontinued tears. She has withdrawn into a state of numb paralysis, refusing to allow her emotions to flow freely. Presumably, this situation impedes Jerusalem’s ability to heal, and perhaps her ability to reconcile properly with God.

As the *gever* develops in chapter 3, he reacquires this lost ability (or inclination) to cry. In our passage (3:47-51), tears flow freely, employed deliberately in order to advocate on his nation’s behalf. Metaphors and words link up to the previous chapter, offering deliberate closure for Jerusalem’s determined refusal to cry. The narrator had previously urged Jerusalem to let her tears flow down (*horidi*) like a *nachal* (a brook or stream) (2:18).[[6]](#footnote-6) In our passage, the individual proclaims that his eyes will flow down (*teirad*) like *palgei* *mayim* (streams of water).[[7]](#footnote-7) Pressing Jerusalem further, the narrator in chapter 2 insisted that she should not cease her weeping (*al titini fugat lakh*), that she should not allow her eyes (*bat* *aineikh*) to stop (*al tidom*) (2:18). The representative of his nation in our chapter declares that this is precisely his intention: “My eyes flow and they do not stop (*ve-lo* *tidmeh*); they refuse to cease (*mei-ein* *hafugot*).”

Within the scheme of the continuous narrative of the book, chapter 3 offers a slight but significant progression forward. Moving past the emotional and religious paralysis of chapter 2, this chapter reopens the floodgates, allowing the sufferer to weep torrential tears.

One final point cements these chapters together even more securely, illustrating the progression of the chapters. As we noted, it was the “brokenness of the daughter of my nation,” the miserable starvation of the children, that precipitated Jerusalem’s numb silence (2:11). The narrator attempted to capitalize on these powerful sights, imploring Jerusalem to resume her cries and prayer, “Because of the lives of your children, who are fainting from hunger on every street corner” (2:19). Jerusalem remains impervious to this argument, preferring not to cry rather than to release a torrent of tears. The individual of chapter 3, however, reemerges in the final section as an avid representative of his people, moved to tears by the very same phrase, “the brokenness of the daughter of my nation.”[[8]](#footnote-8) That which caused Jerusalem’s absence of tears in chapter 2 has the opposite effect at the end of chapter 3, providing closure and allowing the narrative of *Eikha* to progress forward, one paltry step at a time.

1. The word *alal* generally means a deed or an action. In this verse, translating the word as an action makes little sense. Because in the book of *Eikha* the word often has a negative connotation, indicating an action meant to do someone harm (see e.g. 1:12, 22; 2:20), I have offered the above translation (following some modern translations. such as House, *Lamentations*, p. 402). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Once again, the subdivisions do not seem to be dependent on the alphabetic subunits (see my explanation of verses 27-30 above). The third *peh* verse (38) shifts into the first person speaker, containing the leading word, *eini*, directly in the center of the verse. In two of the *ayin* verses (49 and 51), the word *eini* appears at the opening of the sentence, as noted above. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. *Eikha* 1:9, 11; 2:20; 5:1. For other similar biblical verses, see Is. 63:15; Psalms 33:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This idea rebuts the notion held by some scholars that the book of *Eikha* is a loosely connected collection of songs. See e.g. Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 191. The linguistic and thematic connection between these passages suggests deliberate and original arrangement, such that this part of chapter 3 functions as a continuation and rectification of chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In our examination of 2:11, we offered different understandings of Jerusalem’s words, “*kalu* *ve-dema’ot* *einay*.” There, I explained why I prefer this interpretation, which coheres better with the flow of the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a similar use of this metaphor, see *Tehillim* 119:136. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In *Iyov* 20:17, the words *peleg* and *nachal* appear in tandem, maintaining similar meanings. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A similar verse containing a similar idea appears in *Jeremiah* 14:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)