YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #52**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:17-19**

**עוֹדֵ֙ינוּ֙ תִּכְלֶ֣ינָה עֵינֵ֔ינוּ**

**אֶל־עֶזְרָתֵ֖נוּ הָ֑בֶל**

**בְּצִפִּיָּתֵ֣נוּ צִפִּ֔ינוּ**

**אֶל־גּ֖וֹי לֹ֥א יוֹשִֽׁעַ**

**צָד֣וּ צְעָדֵ֔ינוּ**

**מִלֶּ֖כֶת בִּרְחֹבֹתֵ֑ינוּ**

**קָרַ֥ב קִצֵּ֛ינוּ מָלְא֥וּ יָמֵ֖ינוּ**

**כִּי־בָ֥א קִצֵּֽינוּ**

**קַלִּ֤ים הָיוּ֙ רֹדְפֵ֔ינוּ**

**מִנִּשְׁרֵ֖י שָׁמָ֑יִם**

**עַל־הֶהָרִ֣ים דְּלָקֻ֔נוּ**

**בַּמִּדְבָּ֖ר אָ֥רְבוּ לָֽנוּ**

**Our eyes still strain [to see]**

**our futile aid.**

**In our anticipation, we anticipate**

**A nation that does not deliver.**

**They entrapped our steps;**

**[We could not] walk on our streets.**

**Our end nears, our days completed,**

**Our end arrives.**

**Our pursuers were swifter**

**Than the eagles of heaven.**

**They chased us on the mountains;**

**In the deserts, they ambushed us.**

These verses revert to the first-person plural, opening up the account of Jerusalem’s last days to an insider’s perspective.[[1]](#footnote-1) We are privy to a brief but intense glimpse of the final moments of the city’s endurance, just before the total eradication of Jerusalem’s inhabitants. The collective voice casts a spotlight upon one final group of nameless survivors, who remain hiding in the shadows of the ruins of Jerusalem. They cannot escape the watchful eye of the ubiquitous enemy, which determinedly pursues them and hunts them down.

A dramatic scene of scattered snapshots offers an impressionistic portrait of the events. The text moves rapidly from the unnamed people, longingly awaiting help; to the elusive deliverer, whose only role in our chapter is his alarming absence; back to the cowering populace, whose hope is rapidly fading; and finally, to the bold enemy, whose swift and relentless pursuit allows no possible escape.

The scene opens with the eyes of the survivors, desperately scanning the horizon in the hope that a last-minute reprieve will arrive. Amid the rising pitch of anxiety, the survivors apprehend that assistance will not arrive. Panic wells up as hopefulness wanes, and Jerusalem’s frightened residents hunker in their homes; fear and horror surge, in the populace’s increasing awareness that the end has arrived.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unexpectedly, the fugitives emerge suddenly from hiding to flee from their pursuers; they burst into view, roaming the mountains and the desert. The attempt to find refuge in formidable terrain fails; the enemies are everywhere, trapping, hunting, and doggedly pursuing the hapless group of survivors.

The initial verse (4:17) obscures the enemies, ostensibly because the remaining inhabitants have fixed their gaze upon the anticipated savior, whose visage hovers hopefully on the horizon. The enemies linger in the shadows in verse 18, an implicit threat to those who dare venture out into the public spaces. In verse 19, the enemies gain momentum, emerging in a rush of sprightly zeal. They gracefully soar effortlessly over the mountains, keeping an “eagle eye” on their unfortunate prey. Doggedly pursuing the survivors even into the desert, the enemies seem to materialize repeatedly from their hiding places, popping out to ambush and capture the exhausted Jerusalemites.

This section employs rich poetic technique to convey the unfolding tale of terror. Highly alliterative,[[3]](#footnote-3) the section obtains a staccato beat, a hammering effect that mimics the unremitting pursuit, and the inexorable spiral toward a disastrous end. The threefold structure of the second half of verse 18 obtains a similar effect. Instead of the customary binary sentence, this verse offers three clipped phrases, depicting the inescapable end: “Our end nears. Our days completed. Our end arrives.”[[4]](#footnote-4) These sentences also feature several intriguing wordplays. Verse 17 weaves together the gerund and verbal form of the word *tzafa* (to anticipate), illustrating the intense anticipation of the elusive savior (*be-tzipiyateinu* *tzipinu*). Verse 18 combines the word that modifies the stalking enemies, *tzadu*, with the similarly sounding word *tze’adeinu*, our footsteps. This alliterative combination linguistically tangles the relentless hunt with the stumbling steps of the hunted, illustrating the manner in which the implacable enemy impedes movement.

*The Savior Who Fails to Arrive*

The verse does not identify the highly anticipated savior, leaving the impression that his identity matters little. The important point is that the community flails helplessly, gazing into the distance in an illusory quest for an elusive rescuer. Perhaps, though, the eyes that scan the horizon search for a particular redeemer, someone whose arrival is expected.

In the first part of the verse, the identity of this redeemer remains open-ended, allowing the reader to suppose that the community pins its final hope upon God. After all, God is often referred to as the One who helps (*ezer*) both individuals (e.g. *Bereishit* 49:25; *Shemot* 18:4) and His nation (e.g. *Devarim* 33:26; *Yeshayahu* 41:13-14; 49:8; *Tehillim* 33:20; 44:27). God’s nation often trains its eyes upon Him (*kalu* *einai*), in yearning and hopeful anticipation (e.g. *Tehillim* 69:4; 119:82, 123). Finally, the prophets repeatedly assert that Israel can rely only on God to deliver them (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 20:3-6; 30:2-5; 31:1-3; *Yirmeyahu* 2:18; *Hoshea* 5:13; 7:11; 8:9), a message that perhaps they have finally internalized as Jerusalem writhes in fear.

The second half of the verse squelches the hope that Israel finally looks to God for their salvation. Informing us that the community’s eyes are trained upon a **nation**, the verse continues by portraying this nation as one “that does not deliver.” Evidence suggests that this erstwhile liberator is Egypt, whose friendship proves tenuous in the moment of Jerusalem’s great need.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, *Yirmeyahu* 37:5 relates that their Egyptian ally set out from their country to come to Judah’s aid against Babylon, an act that initially frightened the Babylonians, who withdrew temporarily from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the Egyptians soon change their mind about helping (*le-ezra*) Jerusalem, reversing course and returning to Egypt (*Yirmeyahu* 37:7-8).[[6]](#footnote-6)

This betrayal should not come as a surprise to the nation. Prophets often berate Israel for their undue reliance upon Egypt, which prevents Israel from properly depending upon God. God warns them that their alliance with Egypt will be futile, because it distracts them from properly depending upon God (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 20:6; 30:2-5; 31:1-3).[[7]](#footnote-7) *Yeshayahu* 30:7 employs language that strongly evokes our verse, as noted by Rashi: “And Egypt’s help (*yazoru*) is futile (*hevel*) and empty.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, God informs Yirmeyahu that Jerusalem’s desperate hope for a last minute savior to deliver her nation from the calamity will prove futile (*Yirmeyahu* 37:6-10).

The savior’s failure to arrive illustrates the bankruptcy of the original alliance; Israel seals its own fate by pinning its hopes on a human ally instead of God.

*Our Eyes Still Strain*

Eyes have two primary functions; they express emotion by weeping, and they witness events, allowing people to process images and interpret them. *Eikha* generally features the eyes that weep (or refrain from tears), disregarding the primary function of human eyes, which is to enable sight and cognitive observation. This reflects something of *Eikha*’s tenor and general orientation; our book expresses emotions more than insights, it is less reflective than reactive. *Eikha* 4:17 is to be the sole verse in this book in which eyes function to see or watch with anticipation.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this passage, the communal gaze fails to conjure the hoped-for image; their eyes strain futilely to see the anticipated savior. This coheres well with the metaphor of the malfunction of physical body that runs throughout this chapter, illustrating the deterioration and collapse of the city and its populace.

*The Eagles of Heaven*

In comparing the relentless enemies to the eagles in heaven, the verse conveys their swiftness (e.g. *II* *Shemuel* 15:23), and their ability to follow the fugitives even to their impenetrable refuge in the mountains and deserts. This simile contains a theological message as well. God redeems His people on the wings of eagles, conveying His swiftness and protectiveness over His nation (*Shemot* 19:4; *Devarim* 32:11). It appears from our verse that the enemies who pursue the group of survivors overtake God; they fly faster than God can deliver. This, of course, is not because they are actually swifter than God is. Israel’s transgressions have impeded God’s redemption; God chooses to suspend the activities of His redemptive eagle, while instead bringing upon them a nation from afar, soaring and relentless, to punish the errant nation (*Devarim* 28:49; *Yirmeyahu* 4:13).

The actions of the enemy actually recall God’s actions against His nation in the previous chapter. God **pursued** His nation (*Eikha* 3:43) and lay in **ambush** for the *gever* (*Eikha* 3:11), allowing the enemy to **hunt** the *gever* like a bird, without reason (*Eikha* 3:52). By interweaving the enemies’ ominous behavior in this chapter with God’s punishment of the previous chapter, *Eikha* reminds us that the enemies do not act independently of God; Israel’s enemies are the agents of God’s punishment, acting in pursuance to divine will.

1. Though the objective narrator slips an occasional personal pronoun into his reference to the nation, (“daughter of **my** nation”, verses 3, 6, 10), verses 17-20 represent the only actual first-person account in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word *ketz* appears twice in this sentence, recalling *Yechezkel* Chapter 7, which features this word to describe Jerusalem’s end (vv. 2, 5). This terrible chapter in *Yechezkel* contains several intriguing parallels to the book of *Eikha*, illustrating that its primary goal is to prepare Judah for the upcoming catastrophe that finds expression in *Eikha*. Compare for example, *Yechezkel* 7:15 to *Eikha* 1:20; *Yechezkel* 7:19 to *Eikha* 4:1; *Yechezkel* 7:20 to *Eikha* 1:8; Yechezkel 7:26 to *Eikha* 4:13, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The unusual alliteration includes three words in rapid succession that begin with *ayin*, followed by four *tzadi* words, and then four words that begins with *kaf*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Hebrew, the effect is even more pronounced, as the first two sentences contain two words, while the third has two beats (although it has three words, it only has two stressed syllables.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Rashi on *Eikha* 4:17. See also ibn Ezra, who adds that they may have been relying on Assyria as well. Presumably ibn Ezra draws this idea from biblical passages which refer to Israel’s erroneous reliance on these two nations (see e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 2:18; *Hoshea* 6:11). See especially *Eikha* 5:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Yechezkel* 29:6-7 appears to reference this event as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This echoes ideas that we have already encountered in our study of the book of *Eikha* (e.g. 1:2; 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that *Yeshayahu* 31:1-3 uses the word *ezer* four times in describing Israel’s reliance on Egypt’s help and the futility of depending upon their assistance. See also *Eikha* 1:7, which states simply that no one helps (*ozer*) Jerusalem. *Nachum* 3:9 similarly prophesies of the futility of relying on Egypt’s help. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although *Eikha* 2:11 employs a similar verb (*kalu*) to modify the word *ayin*, there the phrase refers to tears, while here it refers to the strain of watching for a savior that does not come. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)