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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #53**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:20**

ר֤וּחַ אַפֵּ֙ינוּ֙ מְשִׁ֣יחַ יְקֹוָ֔ק

נִלְכַּ֖ד בִּשְׁחִיתוֹתָ֑ם

אֲשֶׁ֣ר אָמַ֔רְנוּ

בְּצִלּ֖וֹ נִֽחְיֶ֥ה בַגּוֹיִֽם

**The breath of our nostrils, anointed of God,**

**Was captured in their traps;**

**About whom we said,**

**“Under his shadow, we will live amongst the nations.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The first-person collective account comes to a stunning and tragic conclusion with the capture of the national leader, the anointed of God, the breath of their nostrils.[[2]](#footnote-2) This unnamed figure has inspired confidence, and the community unanimously agrees on his assured success, asserting that this leader will surely cast his protective shadow over the community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The verse concludes with a citation in which the community expresses palpable relief: the anointed of God will help them survive the challenging times and navigate their complex relationship with the surrounding nations.

Nevertheless, this leader also fails them. The unusual syntax of the verse draws our attention to the sharp contrast between hope and disappointment. Focusing first upon the leader’s prestige and status, the verse then tersely describes his inconceivable capture, which represents the climax and conclusion of Jerusalem’s fall. In a staggering reminder of more hopeful times, the verse returns to cite the former words of an optimistic populace. These words fall as a terrible blow, reverberating ironically, and trailing off bleakly, as the nation falls into silence, bereft of their leader, bereft of hope.

Chapter 4 (like Chapter 2) often focuses our attention upon the loss of leadership (verses 7, 13, 16). This, however, remains the only verse in the book that actually refers to an individual whose purpose and personality seem specific.[[4]](#footnote-4) Astonishingly, the actual identity of the leader remains obscure. By not naming the leader, he retreats further into the shadows, impotent and feeble, unable to deliver the city from its misfortune. Nevertheless, the question remains: who is the leader who revives his people and imbues them with newfound confidence? In this *shiur*, we will examine the different possibilities raised by biblical interpreters. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the leader’s identity remains unclear, as elusive as the hopes that fail to come to pass.

**Tzidkiyahu**

Many scholars assume that the verse alludes to the king, Tzidkiyahu, who reigns in Jerusalem during its final days.[[5]](#footnote-5) Appointed by the Babylonians in 597 BCE after they exile King Yehoyakhin along with Jerusalem’s notables (*II* *Melakhim* 24:17), Tzidkiyahu represents the possibility that a remnant of the nation can remain in Jerusalem even as the Babylonians assert their hegemony over the region.

Jerusalem’s residents may well speak optimistically about the newly appointed Tzidkiyahu, who can help them survive Babylon’s aggressive stance toward Judah, “Under his shadow, we will live amongst the nations!”[[6]](#footnote-6) This scion of the Davidic dynasty (“anointed of God”) revives the people’s hopes (“breath of our nostrils”), offering them a reprieve from a rapidly deteriorating political nightmare. Tragically, Tzidkiyahu’s reign is all too brief, ending in disaster as the king tries surreptitiously to escape the city, but to no avail. Apprehended by the Babylonian soldiers (“captured in their traps”) and abandoned by his terrified infantry, Tzidkiyahu’s hope-filled leadership draws to a close (*II* *Melakhim* 25:4-5). The Babylonian soldiers bring him to their king, who summarily executes judgement upon Jerusalem’s king, killing his sons, blinding him,[[7]](#footnote-7) and exiling him in chains to Babylon (*II* *Melakhim* 25:6-7).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Tzidkiyahu’s credentials notwithstanding, he appears to be an unlikely candidate for the superlatives ascribed to the leader in this verse. Although Tzidkiyahu, a descendant of David, technically bears the title “anointed of God,” this king repeatedly scorns the word of God, according to *Yirmeyahu* 37:2.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It seems even less appropriate to refer to Tzidkiyahu as “the breath of our nostrils,” a unique phrase that bespeaks exaltation and the ability to reinvigorate,[[10]](#footnote-10) and which places extraordinary trust and hope in the leader. Possibly the nation simply reveres and adores the Davidic line, indiscriminately pinning their hopes on any king belonging to God’s chosen monarchic lineage. However, these admiring descriptions seem unsuitable to describe Tzidkiyahu, a weak king who does not earn respect by virtue of his character but receives it by virtue of his position on the Judean throne.

**Yoshiyahu**

Perhaps for the above reasons, many of the traditional commentaries assert that this verse refers not to Tzidkiyahu, but to Yoshiyahu.[[11]](#footnote-11) Exegetes who adopt this approach often ascribe this verse to Yirmeyahu, who composed it originally as a lamentation over Yoshiyahu’s death (*II* *Divrei* *Ha-yamim* 35:25). While Yoshiyahu’s death was a deeply troubling event, its occurrence twenty-three years before Jerusalem’s fall should render it largely irrelevant within the context of the present chapter. Why hark back to such a distant tragedy while writing about the current disaster, whose catastrophic impact far outstrips that of Yoshiyahu’s death?

Those who espouse this approach likely focus upon Yoshiyahu’s exceptional virtue, and the manner in which he breathes new spiritual life into the moldering people.[[12]](#footnote-12) The last truly righteous king of the Davidic dynasty, Yoshiyahu embarks upon an extraordinary path, reforming the nation, destroying idolatry, and centralizing worship of God in the Temple (*II Melakhim* 23; *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 34-35). His religious campaign coincides with the waning of Assyrian power, and Yoshiyahu asserts his hegemony over the northern kingdom, restoring the land of Israel to its original undivided state (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 34:6; *II Melakhim* 23:15, 19, 29).[[13]](#footnote-13) Some biblical passages (e.g. *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 34:9; *Yirmeyahu* 3:11-12) suggest that the exiles from the northern kingdom begin to trickle home, an idea supported by rabbinic sources.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Yoshiyahu’s era is particularly hopeful, filled with the exciting possibility that he will restore the fortune of Israel, reunite the kingdoms under a Davidic king and fulfill the optimistic prophecy of *Yeshayahu* 11:1-12:6. Truly, the “breath of our nostrils,” this “anointed of God” offers genuine hope. Under his leadership, Israel retains the hope that it will actually thrive amongst the nations, rebuilding a powerful and flourishing kingdom, which can offer divine guidance to the world (“Under his shadow, we will live amongst the nations.”) Israel’s hopes come to an abrupt and shocking end when Yoshiyahu goes to battle the Egyptians, who are on their way to fight the Babylonians alongside the Assyrians. The verse suggests that the killers of Yoshiyahu capture him in a trap, ostensibly alluding to the manner of his death, caught in the maw of the Egyptian war machine.

Yoshiyahu’s death represents the end of an ideal, if brief, period. Acute disappointment echoes throughout biblical passages, illustrating magnitude of the calamity. Filled with bewilderment and confusion, the prophets respond in various ways to Yoshiyahu’s death.[[15]](#footnote-15) Yirmeyahu instructs the people to refrain from tears (22:10), while Yeshayahu expresses helplessness and confusion (53:7, 9; 57:1).[[16]](#footnote-16) Chavakuk admonishes God, demanding an explanation (1:3-4, 13; 2:1). These prophetic passages have one important thing in common: all of them assume that Yoshiyahu’s untimely death is a case of a righteous person who suffers without reason.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The death of the righteous king in battle launches the theological struggles that characterize the next twenty-three years. A watershed event, the outrage, despair and perplexity that arise in its aftermath accompany the nation up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem. Events seem to spiral out of control, leaving a stunned and theologically distraught nation: cruel enemies and punishing famine wreak terrible and indiscriminate damage upon the entire population, without regard for culpability. Young die alongside the old, priests alongside prophets, Nazirites alongside sinners; innocent babes and sucklings languish on Jerusalem’s streets. Lamentations over the righteous Yoshiyahu’s inexplicable death launch the book of *Eikha*, laying its foundation.

In this schema, we can better understand Rashi’s contention that Yirmeyahu wrote all of Chapter 4 as a lamentation over Yoshiyahu’s death.[[18]](#footnote-18) At first glance, this appears implausible, given that Chapter 4 describes the siege and starvation in Jerusalem, the destruction of the city, and the exile of her inhabitants — all of which occur long after Yoshiyahu’s death.

Nevertheless, the subtext of Chapter 4, its core idea, remains the unexplainable nature of divine justice, the fact that righteous people suffer. Yoshiyahu’s death hovers painfully in the backdrop of this chapter, as the event that initiates all of the perplexing events of the past twenty-three years, which seem to merge, weaving a variegated tapestry of human confusion and outrage. The theological quandary that lies at the heart of the chapter takes root and grows following Yoshiyahu’s death. For this reason, many exegetes assume that this is the leader alluded to in our verse, whose death propels the nation toward the inevitable calamity of Jerusalem’s downfall.

**Gedalya**

Rashbam identifies the leader in this verse as Gedalya ben Achikam, the final leader of the Judean community. Following the destruction of the city and the exile of the majority of her populace, as told in *Yirmeyahu*, the Babylonians permit a small number of poor Jerusalemites to remain in Judah (39:10), appointing Gedalya as their official leader (40:5, 7). Gedalya urges the remaining Judeans to accept their situation and regroup under Babylonian auspices (40:9-12). In a great act of treachery, Yishmael ben Netanya (at the behest of the king of Ammon) murders Gedalya and his cohorts (both Judean and Babylonian), perpetrating a bloodbath upon the remnant of the Judean community (41:1-10). Fearing that the Babylonians will avenge the death of their soldiers and appointed leader, the remaining Judeans flee the country, headed for Egypt (43:2-7). This is a final act of betrayal against God’s word, delivered by Yirmeyahu in an attempt to convince them that God wants them to remain in Judah (42:7-22).

Several factors likely compel Rashbam to identify the leader in this verse as Gedalya. First, Rashbam appears to read the chapter as a chronological continuum. The capture of the leader (verse 21) takes place in the chapter **after** the destruction (verses 11-14) and exile from the city (verses 15-16). If one assumes that the chapter records the events in order, this leader must be Gedalya, who is in charge of the community that does not go into exile. Gedalya truly represents the last Judean hope, “the breath of their nostrils.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, Gedalya appears to be a virtuous and responsible leader, who has gained the trust of the Babylonians, a leader about whom the people may say, “Under his shadow, we will live amongst the nations.”

Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to refer to Gedalya as the anointed of God. He is not a descendant of the house of David, nor does God appoint him to his position. If this verse is not about the end of the Davidic dynasty, then its impact resonates less significantly. After all, Gedalya is only a temporary leader, appointed by the enemy to shepherd the miserable survivors of a beaten nation. Interestingly, in this schema, the one who lays the trap is not the external enemy — Babylonian or Egyptian — but rather, the internal enemy, Gedalya’s fellow Judeans. For the above-stated reasons, I am less inclined to accept Rashbam’s opinion, which represents a minority position among biblical interpreters.

However we understand the specific identity of the unnamed leader who has been trapped and captured, the tone and message of the verse is a dejected one. As the chapter begins to wind down, Judah recalls her last hope, the leader who could have enabled the community to retain some paltry measure of survival within the circumstances. The optimism that first surrounded the leader deflates and vanishes in a tragic finale, leaving nothing but memories in its wake.

1. For the moment, we will not speculate as to the context of this optimistic citation. This *shiur* will examine the possible identities of this leader, while trying to determine the reason that the leader inspires hopefulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As the organ of breathing, the nostrils often describe anger (especially when coupled with the word *charon*), a vivid portrayal of the fierce quick breaths that accompany anger (see *Eikha* 1:12; 2:1, 3, 21, 22). The phrase “breath of the nostrils” sometimes describes God’s powerful ability to whip up a strong wind (e.g. *Shemot* 15:8; *II* *Shemuel* 22:16). In our context, it seems to indicate someone who can breathe new life into the nation (see e.g. *Bereishit* 2:7 and 7:22, where the breath of the nostrils simply signifies life.) Possibly, the similar phrase in *Iyov* 27:3, suggests that this leader will revive them religiously by restoring their “spirit of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The protective shadow of this leader, appointed by God, evokes the shadow that God casts over those under His protection (see e.g. *Tehillim* 17:8, 91:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In *Eikha* 2:6, 9 the king is mentioned in general terms, but he has neither character nor specific attributes or goals. *Eikha* also often mentions general groups (e.g. priests, prophets, officers, mothers, children, elders, youth), without indicating anyone’s names or any specific identity within the group. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g. Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 92; House, *Lamentations*,p. 448. Ibn Ezra adopts this position and R. Yosef Kara cites it as the first possibility (and presumably, therefore, the one that he feels is most logical) of the three opinions that he brings to identify this leader. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 113, raises the possibility that the citation refers to Tzidkiyahu’s rebellion against Babylon. See e.g. *II* *Melakhim* 24:20, *Yirmeyahu* 52:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The reference to the blind people that wander the city in *Eikha* 4:14 may further cement the relationship between this chapter and King Tzidkiyahu’s misfortune. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These events appears also in *Yirmeyahu* 39:1-7; 52:1-11; *Yechezkel* 12:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also *Yirmeyahu* 32:1-5, where Tzidkiyahu imprisons Yirmeyahu because of his prophecy, which Tzidkiyahu rejects. Nevertheless, Tzidkiyahu is not the most sinful king from the Davidic line — he seems to waver between listening to Yirmeyahu’s prophecies and disobeying them. See e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 34:8-11, 17-22; 37:3-4. This finds expression in Tzidkiyahu’s personal relationship with Yirmeyahu, as may be evidenced especially in *Yirmeyahu* 37:17-38:28. From this story, Tzidkiyahu appears to be a weak king, caught between the unyielding advice of his palace officials and Yirmeyahu’s word of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While this phrase refers to God’s actions several times (as noted above), this appears to be the only biblical passage in which it describes a human. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Targum and Rashi on *Eikha* 4:21; *Ta’anit* 22b; *Seder Olam Rabba* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *II* *Melakhim* 23:25 asserts that there was no king before him or after him who returned to God “with all of his heart and all of his soul and all of his strength.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yoshiyahu enacts his reform in the area of the northern kingdom, thereby indicating his hegemony there. Moreover, the fact that Yoshiyahu goes to battle with Pharaoh Nekho as he travels through Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley suggests that Yoshiyahu regards himself as the ruler of that area, deep in what was formerly the area of the northern kingdom (see e.g. Radak, *II* *Melakhim* 23:29; *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:53). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Megilla* 14b asserts that Yoshiyahu seeks God’s word from the prophetess Chulda and not from Yirmeyahu because the latter had gone north to bring back the ten tribes. Radak on *II Melakhim* 23:19 suggests that perhaps not all of the northern tribes went into exile in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For more on this calamitous event, see *shiur* #4 in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These verses in *Yeshayahu* are part of the section of *Yeshayahu* (Chapters 40-66) that describes events from the period of the Babylonian exile and return to Israel. For this reason, some exegetes are willing to explain that these verses refer to Yoshiyahu’s death, despite the fact that that event occur many years after Yeshayahu’s time. See e.g. Rashi and Radak on *Yeshayahu* 57:1 and Abravanel on *Yeshayahu* 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See especially *Yeshayahu* 53 and 57 which — if they are really referring to Yoshiyahu — make this point explicitly. *II* *Divrei* *Ha-yamim* 35:20-22 presents Yoshiyahu’s death somewhat differently, hinting instead at Yoshiyahu’s culpability. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rashi, *Eikha* 4:1. See also *Eikha* *Rabba* 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The fast that commemorates Gedalya’s murder, traditionally observed on 3 Tishrei, acknowledges the significance of the event of his death, which represents the termination of the final possibility for a reduced community to remain in Judah and begin to rebuild. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)