YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #44**

***Eikha*: Chapter Four**

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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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**Introduction: A Chapter of Numb Pain**

Chapter 4 veers away from the story of the individual, returning the book to its account of national anguish. Two-thirds the length of the previous two chapters, Chapter 4 has the same twenty-two verses as Chapters 1 and 2, but each verse is shorter, containing just two sentences instead of three. Brevity indicates despair; there is not much left to report, speech seems increasingly pointless. The city can no longer sustain its starving populace — the city’s fall and the exile of her inhabitants appears imminent.

The speakers in this chapter also deviate from the pattern established in Chapters 1 and 2. Similar to Chapters 1 and 2, the third-person narrator opens the chapter, offering a detached narration of the sights; however, while those chapters shift from the objective speaker to a more emotional first-person account at the midpoint of the chapter (verse 11), in Chapter 4 it seems that the first-person narrator has vanished. In Chapter 4, the third-person account continues long past the chapter’s midpoint.[[1]](#footnote-1) The speaker finally shifts in verse 17, not to the first-person singular but to the first-person plural, a communal voice that prevails until the final two verses of the chapter, which seem to revert to the narrator. The communal voice (verses 17-20) narrates the final dashed hopes of the nation, whose demise follows on the heels of its quashed expectations. These verses move rapidly from brief hope to utter despair, culminating in the enemy’s pursuit, ambush and ultimate success. The account concludes as the leader falls into a snare, bringing all hopes of any measure of continued autonomy to a crashing halt.

The technical construction of the chapter, represented mostly in the matter-of-fact voice of the detached narrator, indicates that despair has settled in alongside a terrible sense of resignation and ineluctable doom. The communal voice musters its last reserve of strength in a desperate quest to find a last-minute reprieve. Failing that, the third-person narrator re-emerges with his sights resignedly set upon the future, in which the enemy will receive its due and Israel will be returned from exile. The third-person account in verses 21-22 contains several second-person addresses, interspersing harsh imprecations directed at the Edomite enemy with a message of comfort directed to the “daughter of Zion.” The shift that we find in these final verses offers a modicum of hope at the conclusion of a chapter shrouded in despondency.

This chapter focuses its attention on the people of Jerusalem; the general populace along with its children, mothers, Nazarites, prophets, and priests. By singling out particular groups, the chapter offers a glimpse of individual experiences, a grim snapshot of human tragedy. Vivid metaphors merge with the most graphic sustained portrait of suffering in the book, focusing particularly on the horrors of famine. In its wake, Jerusalem’s inhabitants treat precious jewels and once-cherished children with similar indifference, mothers abandon their humanity and corpses litter Jerusalem’s streets. Details of the images of famine assault our senses; we visualize the infants’ parched tongues and we hear the children’s desperate plea for bread. Blind people wander the streets — a metaphor for the obtuse sinners, but also an apt description of the terror of sightlessness, and the inability to avoid the impurity and filth that saturate Jerusalem. Despair colors this chapter in dark tones; the lustrous gold, shining white, and rosy-cheeked vigor of Jerusalem’s bright past fades, giving way to black tones, the shadowy color of despair. Blackened by hunger and desiccated by thirst, people no longer recognize their fellow. Lack of recognition metaphorically suggests antisocial behavior; society breaks down as hunger predominates, and every individual must seek his own survival at the expense of his fellow.

Siege gives way to exile (verses 15-16), releasing the people from the entrapment of the starving city. The chapter returns our view to Jerusalem (verses 17-20) even after depicting their movement toward exile. In these verses, the communal voice anticipates an imminent exile. This back-and-forth description may accurately describe the reality, in which exile occurs in stages, and the chapter returns to Jerusalem in order to witness the next wave of expulsion. More poignantly, this chapter illustrates the difficulty of abandoning Jerusalem; though the reader follows the exiles on their journey outside of Jerusalem, our attention immediately returns to the city, as we relive her terrible last moments of impending doom.

Exile brings the nations (“*goy*[*im]*”) to the foreground as the chapter draws to its end. Portrayed three times (verses 15, 17 and 20), the “nations” reject and betray the sullied people. Conditions for co-existence vanish; hope in a leader who can navigate their contact with the nations disappears alongside his entrapment and capture (20).

Strikingly, this chapter lacks petition or prayer. Unlike the first three chapters, even the first-person speaker does not address God, not even to issue the requisite final plea that God should wreak vengeance on Israel’s enemies. With little faith that God will intervene on His nation’s behalf, this chapter tumbles toward a bleak conclusion, in which the nation lacks all prospects, left bereft of God or hope in His salvation.

Yet, despite its gloomy demeanor, this chapter does not end on a despondent note. Even if the chapter does not contain a petition to God, it does express belief in ultimate justice. In a surprising reversal, the chapter concludes with a confident declaration of a just future. Edom will surely meet its deserved fate. Sins have caused this catastrophe; repudiation of sins will surely overturn it. The lessons learned from the previous chapter resonate clearly as the narrator utters his promising conclusion: “When your sins cease, daughter of Zion, He will not continue to exile you!”

**Structure**

Thematically, this chapter divides into the same two parts found in Chapters 1 and 2. The first ten verses of the chapter describe the terrible effects of the famine, an outgrowth of the siege. The account progresses in an apparently chronological fashion; the vulnerable children suffer first (verses 4-5), but as the famine progresses, the adult population experiences its effects as well (verses 7-9). The climax of the famine appears in verse 10, which depicts the women cooking their children, in an effort to obtain sustenance to survive. The second half of the chapter opens with the physical destruction of the city, which concludes the siege depicted in the first half. Events play out in a mostly sequential fashion; destruction (verses 11-14) precedes expulsion (verses 15-16), while the climax of the account ensues with the capture of the leader (verse 20).

Thematically, the chapter divides at its structural center, rendering the following division:

1-10: The Famine

11-20: Destruction and Exile

21-22: Conclusion

As we discussed above, the shift in speaker occurs only toward the end of the chapter (verse 17), suggesting an uneven chapter division:

1-16: Third-person account

17-20: First-person plural account

21-22: Third-person account

Methodological Note:

In my commentary on this chapter, I have desisted from my customary attempt to find comfort in the catastrophe of *Eikha*. This chapter seems to defy alleviation; its testimony of horror seeps insidiously into the reader’s heart and mind, representing the low point of the book. Nevertheless, the chapter itself refuses to allow its reader to sink irrevocably into the mire of the atrocities that it records. As the chapter spins into the abyss, recording events that appear to spiral out of control, the portrayal of the nation’s rapid descent toward irrevocable annihilation suddenly screeches to a halt. In an unexpected turnaround, the chapter concludes by offering the most hopeful moment in the entire book, asserting that Israel’s sins will end and so will her exile. At the same time, her enemy will receive its just desserts, thereby restoring justice to the world. The end of this chapter renders any feeble attempt I might make pointless; Chapter 4’s optimistic ending speaks for itself, offering a remarkable upward movement in a chapter that seemed headed for unmitigated catastrophe.

***Eikha* 4:1**

**אֵיכָה֙ יוּעַ֣ם זָהָ֔ב**

**יִשְׁנֶ֖א הַכֶּ֣תֶם הַטּ֑וֹב**

**תִּשְׁתַּפֵּ֙כְנָה֙ אַבְנֵי־קֹ֔דֶשׁ**

**בְּרֹ֖אשׁ כָּל־חוּצֽוֹת**

**How the gold is dimmed,**

**The fine gold altered,**

**The holy stones spilled**

**On every street corner.**

Opening with the familiar cry of despair and incomprehension, “*Eikha*,” Chapter 4 returns to the tone of lament previously heard in Chapters 1 and 2. Bemoaning the fate of the city’s precious objects, Chapter 4 sets out on its anguished course, assessing the physical and moral impact of the siege and destruction upon its victims.

The substance of this verse seems at first glance to be literal. Contrasting past glory to the present miserable reality, the verse highlights Jerusalem’s drastic fall from splendor to dullness, the painful contrast between the city as it was and as it is now.[[2]](#footnote-2) Objects of value no longer shine; their value depreciated, they litter the streets. Why in fact do these precious gems overflow into the street? Is this exhaustion, carelessness, or neglect? Who is responsible for this peculiar situation?

As many scholars note, gold does not dim. Perhaps, then, it has become sullied, covered in dirt, having been tossed into the street along with all of the people’s once-valued treasures. More likely, the verse suggests that the gold’s **value** has dimmed; after all, of what value are precious jewels when one can no longer exchange them for food? Jewels are but a symbol of value. They maintain their value only insofar as one can exchange them for sustenance and necessary items. A city depleted of food cannot continue to value objects that have no inherent worth. During famine or siege, once-precious gems appear littered in the streets, ignored by all passersby, a stunning symbol of a city desperate for food.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The rejection of these expensive objects, moreover, recalls the past glory of Jerusalem, the royal city. Evoking the glorious palaces of the Davidic kings, the gold and precious stones presently lie dully in the streets, illustrating the dissolution of the lustrous wealth, royalty, and beauty of Jerusalem’s past.

Jerusalem’s Temple also comes to mind, a resplendent building glistening with gold (see: *I Melakhim* 6:20-22, 30; 7:48-50; *Yirmeyahu* 52:19), indicating God’s splendor and regal divine power.[[4]](#footnote-4) The “holy stones” that now lie in the street evoke Jerusalem’s former sacred status, a city that bore the divine presence.

What are these holy stones and why do they lie neglected in the street?[[5]](#footnote-5) The stones may be the structural stones of the Temple (*see* *I Melakhim* 5:31, 7:9-12), which lie in the street following the Temple’s destruction.[[6]](#footnote-6) The desecration of the Temple walls concludes an era in which Jerusalem’s purpose and glory revolved around her Temple.[[7]](#footnote-7) Possibly, the “holy stones” are the Temple treasures, the costly gemstones that lie in its coffers.

More specifically, they may refer to the precious stones set on the ephod and breastplate of the High Priest, each one etched with the names of one of the twelve tribes (*Shemot* 25:7; 28:15-21).[[8]](#footnote-8) These stones once rested proudly on the High Priest’s chest as he discharged the sacrificial service, confirming his role as the representative of all twelve tribes in his sacred service of God. Tossed unceremoniously into the streets, these stones emerge as a symbol of the ruin and disrepair of the nation. The failed High Priest also comes into focus; the chief custodian of the Temple has not managed to protect the sacred space, the city or the nation.

Independent of context, this verse focuses on the valuable objects of Jerusalem that have become worthless and disposable. However, the following verse (4:2) suggests that the primary sense of this verse is figurative, a metaphor for the treatment of Zion’s children, who were once valued as gold. The “holy stones” that spill out onto the streets represent humans, a symbol supported by the engraving of human names onto the precious stones of the High Priest’s breastplate. In this reading, the children of Zion become mirrors of their holy Temple; the demolition of the Temple parallels the destruction of the people. The enemy’s ability to break through the protective ranks of the people to destroy its holy site spells the end of their spirit, their spiritual vigor, and their meaningful existence.

The phrase that describes the public place where the stones lie, namely, “on every street corner,” (*be-rosh kol chutzo*t) further suggests that the stones represent the children. This exact phrase appears in *Eikha* 2:19 to describe the dying children of Jerusalem, who languish from famine “on every street corner.” This unique phrase in the book (appearing only in these two places) links the two images together, confirming that our verse refers to the hapless children, who wither in the streets depleted of their value.[[9]](#footnote-9) The verb that describes them “spilling out” into the streets also evokes the starving children of Chapter 2, who “spill out” their life in their mothers’ bosoms (2:12).

Read independently, the verse highlights the depreciation of Jerusalem’s value. Its splendor and jewels no longer shine or warrant respect; the city no longer maintains its unique royal and sacred status. Nevertheless, the following verses indicate that the simple meaning of this first verse of the chapter narrowly focuses upon one segment of the population: the precious children, who litter the streets as though worthless. *Eikha* frequently returns to the children; their exile, torment, and death point to the breakdown of humanity as well as the collapse of Israel’s future.

Unsurprisingly, the prophecies of return from Babylon to Jerusalem reverses this image of the children, whose restoration mirrors that of the city’s return to her regal status. The following prophecy informs Jerusalem of the imminent return of her children:

Hasten your children [to return]…

Lift up your eyes and see all of them gathering and coming to you, I swear, says God. For you shall wear them all like jewels and adorn yourself with them like a bride…

Your children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: “This place is too narrow for me, draw aside for me so that I may settle!” And you will say in your heart, “Who has born these for me, for I am bereaved and alone, exiled and shunned — who raised them? I was left alone — where did these come from?”

So says God: I will raise my hand to the nations and lift up my banner to peoples, and they will bring your sons in their bosoms and carry your daughters on their shoulders. Kings shall tend to your children and their queens shall be your nursemaids. (*Yeshayahu* 49:17-23)

In this passage, Jerusalem’s children refer to the entire nation. Nevertheless, the images of shining children worn proudly like jewels, carried tenderly and properly nurtured, reverse the cruelty displayed toward the children in the Book of *Eikha*. The passage in *Yeshayahu* seems designed to restore Israel to a situation in which parents cherish their children and maintain hope for a glorious future.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. The first-person singular reference to *“bat ammi*” appear in verses 3, 6 and 10. Offering some personality to the speaker, it does not change his anonymity and the sense that he speaks not from the personal perspective of the city/ people, but rather as an observer of the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See our discussion of *Eikha* 1:1, in which we noted the phenomenon of comparing the past to the present in the book. We will examine this at greater length later in this chapter (4:5, 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Yosef Kara (4:1) notes how unlikely it is that one would dispose of precious jewels. However, in a similar context, *Yechezkel* 7:19 describes the failure of the people’s silver and gold to fill their stomachs during the terrible famine. See also *Tzefanya* 2:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Aramaic Targum on this verse (4:1) refers explicitly to the gold and shine of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a review of this topic, see Emerton, J.A., “The Meaning of ʾabnē qōdeš in Lamentations 4:1,” *ZAW* 79 (1967) pp. 233-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This seems to be the Latin Vulgate’s reading, which translates: “The stones of the sanctuary are scattered at the top of every street.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This reading suggests that *Eikha* 4:1 describes the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. Generally, however, the first ten verses of the chapter focus on the famine in the city, which is more likely a product of the ongoing siege prior to the Babylonian penetration of the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See R. Yosef Kara on 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This exact phrase appears only twice more in *Tanakh* (*Yeshayahu* 51:20; *Nachum* 3:10). Intriguingly, this phrase always describes children who lie “on every street corner,” a symbol of a society that has lost its future, along with its moral compass. The context and language of *Yeshayahu* 51:20 are particularly linked to the Book of *Eikha*, as we have noted previously. Other biblical passages refer to scenes that take place in the streets (*chutzot*), but lack the complete phrase that we are discussing here. We will return to this topic later in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A similar idea appears when God promises Moshe that the children of slavery will leave Egypt bedecked in jewels (*Shemot* 3:22). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)