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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #55:**

***Eikha*, Chapter Four**

**Chapter Four: In Summation**

Chapter 4 maintains a factual tone, recounting shattering events in an even, less emotional style.[[1]](#footnote-1) Like Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 4 seems to divide substantively into two main parts; unlike in Chapters 1 and 2, Jerusalem refrains from speech in this chapter. Jerusalem seems exhausted, speechless, numbly witnessing the atrocities, but lacking the energy to comment or cry out. Thus, this chapter sustains an objective third-person account for its first sixteen verses, leaving the reader dumbfounded by the dissonance between the survey of horror and the coolness that accompanies the mode of retelling it.

Recording a sustained eyewitness account of the siege and starvation in Jerusalem, the first part of the chapter (verses 1-10) focuses on the children, who emerge as the chapter’s most poignant and memorable image. The calamity wreaks havoc upon the vulnerable and innocent victims, who previously functioned as the representatives of Jerusalem’s glory, her jewel and pride. Flitting back and forth between glittering images from a magnificent past and a survey of the bleak present, the shifting snapshots aptly convey the city’s terrible downfall.

The second section of the chapter (11-20) follows what appears to be a chronological continuum, recording events that occur after the breach of the city’s fortifications. The siege appears to have ended. Instead of describing the enemies pouring forth into the battered city, the opening salvo depicts God flinging His wrath against the city, igniting it in a fiery display of divine anger. Disbelief follows, as foreign kings absorb Jerusalem’s disaster. In Jerusalem, survivors blindly pick their way through city streets, unmindful of the blood that flows and contaminates, sullying the city, her survivors, and anyone associated with her.

At this point, the chapter assumes a vague tone, painting an impressionistic portrait of shadowy figures moving aimlessly from the city to exile. Unidentified voices call out to these dazed figures, informing them of the impurities that cling to the city and its sullied populace. It remains unclear whether these voices are hostile or empathetic — it matters little as Jerusalemites are driven far from their homeland, where hostile nations spurn the polluted Jerusalemites. God surfaces once again in the chapter to scatter the nation further afield, wreaking yet more havoc on a shattered nation. Briefly, the communal voice breaks through, recounting the frantic last moments in the city, and concluding with the capture of the leader, God’s anointed, who provided the final hope that the nation might survive.

This chapter seems hopeless; it spins out of control, moving disjointedly, but inexorably toward unmitigated disaster. Nevertheless, the structure here is **not** chiastic, it does not present a cyclical, unending catastrophe. In fact, as the chapter seems to spiral toward a devastating conclusion, a modicum of hope appears, allowing the chapter to emerge from the dark despair that characterized it.

**Chapter 4 and Chapter 2**

Chapter 4 bears striking similarities to Chapter 2 in terms of its content, structure, and language. These shared features direct the reader to compare the two chapters, whose most significant shared theme is theology. The similar manner in which each of these chapters grapple with God and His role in human suffering constitutes the core of these chapters.

Pictorial and intense chapters, Chapters 2 and 4 each depict the sights and atrocities in detail, portraying vividly the calamity that unfolds in the streets of Jerusalem. Filled with the horror of the famine that ravages the city, the unforgettable image of these chapters is that of the hapless children, who languish on the streets, weak and expiring from starvation. Equally haunting, if only because of its unfathomable cruelty, these chapters feature mothers who eat their children, once-merciful women who are now both the victims and the perpetrators of unspeakable atrocities. These mothers are ill-fated and helpless, but also shockingly heinous.

God pours His wrath upon the city in these chapters, resulting in a fiery conflagration that destroys its very foundation. Both chapters focus upon the blow to the political leadership; kings, officers, and the anointed of God are violated, spurned, trapped, captured, and exiled. As explanation, these chapters point to the sins of the leadership, especially the religious leaders: prophets, priests, elders. Loss of leadership entails a dizzying lack of direction along with despair; Jerusalem’s residents seem disoriented and bewildered. Following God’s active destruction, He recedes and disappears; the nation receives no guidance from God as He turns away from His people, refusing to look their way. In both chapters, the people keep their tears and prayers in check; it is difficult to petition God following His decision to abandon them.

Other nations play an important role in both chapters; outsiders respond to Jerusalem’s calamity with mixed reactions. Some display shock and disbelief, while others respond with scorn, exultation, and celebration. Each of these chapters include a citation by exultant enemies, whose words verbalize their enmity. The enemies’ joy rings derisively, and Chapters 2 and 4 close with the hope that God’s vengeance will come upon these contemptuous enemies.

Structurally, the book aligns Chapters 2 and 4 in chiastic relation to each other; they divide into two similar sections, but in opposite order. The first ten verses of Chapter 2 describe the destruction of the city, corresponding to the second half of Chapter 4 (verses 11-20). The second section of Chapter 2 features the famine (11-21) and its terrible effect upon the children, in parallel with the first ten verses of Chapter 4. Both chapters conclude, as noted, with vengeance upon the enemies.

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| **Chapter 2** | **Chapter 4** |
| The Destruction: Verses 1-10 | The Famine: Verses 1-10 |
| The Famine: Verses 11-21  | The Destruction: Verses 11-20 |
| Call for God’s Vengeance: Verse 22 | God’s Vengeance: Verses 21-22 |

In addition to the thematic similarities, the language of Chapter 2 and the language of Chapter 4 bear remarkable parallels, highlighting the common features noted above: God’s fiery anger, the terrible scenes on Jerusalem’s streets, the hapless and starving children, the nation’s (or Jerusalem’s) straining eyes, the sneering joy of the enemies, the failure of the leadership (kings, prophets, and priests), the brokenness of the shattered nation, and the city’s destruction by fire. Thematic and linguistic parallels appear in the following chart:

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| ***Eikha*, Chapter 2** | ***Eikha*, Chapter 4** |
| He spilled out (*shafakh*) His anger like fire (2:4) | He spilled out (*shafakh*) His burning anger (4:11) |
| On every street corner (*be-rosh* *kol* *chutzot*) (2:19) | On every street corner (*be-rosh* *kol* *chutzot*) (4:1) |
| As the child and suckling (*olel* *ve-yonek*) faint in the streets of the metropolis. To their mothers they say, “Where is grain and wine?” (2:11) | The tongue of the suckling (*yonek*) cleaves to his palate in thirst. Children (*olelim*) ask for bread, they have no provider (4:4) |
| My eyes (*einai*) are drained (*kalu*) from tears (2:11) | Our eyes (*eineinu*) still strain (*tikhlena*) [to see] (4:17) |
| And your enemy rejoiced (*vaysamach*) over you (2:17) | Be joyous and happy (*simchi*), daughter of Edom (4:21) |
| My liver spills (*nishpakh*) to the ground… as they spill out (*be-hishtapeikh*) their souls in their mothers’ bosoms (2:11-12). | The holy stones spilled (*tishtapekhna*) on every street corner (4:1)The iniquities of her priests, who spill out (*ha-shofekhim*) in her midst the blood of the righteous (4:13) |
| He profaned the kingdom (*mamlakha*) and her officers (2:2)And he spurned in his fiery anger king (*melekh*) and priest (2:6)Her king (*malkah*) and officers are amongst the nations, there is no instruction (2:9) | The kings (*malkhei*) of the land did not believe (4:12) |
| He destroyed (***shicheit***) its fortresses (2:5)He destroyed (***shicheit***) His appointed place (2:6)God determined to destroy (*le-hashchit*) the wall of Bat Zion (2:8) | The breath of our nostrils, anointed of God, was captured in their traps (*bi-****shchit****otam*) (4:20) |
| Because of the brokenness of the Daughter of my Nation (*al shever bat ammi*) (2:11) | In the brokenness of the daughter of my people (*be-shever bat ammi*) (4:10) |
| How does He becloud in His anger (*be-apo*)? … And He did not remember His footstool on the day of His anger (*be-yom* *apo*) (2:1)He hewed down in his smoking anger (*ba-chori* *af*) (2:3)And he spurned in his fiery anger (*be-za’am* *apo*) king and priest (2:6)You murdered on the day of Your anger (*be-yom* *apekha*)! (2:21) | God completed His wrath, spilled out the anger of His nostrils (*charon* *apo*) (4:11) |
| And he burned in Jacob as a flaming fire (*eish*) that consumes (*okhela*) its surroundings (2:3) | He lit a fire (*eish*) in Zion, and it consumed (*vatockhal*) her foundations (4:11) |
| Even her prophets (*nevi’eha*) have not found a vision from God (2:9)Your prophets (*nevi’ayikh*) prophesied for you falsehood and triviality (2:14)When murdered in the sanctuary of God are the priest and prophet (*ve-navi*)! (2:20) | On account of the sins of her prophets (*nevi’eha*), the iniquities of her priests (4:13)  |
| They wagged (*vayaniu*) their headsabout the daughter of Jerusalem (2:15) | The blind wander (*na’u*) in the streets … as they fled and wandered (*na’u*) (4:14-15) |
| As the child and suckling faint in the streets (*bi-rchovot*) of the metropolis (2:11) | [We could not] walk on our streets (*bi-rchovoteinu*) (4:18) |
| And they did not reveal (*gilu*) your transgressions (2:14) | He will not continue to exile you (*le-hagloteikh*)… [When] your transgressions are remembered, daughter of Edom, He will reveal (*gila*) your sins (4:22) |

Appearing a total of seven times in the book of *Eikha* (but only in Chapters 2 and 4), the verb *shafakh* depicts death (children spill out their life), fury (God spills out His wrath), and carnage (priests and prophets spill the blood of innocents). In these painfully public chapters, the reader views the flagrant spectacle of suffering and death that occurs both in the streets (*chutzot:* 2:19, 21; 4:1, 4, 8, 14) and open spaces (*rechovot:* 2:11, 12; 4:18) of the city.

In *Eikha* 2:11, Jerusalem describes her eyes, worn out from tears (*kalu*… *einai*). An identical expression appears in *Eikha* 4:17 to describe the eyes of the community, worn out from straining to see a savior, who does not arrive. A striking linguistic similarity, this draws our attention to the absence of tears and petition in these chapters. Nevertheless, I have noted that Chapter 2 retains an evocative, passionate tone, while Chapter 4 maintains an emotional numbness that clashes with the painful sights that it describes.

Both chapters feature the incomprehensible horror of the death of innocents, primarily the children and sucklings, too young to have known sin. Similarly, both chapters features the death of righteous figures: Chapter 2 focuses on the death of priests and prophets in the Temple, presumably while attending to their religious duties, while Chapter 4 spotlights the ascetic Nazirites and the innocent righteous (*tzaddikim*), slaughtered by the wicked leaders.[[2]](#footnote-2) A profound sense of divine injustice forms the theological backdrop of these chapters, compounded by the absence of a description of the sinfulness of the general populace.[[3]](#footnote-3) Instead, these chapters place the burden of the events upon the leaders, prophets, and priests, deflecting the people’s guilt. These chapters appear to take issue with the fate of the nation, which seems unwarranted and disproportionate.

Unrelieved by a clear sense of theological culpability, and focused on the intensity of God’s anger and its brutal outcome, the chapters display both confusion and defiance. Neither chapter properly reconciles with God. Instead, they retain a tenor of theological uncertainty, in which humans remain unable to understand the events that have occurred.

**The End of the Chapter; The End of the Book?**

Chapter 4 concludes in an unexpectedly hopeful manner (partially contradicting the theology and tone of the chapter that I describe above). I recommend treating these final two verses as a separate entity from the rest of the chapter, almost as an addendum, or epilogue to the chapter. Offering a glimpse of actual hope (and theological reconciliation), verses 21-22 suggest that when sinning ends, so will the punishment, and the nation will return from their exile. Enemies will receive their due recompense, and justice will be restored to the world. This conclusion of Chapter 4 seems to look in an entirely new direction, envisioning an optimistic end to Zion’s calamity.

These verses appear to function as the conclusion of this calamitous book, offering a glimpse of the possibility of return to God and rejuvenation of the nation. This view is supported by the first word of 4:22, *tam*, which suggests completion and conclusion. Followed by the word “sins,” the verse asserts that the conclusion of the disaster must be predicated upon the conclusion of sinning.

However, *Eikha* does not conclude with these verses and will continue its tale in Chapter 5. Perhaps the book cannot yet conclude because Chapter 4 ends without a direct address of God. The community, exiled and detached from their land and their city, still feels alienated from God. Despite the confidence at the end of *Eikha* 4, the community still lacks the courage and strength to call upon God directly. To restore communication with God, the suffering community must gather strength; they must regroup and accrue newfound reserves of energy. The book cannot close without God and cannot conclude with a community that lacks the inner resources to petition God. Nevertheless, the ability to see a broader picture along with the possibility of a just world, both of which emerge at the conclusion of Chapter 4, reimbue the community with confidence and vigor. This paves the path to the following chapter, which opens with the community’s direct and evocative petition to God.

1. Strikingly, this chapter contains only two sentences per verse (44 sentences), rendering it shorter by a third than the (approximately) sixty-six sentences of each of the first three chapters [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Whereas Chapter 2 suggests that the slaughtered priests are the innocent party, Chapter 4 presents the priests as the perpetrators of the killing of innocents. Perhaps, the priests who faithfully serve in the Temple remain pious, while those who wander the streets get into trouble. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As noted above, *Eikha* 4:6 alludes to the “*avon*” of the people. Some biblical interpreters understand it to mean punishment rather than sin. In any case, the purpose of the verse is not to condemn their sinfulness, but to bemoan their annihilation. The conclusion of Chapter 4 also contains a reference to the nation’s sins. Nevertheless, this reference coheres with the anomalous nature of the conclusion of the chapter, which mentions sinfulness in order to offer guidance and hope for ending the exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)