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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #51**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:16**

**פְּנֵ֤י יְקֹוָק֙ חִלְּקָ֔ם**

**לֹ֥א יוֹסִ֖יף לְהַבִּיטָ֑ם**

 **פְּנֵ֤י כֹהֲנִים֙ לֹ֣א נָשָׂ֔אוּ**

 **וּזְקֵנִ֖ים לֹ֥א חָנָֽנוּ**

**God’s face scattered them**

**He did not continue to look at them**

**The faces of priests, they did not lift up**

**And to the elders, they did not show favor**

The lens widens as God enters, scattering the nation further into exile.[[1]](#footnote-1) God’s actions extend the misery caused by the nations in the previous verse (15). This is evidenced by the similar phrase wielded by the nations (*lo* *yosifu*) and that which describes God’s actions toward His people in this verse (*lo* *yosif*). Moreover, this verse exacerbates the blindness, contamination, and estrangement of the exiles found in previous verses. In turning His face away from them, God intensifies the nation’s experience of alienation; even their God refuses contact with them. Moreover, by withholding His guidance, their sightlessness worsens. The disgrace of the priests in this verse likewise hampers the nation’s ability to obtain purity, submerging them more deeply in a state of contamination.

**God’s Face Scattered Them**

What is the meaning of God’s face scattering them? Several biblical passages feature “God’s face” in a punitive context (e.g. *Vayikra* 20:3, 6; 26:17; *Yechezkel* 14:8). For this reason, some interpreters explain the phrase “God’s face” to mean His anger, an emotion that is evident on people’s faces.[[2]](#footnote-2) God’s face may simply refer to divine attention, which, when wielded against a sinner, necessarily results in punishment:

God’s face is against those who do evil, to obliterate their memory from the earth. (*Tehillim* 34:17).

God hints as much to Moshe, when He explains why He will not continue to accompany the people on their journey, in the aftermath of the incident with the Golden Calf:

Now go and lead the nation to where I have told you; behold my messenger will go before you, because on the day that I shall recall [the nation], I will recall upon them their sins….

And I will send before you a messenger… For I will not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked nation, lest I will destroy you on the way. (*Shemot* 32:34; 33:2-3)

Following this, God elucidates the danger of maintaining His presence amongst the sinful nation:

And God said to Moshe, “Say to the children of Israel. You are a stiff-necked nation; [if for] one instant I will go up in your midst, I will destroy you.” (*Shemot* 34:5).

Adhering closer to our context, Yirmeyahu flings the following warning at Tzidkiyahu and the nation during the siege of Jerusalem:

“For I have placed My face against this city, for evil and not for good,” says God. It shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon and it shall be burned by fire. (*Yirmeyahu* 21:10)

This can help us to better understand God’s well-known warning that, under extreme circumstances, He will hide His face from His nation, abandoning them to their fate (*Devarim* 31:16-18). We suggested earlier (in our examination of *Eikha* 1:9) that the hiding of His face (a disciplinary action) actually contains an underlying kindness. When God gazes directly at sinful humans, punishment follows, swift and sweeping. Thus, although humans ostensibly desire the unique intimacy described as *panim el panim*, “face to face” (e.g. *Shemot* 33:11), this direct relationship has its perils and requires extra vigilance on the part of the nation. In circumstances in which people are behaving sinfully, it is far preferable that God turn His face away, thereby preventing the inevitable disciplinary action.

Repeatedly in the book of *Eikha*, God’s elusive remoteness gives rise to the speaker’s painful sense of divine abandonment, provoking his evocative cry: “Look God (*re’eh*) and see (*ve-habita*)!” Variations of this plea surface in Chapter 1 (verses 9 and 11), Chapter 2 (verse 20), Chapter 3 (verses 59, 60, 63), and Chapter 5 (verse 1). Only Chapter 4 deviates from this standard request, remaining strangely silent on this matter. This difficult chapter refrains from addressing God at all, preferring to maintain its aloof demeanor.

*Eikha* 4:16 can explain the reason for this detachment. The terrible consequences of God’s attentions resonate with horrifying impact, as “God’s face” flings the wretched exiles, scattering them pitilessly to far-flung places. Instead of requesting God’s attentions, the following sentence offers a welcome respite from them, stating that, “He did not continue to look at them (*le-habitam*).” Israel avoids any attempt to reverse this situation, fearing that God’s further attention could destroy it. Instead of repairing its relationship with God, in Chapter 4, Israel prefers to focus inward. Alone and isolated from God, Israel tends to its wounds and maintains its tenuous survival among the nations until it is ready to reinstate intimacy with God, without danger of destruction.

***Birkat* *Kohanim***

The priestly blessing evocatively simulates the experience of encountering God *panim* *el* *panim*. As the priests face the nation, they utter the three sentences that God instructs them, invoking God to turn His face to the community in blessing (*Bamidbar* 6:24-26):

God shall bless you and guard you.

God shall shine **His face** upon you and give you favor.

God shall lift up **His face** to you and bestow upon you peace.

This blessing conjures the ideal situation, where God’s “face” confers bounty and harmony upon His nation.

Ominously, our chapter depicts sinful priests in 4:13, describing their failure to carry out their tasks faithfully. The priestly blessing vanishes, along with any semblance of purity, guidance, or religious integrity. Intriguing references to the elusive priestly blessing crop up in our verse.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Alongside the negative manifestation of “God’s face,” the priests’ “faces” suffer a tragic, if unclear fate. In a linguistic allusion to the final sentence of the blessing, “God shall lift up (*yisa*) His face” to the nation, the verse declares that no one “lifts up” (*nasa’u*) the priests’ faces. Instead of a situation in which God confers favor upon His nation (*vi-chuneka*), the verse maintains that no one showed favor (*chananu*) to the elders. Blending seamlessly into the grim portrait of divine abandonment, the priestly blessing disappears along with the withdrawal of God’s face; as divine favor evaporates, Israel sinks deeper into the mire of its defilement.

**Dishonoring the Priests and the Elders**

The second half of the sentence lacks a subject, leaving ambiguous the identity of those who disrespect the priests and the elderly. Possible culprits range from the enemy, to the nation, to God. The widely disparate options illustrate the richness and depth of *Eikha*’s poetry, which allows readers to encounter and internalize significantly different readings of the same verse.

*The Culprit: Israel*

Some interpreters understand the second half of this verse as an attempt to explain that the nation’s punishment is a consequence of its own behavior.[[4]](#footnote-4) Why, in fact, does God scatter the people? God’s action is a result of the nation’s flagrant insolence toward the consecrated priests and esteemed elders. Linguistically, this reading obtains support from the word *penei*, which appears twice in this verse in a seemingly interconnected manner. The first appearance of the word describes God’s face scattering the nation into exile, while its second appearance describes the dishonored faces of the priests, an egregious act committed by a nation which receives its punishment.

Why does Israel no longer respect its priests and elders? The honoring of the religious leadership derives from their role and function in society. The priests, in particular, deserve reverence due to their active and public task, performed on behalf of the nation in the Temple. When the nation no longer honors its priests, failing to give due respect to those who represent it before God, this signifies the nation’s disregard for Temple worship. A nation that no longer properly serves God loses respect for the caretakers of the Temple.

The stature of elders varies from one culture to another. Respect and care of the elderly requires organization, compassion, and an appreciation of the wisdom that accumulates with life experience. A rabbinic homily suggests that the word *zaken* (elder) is an acronym for the phrase *“Zeh she-kana chokhma*,” “This is the one who has acquired wisdom.”[[5]](#footnote-5) To ensure that society accords the elderly proper respect, *Vayikra* 19:32 mandates veneration of the elderly:

You shall rise before the aged and you shall honor the face of the elderly.

Our verse portrays the violation of this directive. In a world turned upside down, no one honors the elderly. In a society lacking compassion or respect for the other, the weaker members of society suffer from the neglect of those who should care for them. This chapter features society’s failure to care properly for its vulnerable members, both young and old.

*The Culprit: Enemies*

Some biblical interpreters maintain that this is not a description of the breakdown of societal norms; rather, it describes the havoc that the enemies wreak on society.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this reading, the second half of the verse describes what occurs **after** God scatters the people; the enemies do not behave with respect or favor to their victims. This reading finds support in *Eikha* 5:12, where the actions of the marauding enemies include a description of their mistreatment of the elderly: “The faces of the elderly, they did not honor.” The similarity between these verses suggests that both verses refer to the same villain who disrespects the vulnerable aged — namely, the enemy.

This approach obtains further confirmation in *Devarim* 28:49-50, where God ominously warns Israel of the consequences if they violate the terms of their covenant with God:

God shall bring against you a nation from afar… an audacious nation, **who will not lift up the face of the elderly** and will not show favor to the young.

God cautions the nation in advance that (if they sin), an enemy nation will arrive who will not “lift up the faces” (*lo* *yisa* *fanim*) or “show favor” (*yachon*) to their victims. Indeed, during this tragedy, the priest’s faces are not lifted up (*lo* *nasa’u*) and the elderly are not shown favor (*lo* *chananu*), presumably by the enemy.

*The Culprit: God*

Most interpreters eschew the reading that identifies God as the one who refuses to lift up the faces of the priests or bequeath favor upon the elderly. After all, plural verbs describe the perpetrator of this disrespectful behavior. Nevertheless, some scholars do suggest that God is the subject of the entire verse.[[7]](#footnote-7) If so, then this verse continues to describe the devastation that God wreaks upon His nation: first, He scatters them; then He disgraces her priests and elders.

In this reading, God debases both the priests and elders, a continuation of His punitive actions against His nation. If God commits these acts against the erstwhile leaders, then they are acts of divine justice. Indeed, the priests have brought this upon themselves, as is evident from the blood that they shed in *Eikha* 4:13.

While *Eikha* features only the mourning and suffering of the elders (and not their sins), Yechezkel often depicts the elders as a group of evildoers (e.g. 14:1-8; 20:2-4), who flout their role as wise counselors and caretakers of tradition.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yechezkel depicts these senior members of society as engaged in duplicitous and flagrant idolatry, cultivated by the conviction that “God does not see us; He has left the land” (8:11-12).

In the final analysis, the identity of the one who brings this ruin upon the priests and prophets matters less than the result. This chapter draws our attention to the unravelling of Judah’s leadership. In the span of just a few short verses, prophets and priests foster terrible violence, and priests and elders forfeit their honor and stature. *Yechezkel* 7:26 features prophets, priests, and elders as the triumvirate who are the source of all wisdom. Their downfall represents the foundering of guidance and sagacity. Lacking leaders, hierarchy or authority, the people stumble, bewildered and unsure.

Instead of choosing between these readings, I prefer to assume that *Eikha* intentionally weaves multiple meaningful interpretations into this verse. Each reading offers an important understanding of the identity of those who disrespect Judah’s men of stature, contributing new insight into the nation’s culpability, the unscrupulous behavior of the enemies, and divine justice brought to bear against the debased leaders.

1. For this meaning of the word, *chillekam*, (“scattered them”), see *Bereishit* 49:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 1:16, who employs the elliptical reference to *paneha* (her face) in *I Shemuel* 1:18 as a prooftext that the word can mean anger. Although Chana’s anguish seems to predominate over her anger, Chana’s anger is featured in the story (*I Shemuel* 1:6-7 refers to Penina’s attempt to goad Chana to anger, while Chana refers to her own anger in *I Shemuel* 1:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scholars note that biblical passages often refer to the priestly blessing, most notably in the book of *Tehillim*. See for example, L. Liebreich, “The Songs of Ascent and the Priestly Blessing,” *JBL* 74 (1955) pp. 33-36; M. Fishbane, “Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing,” *JAOS* 103 (1983) pp. 115-121. See also H. Angel, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*: *Prophecy in an Age of Uncertainty* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016) pp. 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rashi on *Eikha* 4:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., *Kiddushin* 32b; *Sifra, Kedoshim* 3:7; *Seder Olam Rabba* 30; *Ruth* *Zuta* 4:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Targum* *Eikha* 4:16; Moshkovitz, *Eikha*, pp. 35-36; House, *Lamentations*, p. 446; Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 84, 91. This approach requires regarding the plural form as the singular form. Perhaps the plural form of the word *penei* influences the plural form in the second half of the sentence. Hillers suggests that the original form is changed as part of the tendency to alter passages that ascribe responsibility for calamity to God. While Hillers concedes that this is not done systematically (and actually is done hardly at all) he does bring several examples from the Qumran scrolls that seem to suggest this tendency. Similarly, the separate phenomenon of *tikkunei* *soferim* indicates that rabbinic authorities were (albeit rarely) willing to make slight textual emendations in order to protect God’s honor. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yechezkel concludes the prophetic castigation of the elders (*Yechezkel* 14:1-8) with ominous words that evoke *Eikha* 4:16: “And I shall place My face against that person and I will make him a sign and a byword, and I will cut him off from his people and you will know that I am God” (*Yechezkel* 14:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)