YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde zt"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #48**

***Eikha*: Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:10**

**יְדֵ֗י נָשִׁים֙ רַחֲמָ֣נִיּ֔וֹת**

**בִּשְּׁל֖וּ יַלְדֵיהֶ֑ן**

**הָי֤וּ לְבָרוֹת֙ לָ֔מוֹ**

**בְּשֶׁ֖בֶר בַּת־עַמִּֽי**

**The hands of compassionate women**

**Cooked their children;**

**They were food for them**

**In the brokenness of the daughter of my people.**

**A Dispassionate Account**

Compassionate women cook their children for food.

A spare, unemotional descriptive statement; its calm belies its madness, the grim emblem of an unbalanced world. The unadorned testimony dispassionately notes the collapse of the nation, its utter brokenness, “*be-shever* *bat* *ammi.*”[[1]](#footnote-1) Women consuming their children represent a cataclysm marked by moral bankruptcy; human relationships unravel and people commit unspeakable atrocities, beyond comprehension. Drained of moral accountability, society has no recourse for repair, moving inexorably toward its demise.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In spite of its factual tone, this statement stuns, leaving the reader horrified and incredulous.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is made even more remarkable because of its absence of emotion, judgement, or pain, the reader uncomfortably observing the dissonance between the subject matter and its telling.

In *Eikha* 2:20, we empathized as Jerusalem howled in anguish, furiously pointing an accusing finger at God: “Look God and see! To whom have You done this? When women consume their fruits, their well-nurtured children!” The narrator’s detachment here conveys apathy; he appears unmoved by the terrible sights. How can the narrator present this horror in such an understated fashion?

In Chapter 2, Jerusalem narrates the account; perhaps the detached observer of Chapter 4 maintains a consciously objective tone. Perhaps the narrator finds language inadequate to express the scope of the horror; therefore, he prefers to present the dry facts, allowing the reader to experience the dreadful scene without embellishment. The copious suffering that he has seen in Jerusalem since the events of Chapter 2 may have numbed the narrator, extinguishing his ability to muster up genuine feeling for each fresh harrowing tale. This represents a moral failing similar to others that we encounter in the chapter; famine produces apathy, callousness, and alienation. The narrator’s apathy mirrors that of the subject that he describes: the heartless mothers who consume their children. This stark representation of human failing emerges as a symbol of a society that has lost its moral moorings.

**Womb and Compassion: *Rechem* and *Rachamim***

The word *rachamaniyot* (compassionate women) evokes the *rechem* (womb), highlighting the inherent connection between the biological role of a mother and her emotional involvement. A *midrash* notes the etymological connection between these words, basing itself on our verse:[[4]](#footnote-4)

At that time, she placed her son in her bosom, and stroked him, and kissed him and said, “Woe to your mother that found no joy in you. The arms that carried you should be cut off, and the mouth that kissed you should be sealed, the breast that nursed you should dry up, and the womb that you emerged from should be plucked.”

Why is the womb called a *rechem*? Because it should produce compassion for itself (*mitrachem*). However, due to the terrible sins, that compassion transformed into cruelty, and she became cruel to her son, like a mongoose, which bears and then eats her children.[[5]](#footnote-5) (*Midrash* *Aggada* [Buber], *Devarim* 1)

The compassionate women of Jerusalem (*rachamaniyot*), who calculatedly cook their children for food, previously nurtured them in their womb (*rechem*). Bearing children prompts mothers to develop compassion toward their helpless young, who cannot survive in a world absent of altruistic adult care. The betrayal of these mothers represents a flagrant inversion of normalcy, biological behavior gone awry. It hardly matters whether we view the women as victims or perpetrators. The dissolution of the maternal instinct suggests the ultimate betrayal of compassion, and the demoralizing effect of famine.

Compassion is not restricted to mothers. All humans can cultivate compassion (*rachamim*), whether or not they have a womb that has borne a child. In fact, mothers are not the only ones moved to compassion in *Tanakh*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Fathers also display compassion, stemming from their parental role:

As a father has compassion for his children, so does God have compassion for those that fear Him. (*Tehillim* 103:13).

Biblical passages describe compassion between brothers (*Bereishit* 43:30) and fellow humans (*Zekharya* 7:9; *Tehillim* 112:4), as well as compassion that emerges from kings (*Nechemya* 1:11), court officials (*Daniel* 1:9), and even formerly cruel captors (*I Melakhim* 8:50) or enemies (*Yirmeyahu* 42:12).

The womb lays the foundation for human compassion, as is evident from the etymology of the word *rachamim*. Initially, the womb links the mother and her fetus; in a unique display of altruism, a mother shelters her child for nine months, nurturing, protecting, and sustaining her child with her body. Once the child emerges from her womb, the child continues to require altruistic care and devotion, acts that cultivate compassion among anyone who participates — male and female. Raising children binds humans to their fellows, cultivating relationships based on selflessness, commitment, and shared resources. The experience of child-rearing underlies the success of a society that thrives, educating humans to overcome their innate self-centeredness and linking humans together in a shared quest to create a community, also based on altruism, commitment and shared resources.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this schema, the loss of maternal compassion indicates the implosion of human compassion. As the basis for human relationships evaporates, society invariably caves in, a crumpled heap of moral turpitude and social apathy.

***Devarim* 28: The Fulfillment of the Covenant**

This scenario turns our attention to the chapter in *Devarim* in which God informs the people that as punishment for breaking the covenant, a siege and famine will destroy the pampered society, which will lose its moorings:

**And you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters** that God has given you **in the siege and straits** that your enemies have pressed against you in all of your gates. He who is most tender and delicate amongst you will set his evil eye against his brother and against the wife of his bosom and against the remainder of his sons that he has left over… She who is most **tender and delicate** amongst you; she who has not ventured to allow the sole of her foot to be placed upon the ground because of her delicateness and tenderness, her eye shall be evil against the husband of her bosom and against her son and against her daughter... (*Devarim* 28:53-56)

By drawing on *Devarim* 28, *Eikha* reminds the reader that these events are the result of a longstanding contract between God and His nation, who abrogated the terms of the contract. While this does not mitigate the horror of the scene, it places it within a context of sin and punishment.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**God’s Compassion**

In Chapter 2, the image of women consuming their children causes Jerusalem to hurl an angry accusation at God (*Eikha* 2:20). This verse lacks any such accusation. In fact, God has been noticeably absent from the chapter thus far. Nevertheless, the word *rachamim* recalls the *gever*’s abiding confidence in God’s compassion (*Eikha* 3:22, 32). Generally, biblical passages associate *rachamim* with God, whose compassion appears far more frequently than that of humans in *Tanakh*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Some passages compare God’s compassion to the natural, instinctive one maintained by a parent (e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 31:19).[[10]](#footnote-10) In one striking passage, God maintains that His compassion outweighs even that of the biological mother:

And Zion said, “God has forsaken me and God has forgotten me.” Does a mother forget her child? [Can she desist] from having compassion of the son of her womb? Even if she **could** forget, I would not forget. I have engraved you on the palms [of My hands], your walls are always before me. (*Yeshayahu* 49:14-15)

Nevertheless, God’s compassion for His nation has its limits. Prophets often warn that God may choose to withdraw His compassion toward the nation, deliberately abandoning His natural compassionate state in order to punish and educate them (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 9:16; *Yirmeyahu* 13:14; 16:5).[[11]](#footnote-11) Echoes of God’s discarded compassion echo faintly in our verse as well. Mothers were once expected to be compassionate, but so was God (as we saw in *Eikha* 3:23, 32). A *midrash* astutely observes this idea:

“The hands of compassionate women” — when Yirmeyahu saw this, he began to shout and cry before God. He said, “Master of the Universe, Which nation has experienced troubles like these? Where is Your compassion? Where is Your kindness? Is it not written, ‘God is a merciful God’? You turned compassion into cruelty; You stood up from the chair of compassion and sat [instead] on the chair of judgment.”[[12]](#footnote-12) (*Midrash* *Aggada* [Buber], *Devarim* 1)

The dissipation of the mothers’ compassion mirrors the dissipation of God’s compassion. This idea gathers strength in the following verse. There, God pours out His wrathful fury against Jerusalem, igniting a fire that **consumes** the city’s foundations. The proximity between these verses juxtaposes the scene in which mothers cook their children with the depiction of God’s fire that devours Jerusalem. This suggests a fundamental connection between these scenarios; compassion no longer arrives from its expected sources and the nation suffers the consequences of its absence.

This verse does not directly mention God, successfully maintaining the detachment and alienation from God that prevails in the first part of the chapter. Nevertheless, the reader can hear a muffled trace of God’s betrayal resonating quietly in the subtext.

**Birth, Motherhood, and Nursing**

Language of birth, motherhood, and nursing reverberates throughout the first section of this chapter, underscoring its thematic centrality. Several scholars note the wordplay between *shever,* which means brokenness, and the word *mashber/ mishbar* that alludes to birth, namely, the breach of the womb (e.g. *II* *Melakhim* 19:3; *Yeshayahu* 37:3; *Hoshea* 13:13.)[[13]](#footnote-13) The difficult word “*chalu”* in verse 6 evokes the writhing pain and fear that accompanies birth (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 26:17-18; *Mikha* 4:9; *Tehillim* 48:7.)[[14]](#footnote-14)

*Eikha* 4:7 employs milk as a metaphor that evokes the healthy glow of the Nazarites. This recalls the image of the female jackal’s breast, generously unsheathed to suckle her young, in terrible contrast to the Judean mothers who cruelly resist nursing their parched children (4:3-4). Perhaps the word *saddai* (which we rendered “the field,” but literally means “my fields”) in 4:9 also evokes a wordplay with the *shad* (breast) of *Eikha* 4:3,[[15]](#footnote-15) drawing a parallel between the field that sustains the population and the breast that sustains the infant. The betrayal of the maternal instinct mirrors the betrayal of the land, whose produce no longer functions to sustain her people.

As hope for continuity, seed, and future rapidly fades, images of birth emerge, ironically recalling all that is elusive, all that has been lost. Utilized in in an inverted manner, as death swirls throughout the city, rapaciously claiming its hapless victims, images of fertility and fecundity, once so promising, now emerge to convey the city’s impending demise.

**In Summation: *Eikha* 4:1-10**

The first half of Chapter 4 (1-10) is entirely devoted to describing the devastation wrought by famine. Illustrating the heavy toll that famine exacts on society, both morally and physically, the section twice declares that other deaths (specifically that of Sodom and death by sword, but presumably meaning **any** death) are preferable to famine. The intense depictions of the starving city illustrate this point well, exhibiting the damage that famine wreaks on society.

The famine results in the unraveling of the moral fabric of society, displayed by the focus upon the mothers and children, which frames this section. Once valued as precious, Jerusalem’s mothers neglect their children, refusing them even the most elemental care (4:1-5). The section ends by casting a harsher spotlight on the mothers, who now pay attention to their children, but only as a means of sustenance (4:10).

The effects of the famine progress gradually as the chapter progresses, mirroring the slow spread of starvation throughout Jerusalem. The suffering and demise of the vulnerable children occurs in the earliest stages of the city’s privations (verses 2-5). Unabated, the famine continues to plague the city, collecting victims until even the stronger members of society deteriorate and languish (verses 7-8). The final verse (verse 10) records the desperate straits of a city deep in the throes of utter starvation — only this can account for the incongruous act recorded in the final verse that describes the starved and besieged city.

A visceral section, *Eikha* 4:1-10 explicitly references many individual body parts in various states of health and corrosion. These body parts — hands, breast, tongue, palate, bone, limbs, skin — draw our attention to the intense physicality of the chapter, which, after all, endeavors to convey the physical effects of lack of food. Evoking the instinctive behavior of animals in comparison (and contrast!) to humans further cements the focus on the corporeal in this chapter. Famine dehumanizes, forcing humans to focus their attention on their bodily functions as they slowly deteriorate and fail.

Vivid imagery represents the famine in a series of snapshots, as one might paint an artistic piece, representing not every individual feature, but rather those that capture the moment, the emotion, and the horror. Images remain frozen in various contortions of agony: humans treated as earthenware pots, spilling onto the street and littering it with bodies, like unwanted debris; nursing mothers turn their backs on their infants with indifference; children’s anguished pleading for bread, to no avail; blackened and wizened faces, shrunken skin covering skeletal shadows of human forms; and near-corpses dying on the streets, blending together with those who have already died from sword wounds and starvation.

The chapter partially alleviates the terrible scene by unexpectedly conjuring equally vibrant images from the past, of the world that the nation has lost. Glimpsed beyond the ghastly landscape of death, the past beckons dimly, a bright memory that glitters and shines, providing a painful glimpse of a prosperous and pampered life, nearly forgotten in the grim reality that now envelops them. Increasing the disparity between the present and the past, we observe that from the heights of luxury, Jerusalem has collapsed into the pit of despair. By evoking the past, this terrible section allows some positive imagery to enter. Perhaps without intending to do so, Chapter 4 offers a sliver of consolation to a nation steeped in degradation, briefly allowing the reader to recall Jerusalem’s former nobility.

1. Nevertheless, we should note that the narrator does employ the possessive form of referring to the nation: “*bat* *ammi*,” “daughter of my people,” which suggests some type of emotional involvement in the account. As we have noted, this is the third time that the narrator uses this term in this section (4:3, 6, 10). Oddly, however, the tone of his statements still does not change when he uses this term; throughout the chapter, the narrator displays no pathos when he refers to Jerusalem as *bat ammi*. This tone is strikingly dissimilar to the book’s previous use of this phrase. As we have noted, on both of the occasions where this phrase appears (2:12; 3:48), the narrator utters these words accompanied by intense pathos. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *II Melakhim* 6:24-30 offers a harrowing tale of a similarly horrifying situation in which women are consuming their children during a terrible famine. Writers have often depicted the manner in which famine dehumanizes and reduces people to a bestial and inhuman existence. See, for example, Josephus’ depiction of the famine in besieged Jerusalem by the Romans during the Second Temple Era (*Wars of the Jews:* Book V, Chapter 10, paragraph 3.) Vasily Grossman offers one of the most evocative descriptions of the impact of famine upon humans that I have read, when he describes the deliberate starvation that Stalin caused in the Ukraine in the 1930s. See Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2009) pp. 123-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some scholars remain skeptical as to whether this act actually took place. For example, Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 89, raises the possibility that the book presents cannibalism as a literary trope that describes the last dreadful state of the famine. Alternatively, he suggests that the book wants to illustrate the fulfillment of the curses of *Devarim* 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 938. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although the mongoose has not cultivated a particular reputation for this behavior, feline carnivores (like the mongoose) have been seen killing and eating their young. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To the best of my knowledge, the only biblical narrative that described a mother’s compassion using the word *rachamim* is in *I* *Melakhim* 3:26. Sisera’s mother twice employs the word *rechem* as she gloats that her son surely rapes the women that he captures (*Shoftim* 5:30). With this utterance, she seem to betray and violate her role as mother, abandoning any semblance of compassion or female camaraderie. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I am not claiming that only those who raise children arrive at these ideals, nor would I claim that everyone who raises children arrives at these ideas; rather, the basis of these ideals in a society stems from the extraordinary experience of bearing and nurturing life. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although Chapter 4 does not focus on the sinfulness or responsibility of the people, the book maintains a consistent linguistic thread linking it to other biblical passages that suggest that these events are a consequence of ignored prophetic warnings and violations of the covenantal relationship with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. God’s compassion appears in dozens of contexts. The following is not a comprehensive list, but an attempt to show the breadth and scope of the idea. One of God’s essential defining features is His compassion (e.g. *Shemot* 34:6; *Devarim* 4:31; *II Shemuel* 24:14; *Yoel* 2:13; *Yona* 4:2; *Tehillim* 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8-9), which He often extends to Israel (*Devarim* 30:3; *II Melakhim* 13:23; *Yeshayahu* 14:1; 49:10, 13; 54:7-10; *Yirmeyahu* 12:15; 30:18; 42:12; *Yechezkel* 39:25; *Hoshea* 2:21; *Mikha* 7:19; *Zekharya* 10:6). Moreover, trust in God’s compassion emerges as a formative principle in prayer and petition (*Tehillim* 40:12; 51:3; 69:17; 79:8; 103:5; 116:5; 119:156; *Daniel* 9:9, 18; *Nechemya* 9:17, 19, 27-31.) According to *Kiddushin* 30a, the central verse in the Book of *Tehillim* opens with the words, “And He is compassionate!” (*Tehillim* 78:38), thereby underscoring the centrality of this idea in the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This passage does not clearly refer to a mother; biblical commentaries on this verse (e.g. Radak, *Metzudat David*, Malbim) suggest that the verse refers to the connection between a father and a child. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. An essential component of God’s compassion, stated at the outset (*Shemot* 33:19), is that God can bestow His compassion on whomever He chooses, without having to explain His decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the continuation of this *midrash*, God defends His actions, accusing Israel of sins that warrant this punishment: The Holy Spirit responds to him and says to [Yirmeyahu], “Which nation… has acted as Israel has acted? ‘When the priest and the prophet are murdered in the sanctuary of God’ (*Eikha* 2:20). By the measure of what people mete out so it will be meted out to them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 990-991; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 109. It is also noteworthy that the same word (*shever*) can allude to food, such as corn or grain, which must be broken (threshed) to eat (e.g. *Bereishit* 42:1; 44:2; *Amos* 8:5; *Nechemya* 10:32). Sometimes, this word appears in a verbal form to mean the purchase of grain (e.g. *Bereishit* 43:4; *Devarim* 2:6; *Yeshayahu* 55:1). The brokenness (*shever*) of the people in *Eikha* alludes to the inability to obtain any food. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See the discussions on the various possible meanings of this word in Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 189; Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 80. See also Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 132, who notes the allusion to childbirth. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Some scholars believe that there could be an etymological connection between words written with the letter *shin* and those written with the *sin* (which use the same letter, even if they maintain different sounds). Harris, *Canaanite Dialects*, pp. 33-35, concludes that these two phonemes coincided in much of the Canaanite area, rendering an etymological connection such as this one possible. Another example is a proposed connection between the word *shevua* (oath) and the word *sava* (satiated). See Yael Ziegler, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)