YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Shiur #50**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:14-15**

 **נָע֤וּ עִוְרִים֙ בַּֽחוּצ֔וֹת**

**נְגֹֽאֲל֖וּ בַּדָּ֑ם**

 **בְּלֹ֣א יֽוּכְל֔וּ**

**יִגְּע֖וּ בִּלְבֻשֵׁיהֶֽם**

**ס֣וּרוּ טָמֵ֞א קָ֣רְאוּ לָ֗מוֹ**

**ס֤וּרוּ ס֙וּרוּ֙ אַל־תִּגָּ֔עוּ**

**כִּ֥י נָצ֖וּ גַּם־נָ֑עוּ**

**אָֽמְרוּ֙ בַּגּוֹיִ֔ם לֹ֥א יוֹסִ֖יפוּ לָגֽוּר**

**The blind wander in the streets,**

**Polluted by blood,**

**So that no one was able**

**To touch their clothing.**

**“Turn aside, impure one!” they called to them,**

**“Turn aside, turn aside, do not touch!”**

**As they fled and wandered,**

**The nations said, “Let them not continue to dwell [here]!”**

A vivid portrait, the verse first focuses our attention on the blood that desecrates the blind people, staining them so substantially that no one can bear even to touch their clothing. The repulsive description elicits images of a bloodstained populace; a myriad of atrocities committed against Jerusalem’s residents by violent enemies, who maim and kill, saturating the city with blood.

The blood that pollutes the city is not simply a consequence of the enemies’ butchery, but also alludes to the blood and defilement produced by Jerusalem’s inhabitants.[[1]](#footnote-1) Linking up to the previous verse (13), which describes Jerusalem’s religious leaders spilling the blood of righteous innocents, verse 14 describes that blood overflowing into the streets of the city. Read metaphorically, the “blood” that pollutes may simply allude to a noxious atmosphere in the sacred city. Steeped in iniquity, anyone who walks Jerusalem’s streets emerges stained and soiled by its corruptions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To describe the aftermath of the destruction, verse 14 zeroes in on the blind individuals who pick their way through the streets of the ravaged city. Contaminated by blood, no one wants to touch their clothing or approach them. The expressed fear of contamination (in verse 15) sounds like a taunt, uttered by an unidentified voice. By repeating the alienating call “*Suru*!” (“Turn aside!”) three times in rapid succession, the faceless voice deflects the offensive itinerants, who roam the streets of the city with no discernable destination. Driven forward by the unwelcoming voice, the sightless ramblers wander, suddenly finding themselves among the nations. An apt description of the aimless movement toward exile; the evacuee flees, drifts and roams.[[3]](#footnote-3) Arriving at an unnamed place, the exiles hear the dogged rejection of “the nations,” who univocally proclaim that these contaminated refugees will not be permitted even a temporary residence.

The vague and surreal quality of the tale, which offers some vivid and gruesome detail, while remaining elliptical in so many others, tenders a remarkably lifelike portrayal of the muddled and dazed journey from a ruined city to an unwelcoming exile. The account leaves the reader with more questions than answers, as it withholds basic information that could clarify and sharpen the scene.

**Blindness: Literal or Metaphoric?**

Who are the blind people who wander the streets, soiled by blood? Why does the scene immediately focus upon them in the aftermath of the destruction? Perhaps the verse features them because they remain the most conspicuous wounded following the disaster. Blinded by the pitiless enemy, who also blinded the city’s king, Tzidkiyahu (*II Melakhim* 25:7), these hapless victims constitute visible evidence of the butchery that took place in the city. The enemy has not even bothered to deport these disfigured casualties into exile. Disregarded as a potential threat because of their recently imposed handicap, the enemy leaves them to forage the streets of the ravaged city, alone and bloodied, vulnerable and dazed.

Profuse tears shed by the wretched survivors could conceivably cloud people’s vision, causing temporary sightlessness.[[4]](#footnote-4) While this does not constitute the simplest meaning of the verse, its advantage lies in the way in which it links up with other chapters in the book. As we have seen, tears saturate the book of *Eikha*, the pathos of a nation steeped in tragedy. In Chapters 1 (verses 2 and 16) and 3 (verses 48-49, 51), tears flow freely. Chapter 5 similarly describes the dimming of the nation’s eyes, likely from tears (verse 17).[[5]](#footnote-5) In contrast, Chapter 2 depicts a notable absence of tears,[[6]](#footnote-6) which coheres with Jerusalem’s paralysis and cessation of speech. Chapter 4 lacks emotions (as well as tears), maintaining instead a jarringly impassive posture. It seems unlikely that the chapter means to conjure an image of copious weeping that produces blindness.

Ibn Ezra suggests that this blindness is not literal, but rather a description of the manner in which residents wander dazed and unseeing, bloodied by the corpses in the streets.[[7]](#footnote-7) Often, blindness is a figure of speech in *Tanakh*, referring to tentative and fumbling movements, characterized by confusion and helplessness.[[8]](#footnote-8) Prophets also employ blindness as an apt metaphor for the nation in exile, referring to the absence of God, and the consequent lack of clarity and guidance with respect to their national aspirations.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, those who blindly wander Jerusalem’s streets have begun their inexorable movement toward exile, with its attendant darkness and disorientation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The blind who roam the city may refer to wicked and corrupt people, who refuse to see truth and justice. Prophets wield blindness as a figurative portrayal of the sinful nation. Yeshayahu berates a corrupt nation in a depiction that recalls our verse:[[11]](#footnote-11)

Your transgressions have separated between you and your God, and your sins have made him hide his face from listening. For your hands **are polluted with blood**, and your fingers with transgressions, your lips have spoken falsehood and your tongue utters perversions…

Their legs ran to do evil and they rushed to **spill innocent blood**, their thoughts were filled with wickedness, plundering and brokenness littered their path. They know not peaceful ways and there is no justice in the paths; they pervert their courses; all who traverse them know no peace. Therefore justice is far from us and righteousness cannot reach us; we hope for light and there is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope the wall **like blind people** and we fumble as though we have no eyes, we stumble in the afternoon… (*Yeshayahu* 59:1-3, 7-10)

The blind people of our verse who wander the streets “polluted with blood” recall the blind stumbling of the corrupt society which spills the blood of innocents and whose “hands are polluted with blood” in *Yeshayahu* 59.

Finally, blindness emerges as an appropriate punishment for a myopic nation, who have heedlessly ignored God’s instructions:

I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind people, for they have sinned to God. (*Tzefanya* 1:17)

In the subtext of our verse, the blind and contaminated people represent the errant nation, who have received due recompense for their own behavior.

**The Blind and the Impure**

Following the above analysis, we can offer several possibilities for the specific identity of the blind people, soiled by blood. They may represent the general population of Jerusalem, the miserable survivors of the carnage of destruction.[[12]](#footnote-12) Perhaps, however, verse 14 features the errant leaders of the previous verse (prophets and priests), saturated with the blood of innocents that they spilled.[[13]](#footnote-13) These erstwhile religious guides now blindly wander the city, a fitting demotion for the sinful prophets or **seers**, who failed to educate their constituents to see properly.[[14]](#footnote-14) Contamination and impurity saturate these unseeing figures (and especially their clothing), an apt end for the priests who failed to wear the priestly vestments in holiness and failed to infuse the people with sanctity and purity.[[15]](#footnote-15) If this verse does feature the religious leaders of verse 13, they suffer the havoc and ruin that they spawned. Whatever their specific identity, the blind and impure people in verse 14 emerge from the detritus of the aborted prophecies and impious behavior of the priests of verse 13, illustrating the consequences of their deficiencies.

***“Suru Tamei”***

Recoil from the blood-drenched clothes of the blind gives way to an explicit cry, “Turn aside, impure one!” Who speaks these words? Are these the words of the enemies or compatriots? Accomplices or innocent observers? These disembodied words remain ambiguous in tone: Is it a jeer, a yelp, a shriek? Does it emerge from pity, disgust, fear, or shock? Initially it appears that solicitous passersby or compatriots speak these words, warning others to be alert to the impurities in the city;[[16]](#footnote-16) yet as the words grow more intense, they appear strident and antagonistic.[[17]](#footnote-17) The speaker shrilly repeats the word “*suru*” twice more, following by a panicked exclamation, “Do not touch!” Rapid movement follows; suddenly these polluted undesirables find themselves immersed among the nations, who also speak, mingling with the rebuff of the unidentified speakers. The nations leave no doubt as to their hostile intentions; rejecting the wretched wanderers, they firmly announce, “They shall not continue to dwell [here]!”

Marked by confusion, the journey into exile does not develop in a sequential or methodical fashion. Two words describes movement: *natzu* (which appears to be related to the word feather, to a bird in flight or the drift of the feather)[[18]](#footnote-18) and *na’u* (wander — a word that appears already in the previous verse). The movement from Jerusalem’s polluted streets to a country of foreigners occurs without much detail. The exiles appear to both flee and drift, reflecting a muddled state, a panicked but aimless journey, whose destination matters little. There is one thing about the journey that seems clear: the cacophony of background voices resonate with antipathy, relentlessly pursuing the exiled nation as they wander. Harsh words confront them whenever they approach, thrusting them outward, toward their next unknown destination. The exiles are unwanted, untouchable, and unwelcome; defilement clings to them.

The refugees will eventually wash their bloodstained clothing, but the notoriety of their contamination continues to accompany them on their perambulations. Nations recoil from this community, beset by troubles, and stained by the ignominious repute of their sin-filled city. Tainted, moreover, by God’s rejection, the nation bears its disgrace, haunted by the revulsion that it encounters. The reference to impurity suggests that Israel’s exile emerges from sin, a theological certainty expressed by prophets and numerous biblical passages.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nevertheless, Chapter 4 remains vague with respect to the nation’s culpability. The unnamed identity of the contaminated blind people and the unspecified reason for their contamination sidelines the nation’s iniquities. In any case, Israel’s defiled state does not exempt the nations from responsibility for their despicable behavior. At its close, Chapter 4 expresses certainty that the nations who mistreat Israel will receive just retribution for their cruelty.

In this concise account, the book succeeds remarkably well in encapsulating the tragic essence of Israel’s exile, one that continues to unfold over the course of Jewish history. Indeed, the nation of Israel wanders from country to country in the diaspora, banished unceremoniously from each one, in an echo of the damning sentence uttered in our verse by the nations, “They shall not continue to dwell here!”

This is an alarmingly accurate prediction; from our historical vantage point, we can identify the taunting nations in our verse with chilling certainty. Alexandria utters these words in 415. Mainz in 1012. France in 1182, 1254, 1322, 1359, 1394. Naples in 1288. England in 1290. Bern, Switzerland in 1392. Upper Bavaria in 1276 and 1442. Warsaw, Lithuania and Sicily in 1483. Spain in 1492. Portugal in 1496. Brandenburg, Germany in 1410. Nuremberg in 1499. Frankfurt in 1614. Prague in 1542, 1561. Germany in 1935.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The nations’ rejection, while certainly demoralizing, ultimately preserves Israel’s distinctive character, preventing them from assimilating into their environment. Yeshayahu offers a counter message, linguistically evoking *Eikha* 4:14-15 to suggest that it is the diaspora that represents impurity rather than the nation of Israel. In fact, Israel must leave the diaspora and return to Israel if they wish to reacquire a pure character and mode of living:

Burst out and sing together, ruins of Jerusalem! For God has consoled his nation, redeemer of Jerusalem. God exposed His holy arm in the sight of all of the nations, and all of the gathered of the earth will see the deliveries of God! “Turn aside, turn aside (*suru*, *suru*) go out of there, do not touch impurity (*tamei, al tiga’u*)! Go out of [the diaspora],[[21]](#footnote-21) cleanse yourself, oh bearers of the vessels of God!” (*Yeshayahu* 52:9-11)

Yeshayahu’s prophecy of consolation runs counter to Eikha’s presentation of the situation. While Israel does absorb impurities associated with the exile (both from the nation’s sins and desecration), this can easily be transformed by their own behavior. If the exiles choose to repent, they can abandon the impurities rampant in the diaspora and return to a pure land, to reassume their position as the nation consecrated to God, one that bears God’s message of holiness to the world.

**Jerusalem’s Streets (*Chutzot*)**

Snapshots of public ruin feature on the streets of this chapter; precious jewels strewn on every street corner, former nobility languishing and dying in full view on the streets, shadows of human figures roaming the streets, unrecognizable in their withered starvation, and finally, blind people aimlessly wandering the streets, defiled and ashamed. The word *chutzot* appears four times in this chapter; a chapter that violates basic human privacy, and turns people out of their houses to die, publicly, disgracefully, and anonymously.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The public scene obtains theological significance when we recall that Yirmeyahu decries the rampant idolatry,[[23]](#footnote-23) injustice,[[24]](#footnote-24) and evil[[25]](#footnote-25) that pervades Jerusalem’s streets (*chutzot*). Moreover, Yirmeyahu pronounced God’s sentence of public death upon Jerusalem’s residents:

And the nation to whom the [false prophets] prophesy shall be flung into the streets (*chutzot*) of Jerusalem from starvation and the sword, and there will be no burial for these, for them or for their wives, or for their sons and daughters, and I will spill upon (*shafakhti*) them their evils. (*Yirmeyahu* 14:16)

A nation that sins publicly and without shame dies disgracefully, on the streets. Employed both to describe their sins and their punishment, the word *chutzot* hints to the justness of the nation’s end.

This understanding of the situation can also produce its reversal, by encouraging Israel’s repentance. Yirmeyahu notes this, offering the possibility of replacing Israel’s punishment with jubilant scenes of restored vivacity and joy in the streets (*chutzot*) of Jerusalem:

So says God, “There will yet be heard in this place about which you say ‘It is destroyed; there are no humans and there are no beasts in the cities of Judah and in the streets (*chutzot*) of Jerusalem. They are destroyed, without humans and without residents and without beasts.’ [You shall yet hear] sounds of festivity and sounds of joy, sounds of the groom and sounds of the bride, a voice saying, ‘Praise God, for God is good, for His kindness is eternal!’ as they bring thanksgiving sacrifices to the House of God! For I shall restore the captives of the land as they once were,” says God. (*Yirmeyahu* 33:10-11).

Employed variously to describe Jerusalem’s sins, punishment, and promises of restoration, the word *chutzot* offers a sweeping view of the city’s turbulent but ultimately propitious history. Yirmeyahu’s hopeful prophecy serves as the basis for the seventh blessing said at a wedding, a prayer that today echoes through the wedding halls that cram Jerusalem’s streets:

“Quickly God, let there be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets (*chutzot*) of Jerusalem sounds of festivity and sounds of joy, sounds of the groom and sounds of the bride!”

1. For a similar metaphoric meaning of impurity, see *Yeshayahu* 64:5. See also *Bamidbar* 35:33-34 and *Yechezkel* 22:1-31, where bloodshed and sins contaminate the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We will soon see *Yeshayahu* 59:3, which employs a phrase that mirrors the one in *Eikha* 4:14, *nego’alu* *va-dam*, polluted with blood. The context of *Yeshayahu* suggests that the primary meaning of the phrase there is not literal but metaphoric, a reference to Israel’s iniquities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I have conflated two possible understanding of the word *natzu*, with the meaning of “feather” depicting either a bird in flight or the drifting motion of the feather in the wind. For a fuller explanation of this word, see footnote 18 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have not encountered any commentators who suggested this, although R. Yosef Kara posits that the blood from their head-wounds may flow into their eyes, rendering them temporarily sightless. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5:17 contains language strongly reminiscent of the tears of 1:17 (e.g. the phrase *“al eila”* alongside the reference to eyes in both 1:17 and 5:17), thereby suggesting that 5:17 also refers to tears. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See our discussion in *Eikha* 2:11, where we grappled with different interpretations of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Rasag, *Eikha* 2:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, *Devarim* 28:29; *Yeshayahu* 59:10. Sight in biblical passages obtains similar metaphoric meaning. Sight suggests insight, while lack of sight bespeaks of obtuseness. For unelaborated examples, consider the textual presentation of Yitzchak’s blindness as an introduction to the narrative in which Yitzchak attempts to give the blessing to Esav (*Bereishit* 27:1), or the way in which Eli’s blindness functions to convey his lack of insight in *I Shemuel* 3:2. Like any metaphoric reading, these depend upon one’s interpretation of the narrative and do not have a straightforward meaning agreed upon by all interpreters. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 35:3-10; 42:7; 43:8, and Radak on *Yeshayahu* 35:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While the verse itself does not clarify that the streets in which the blind wander are Jerusalem’s streets, it seems unlikely that these unidentified *chutzot* are anything other than Jerusalem’s streets, so often referred to simply as *chutzot*. However, by the conclusion of 4:15, these blind people do find themselves among the nations (presumably in exile), although it remains unclear how and when they got there. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shemot* 23:8 notes metaphorically that bribes can “blind those who can see,” and cause the perversion of justice. See Rashi’s explanation of *Yeshayahu* 35:5; 56:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 90; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 202; Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 111; House, *Lamentations*, pp. 444-445. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In a similar context, Radak and Ibn Ezra explain *Yeshayahu* 56:10 as a description of the false prophets, who are meant to see, but are actually blind. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Yechezkel* 22:26 castigates the priests sharply for shirking their duties: “Her priests did violence to my teachings, and they violated my holiness, they did not distinguish between sacred and profane and they did not teach [the distinction] between pure and impure, and **they closed their eyes** to my Sabbath, and I have been profaned amongst them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This evokes the call of the leper himself, in *Vayikra* 13:45, which seems to be good advice for those who surround him; he most certainly does not speak these words to abase himself. Nevertheless, the leprous state of the nation suggests both ritual impurity and contamination from sin. *Vayikra* 13:46 contains a striking parallel to *Eikha* 1:1, drawing another connection between a nation tainted by impurities and the impurity of the leper. See also *Eikha Rabba, Petichta* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Targum’s translation of *Eikha* 4:15 suggests that the nations speak these words in a hostile tone. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibn Ezra and BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 663. Perhaps the word is related to the root *notz*, meaning ruin or destruction (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 37:26; *Yirmeyahu* 2:15). Basing this on his understanding of the Targum on *Vayikra* 1:16, Rashi maintains that this word signifies filth, parallel to the word *nego’alu* in 4:14. See Rashi there and on *Zevachim* 65a. Ramban on *Vayikra* 1:16 disagrees with Rashi’s understanding, explaining our verse in a way similar to that of ibn Ezra. *Eikha* *Rabba* 4:18 (and R. Yosef Kara) relates this to the word *na’atz*, meaning to anger, providing a theological explanation for the exile as it occurs: “For they angered God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As in the case of Kayin, the punishment for bloodshed is wandering (*Bereishit* 4:12 14), a point expressed by the word *na’u*, which appears twice in *Eikha* 4:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is an abridged list, collated to offer a general impression. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Rashi and Radak on *Yeshayahu* 52:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Chapter 2 offers similar public scenes of people languishing and dying in the streets. In that chapter, the word *chutzot* appears twice (2:19, 21) and the word *rechovot* appears twice (2:11, 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Yirmeyahu* 7:17; 44:17, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Yirmeyahu* 5:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Yirmeyahu* 44:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)