YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #49:**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:11-22**

**An Introduction**

The second part of Chapter 4 widens the lens, shifting from a close-up look at the famine and its human casualties to a general description of the city’s destruction. It appears that the siege has ended, releasing the enemy into the exhausted city. Destruction follows rapidly; the city goes up in flames, which consume its foundations and force the survivors into exile. Jerusalem’s refugees scatter and wander, continuously reliving the story of their desperate and chaotic final moments.

This second section of the chapter (11-22) divides into three parts. The first part (11-16) continues with the detached perspective of the narrator, whose calm demeanor clashes jarringly with the horror of his description. The narrator assigns responsibility for the carnage to God (11) and to the nation’s religious leaders (13), without any accompanying accusation or outrage. The dispassionate presentation no longer even uses the possessive epithet *bat* *ammi* to refer to the nation.

The second part of this section (17-20) employ a first-person plural voice, summoning the community to describe the final, frantic moments of life in Judea, an account accompanied by a rising pitch of anxiety and despair.

The final verses (21-22) directly address the Edomite enemy and the daughter of Zion. The conclusion of Chapter 4 focuses mostly upon vengeance; the dust seems to have settled on the destruction, and the nation fixes its attention upon the impending misfortune of its enemies and a laconic plan for their own return from exile, allowing a ray of light to enter the chapter’s end.

1. 4:11-16: Third-person description
2. 4:17-20: First-person plural description
3. 4:21-22: Third-person description with a second-person address

***Eikha* 4:11-12**

**כִּלָּ֤ה יְקֹוָק֙ אֶת־חֲמָת֔וֹ**

**שָׁפַ֖ךְ חֲר֣וֹן אַפּ֑וֹ**

**וַיַּצֶּת־אֵ֣שׁ בְּצִיּ֔וֹן**

**וַתֹּ֖אכַל יְסוֹדֹתֶֽיהָ**

**לֹ֤א הֶאֱמִ֙ינוּ֙ מַלְכֵי־אֶ֔רֶץ**

**כֹּ֖ל יֹשְׁבֵ֣י תֵבֵ֑ל**

**כִּ֤י יָבֹא֙ צַ֣ר וְאוֹיֵ֔ב**

**בְּשַׁעֲרֵ֖י יְרוּשָׁלִָֽם**

**God completed His wrath,**

**Spilled out the anger of His nostrils.**

**He lit a fire in Zion,**

**And it ate her foundations.**

**The kings of the land did not believe,**

**[Nor did] all of the inhabitants of the world,**

**That an adversary and enemy would come**

**Into the gates of Jerusalem.**

Focusing primarily on human affairs, this entire chapter only twice refers to God.[[1]](#footnote-1) These references surround the account of the city’s destruction (4:11-16), illustrating God’s active role in the events. In His first appearance (4:11), God wrathfully demolishes the city, setting a fire to Zion that consumes its foundations. The narrator’s tale of Jerusalem’s destruction concludes as God scatters the nation, before averting His gaze (4:16). Without undue emotion, the narrator frames the events from destruction to exile as acts of God. This mild accusation lacks drama or pathos, appearing in the matter-of-fact style so characteristic of this chapter. Helpless and dejected, the narrator simply describes the events as he sees them.

The brief, but intense, report of Jerusalem’s annihilation consists of just one verse (4:11), which appears to be an abridged version of the lengthy account in *Eikha* 2:1-10. Two expressions of anger attend God’s actions, recalling God’s intense fury of Chapter 2. Both *chamato* (2:4) and *charon* *apo* (2:1, 3, 21, 22)[[2]](#footnote-2) link to specific words in Chapter 2; here too, divine anger emerges as the primary cause of the catastrophic events. God’s anger spills over and erupts in a fiery conflagration, just as it did in 2:3-4, consuming (*vatokhal*) the physical infrastructure of the city (see the word *akhela*, which describes the consuming fire in 2:3).

In an ironic reversal of the previous chapter’s declaration that God’s compassions are never **completely** spent (*ki* *lo* ***khalu***, 3:22), 4:11 depicts God **completely** pouring out His anger upon the city (***kila****… et chamato*). Despite the optimistic tone that emerged in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 returns to describe the grim reality, one that bears little resemblance to the hopeful center of the book.

God’s explosive anger highlights the narrator’s impassivity alongside that of Jerusalem’s populace. As we will see, the nation displays no discernible reaction to the violent destruction of her city. Those who survive wander blindly in the streets and out of the city, mutely enduring the taunts that accompany their perambulations (14-15).

Reactions from around the world fill the void created by the blank silence of Jerusalem’s survivors. Kings of the land and citizens of the world cannot believe that enemies have succeeded in penetrating Jerusalem’s gates. Some scholars reject this description as historically improbable, suggesting that it is simply a literary trope employed to convey the scope of the shock and the presumed importance of the city.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let me propose, however, that this attitude may reflect a historical attitude that harks back to Sancheriv’s failed attempt to conquer Jerusalem, which cast a mythological aura upon the sacred city. Sancheriv’s military campaign was wildly successful and well-publicized;[[4]](#footnote-4) yet Sancheriv, with all of his troops and military resources, was unable to conquer Jerusalem! Kings and civilians may have concluded that Jerusalem is inviolable, the special protectorate of God. With Jerusalem’s fall, it seems that the inconceivable has occurred: Jerusalem’s enemies succeed in penetrating the sacrosanct city, leaving the world flabbergasted and defying their long-held beliefs.

***Eikha* 4:13**

**מֵֽחַטֹּ֣את נְבִיאֶ֔יהָ**

**עֲוֹנ֖וֹת כֹּהֲנֶ֑יהָ**

**הַשֹּׁפְכִ֥ים בְּקִרְבָּ֖הּ**

**דַּ֥ם צַדִּיקִֽים**

**On account of the sins of her prophets,**

**The iniquities of her priests,**

**Who spill out in her midst**

**The blood of the righteous.**

An incomplete sentence, this verse opens with the causative *mem* (“**On account of** the sins of her prophets, the iniquities of her priests…”) linking it either backward to explain the destruction of the city (4:11),[[5]](#footnote-5) or forward to explain the reason that blind people wander in the streets, defiled by blood (4:14-15).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Linguistically, both readings obtain support. The word *shafakh* in this verse links verse backward, to 4:11; God spilled out (*shafakh*) His anger on the city, **because** the priests and prophets spill out (*ha-shofekhim*) the blood of the righteous in her midst.[[7]](#footnote-7) Blood (*dam*) links our verse to the one that follows it. The copious blood shed by the religious leaders, which flows in the midst of the city, begets the scene in the following verse, in which blood contaminates the blind people who wander the street. Carefully placed between the verses, our verse likely functions in a dual capacity; harking backward and forward to explain both the destruction of the city and the bloody desecration of its unseeing pedestrians.

The narrator flatly blames the religious leaders, denouncing both priests and prophets.[[8]](#footnote-8) By featuring the iniquities of the leadership, the chapter shifts our attention away from the general populace.[[9]](#footnote-9) Like Chapter 2, Chapter 4 avoids highlighting the people’s guilt, possibly alluding to it (tangentially) in verse 6,[[10]](#footnote-10) and again at the chapter’s conclusion, which deviates from the general tone of the chapter.

The focus of Chapter 4 (like Chapter 2) instead centers upon the incomprehensible horror of the death of innocents: children too young to have known sin (1-4, 10), ascetic Nazarites, pure as white snow (7), and the innocent righteous (13), slaughtered by the wicked leaders. Injustice and a sense of *tzaddik ve-ra lo* (the righteous that suffer inexplicably) form the theological backdrop of this chapter. In contrast to the tension and outrage expressed in Chapter 2, the atmosphere of Chapter 4 remains oddly impassive in view of the death of righteous innocents. Paralysis sweeps through the dulled city, which lacks the energy to protest even the most profoundly disturbing events.

**Murder or Metaphor?**

Although priests and prophets do not work in tandem in a formal sense, due to their shared role as religious leaders they occasionally appear as a team, working together to promote shared goals.[[11]](#footnote-11) More often, however, biblical passages feature priests and prophets in conjunction as the subject of prophetic castigations[[12]](#footnote-12) and shared punishment.[[13]](#footnote-13) Positioned as the nation’s religious teachers and guides, these leaders share responsibility and accountability when things go wrong. More egregiously, their position gives them power, which often corrupts, giving both prophets and priests the opportunity to engage in unscrupulous and self-promoting behavior.

*Eikha* 4:13 flings a scathing accusation at these religious leaders, censuring them for spilling the blood of righteous innocents. Do the priests and the prophets commit actual murder? Perhaps this accusation refers to an actual event. In *Yirmeyahu* 26, when the prophet speaks of the Temple’s possible destruction, the outraged priests and the prophets seize the prophet, declaring that Yirmeyahu deserves death (vv. 1-9). Some sort of trial ensues, where these priests and prophets play the role of Yirmeyahu’s prosecutors, insisting that he receive a death sentence (v. 11). The officers and the people defend Yirmeyahu, who ultimately survives due to the actions of Achikam ben Shafan (v. 24). The role of the priests and prophets in the incident involving Yirmeyahu, and their ardent insistence that the innocent prophet be sentenced to death, may account for the accusation in our verse.[[14]](#footnote-14)

More likely, our verse does not refer to a specific event. In several biblical passages, God decrees destruction upon Judah and Jerusalem in the wake of Menashe’s long, corrupt reign.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Judean king’s depravities include idolatry and mass murder. Menashe spills so much innocent blood in Jerusalem that it fills the streets, a literal or metaphoric description of a polluted city. Two separate verses link God’s decree of Jerusalem’s destruction to the innocent blood (*dam* *naki*) that Menashe spilled (*shafakh*) in Jerusalem (*II Kings* 21:16; 24:4), acts that echo linguistically in our verse (*shofekhim* and *dam* *tzaddikim*). Although the *Tanakh* does not blame the priests and prophets during Menashe’s reign, this verse may suggest that the religious leaders bear (perhaps indirect) responsibility for the king’s actions.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, the job of the religious leadership (especially the prophets) is to censure the king when necessary. By not preventing Menashe’s actions, the religious leaders bear some measure of culpability for the blood of innocents that the king shed and the consequent destruction of the city.

Possibly, the priests and prophets do not actually shed blood, but are responsible for allowing violence to become widespread in Jerusalem. Crooked religious leaders produce a general state of injustice and immorality, leading to anarchy and bloodshed among the populace. Mikha describes the corruption in Jerusalem, castigating both priests and prophets for unscrupulous leadership that leads to bloodshed:

Listen to this, leaders of the House of Jacob and officers of the House of Israel, who loathe justice and twist all that is straight. You have built Zion with **bloodshed** and Jerusalem with perversion. Her leaders judge for bribes, and her **priests** teach for pay, and her **prophets** prophesy for money and on God they rely, saying, “Does not God live amongst us?[[17]](#footnote-17) No evil shall come to us!” (*Mikha* 3:9-11)

When leaders neglect their duties, disdaining law and justice, society no longer functions in a viable manner, spawning bloodshed in Jerusalem.[[18]](#footnote-18) Yechezkel describes Jerusalem as a city of blood, filled with abominations and depravity.[[19]](#footnote-19) While he does not specifically blame the priests and the prophets, he does focus his attention upon the leaders, singling out both prophet[[20]](#footnote-20) and priest[[21]](#footnote-21) for their involvement in defiling the land.

Finally, it is possible that this verse focuses not upon past behavior, but on the current state of society. Instead of guiding the people to repentance and righteousness, the prophets and priests flatter the errant nation, offering them false messages of security and complacency:[[22]](#footnote-22)

From the youth until the adults, all greedily take profits, and from **prophet** to **priest**, all engage in falsehood. And they repair the brokenness of my people glibly, saying, “Peace! Peace!” And there is no peace. They should be ashamed! For they have committed abominations. But they are not ashamed, they do not know shame. Therefore, they will fall among the fallen when I punish them; they will fail, says God. (*Yirmeyahu* 6:13-15)[[23]](#footnote-23)

When the religious leadership erroneously assures its constituents that everything is fine, that “no harm shall come upon you” (*Yirmeyahu* 23:17), they prevent the nation from repenting, which could have averted disaster. In this way, prophets and priests bear responsibility for the disaster of Jerusalem’s destruction, including the massacre of innocents and the carnage wrought upon the city.

1. A third mention of God in the chapter appears in the epithet, “anointed of God,” in 4:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sometimes the word *af* appears without the full phrase, *charon* *af*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 110; Provan, *Lamentations*, pp. 116-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Archeologists have obtained three ancient version of Sancheriv’s annals, each of which contain an account of his military campaigns. While Sancheriv proudly boasts that he successfully extracted heavy tribute from Chizkiyahu, the king of Jerusalem, he actually never claims to have conquered the city, in contrast with his other successful military exploits, which conclude with his demolition of the city. As we have discussed, this omission lends credence to the Bible’s account of this event, which it regards as a great act of God’s salvation of Jerusalem The fact that three copies exist demonstrates that Sancheriv’s military exploits were well-publicized and were probably familiar to many residents of the vast Assyrian empire. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 2:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The word *shafakh* also links up to the description of the precious stones (a metaphor for the children) that spill (*tishtapekhna*) onto the streets of Jerusalem in 4:1. The reason for that horror is because the religious leaders spilled (*ha-shofekhim*) blood of innocents. The word *shafakh* constitutes a *leitwort* in the book, appearing seven times in total, mostly in the context of death, fury, and carnage. Significantly, the word *shafakh* only appears in Chapters 2 and 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is similar to *Eikha* 2:14. The similarities between Chapters 2 and 4 continue to accumulate, coalescing together to form a collaboration of thought, ideas, and language. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In contrast, House, Lamentations, p. 444, maintains that similar to Chapters 1, 2, and 3, this passage lays the responsibility “at the feet of a sinning people.” I propose that Chapters 1 and 5, which hold the general populace accountable, differ from Chapters 2 and 4, which lay the responsibility at the feet of the leaders of the people. We will discuss this and other distinguishing features of these pairs of chapters at the conclusion of our study. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As noted previously, some biblical interpreters understand the words *avon* and *chatat* in 4:6 not as references to sin, but rather as references to punishment. In any case, even if one does interpret the words to refer to Israel’s sins, the purpose of the verse is more inclined to bemoan Israel’s punishment than to condemn its sinfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, *I* *Melakhim* 1:32, 45; *II* *Melakhim* 23:2; *Zekharya* 7:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example, *Yeshayahu* 28:7; *Yirmeyahu* 2:26; 23:1; 32:32; *Tzefanya* 3:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, *Yirmeyahu* 4:9; 14:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It seems unlikely that this is an isolated incident. During the course of the chapter, we learn of a previous incident, in which the king Yehoyakim kills Uriyahu the prophet for a similar offense (vv. 20-23). While that incident does not explicitly mention the involvement of the priests and prophets, its appearance as part of the account of Yirmeyahu’s trial suggests their culpability as well. It also does not appear that the priests and prophets acted out of a sincere belief that Yirmeyahu blasphemed God. Other passages indicate that corruption was rampant among this leadership elite, who said what was politically expedient so that they maintained their popularity (see e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 6:13-15; 8:10-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See *II Melakhim* 23:26; 24:3-4; *Yirmeyahu* 15:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Yehoyakim also spills innocent blood, according to *Yirmeyahu* 22:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This verse reflects a prevailing attitude among Jerusalem’s inhabitants, who seem to believe that God dwells in Jerusalem’s Temple, thereby precluding the possibility that any evil could affect Jerusalem. Yirmeyahu rails against this erroneous notion (see *Yirmeyahu* 7:1-15), which seems to gain traction following the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem from Sancheriv’s siege. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, *Yirmeyahu* 2:34; 7:6; *Yechezkel* 22:1-16; 33:25-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Yechezkel* 22:1-16; 23-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Yechezkel* 22:24, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Yechezkel* 22:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See *Yirmeyahu* 2:8; 5:31. *Eikha* 2:14 similarly assigns responsibility to the prophets for their failure to castigate the people for their sins and induce them to repent. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, similarly, *Yirmeyahu* 23:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)