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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #56:**

***Eikha*: Chapter Five**

**Introduction: A Communal Petition and Lament**

The composition of the concluding chapter of the book of *Eikha* sets it apart from previous chapters in the book. Especially noticeable is the absence of an alphabetic acrostic, even though it contains the requisite twenty-two verses that an alphabetic sequence requires. The dissolution of the alphabetic structure may indicate the ebbing of the all-encompassing pain that characterized previous chapters.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, unlike previous chapters, chapter 5 opens with three imperative verbs asking God to intervene, instead of the customary opening, “*Eikha.*” Omitting the word “*eikha*” at its opening indicates that this chapter is not primarily a lament, despite its elegiac elements. “*Kina* meter” likewise dissipates, and sentences revert mostly to the customary balanced meter of biblical poetry.[[2]](#footnote-2) Written in the first-person plural, the chapter never gives sway to a third-person objective narrator or to a first-person singular account, although these voices dominated previous chapters. The reflective and communal nature of the chapter suggests organization; it seems less spontaneous than previous eyewitness accounts, and possibly written after some time has elapsed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Taken together, these factors suggest that the chapter contains a collective appeal to God, a communal prayer.[[4]](#footnote-4) The previous chapter recorded a climactic account of tragedy and despair as the final exiles depart from Jerusalem, dejected by the capture of their promising leader. Hope emerges unexpectedly at the conclusion of chapter 4; in a stunning turnaround, the narrator declares that Israel’s exile will end and her enemies will be punished. Nevertheless, this optimistic projection remains obscured in an amorphous future, dependent upon factors that have yet to occur. Jerusalem’s desolation endures, her inhabitants still suffer terribly, and God remains elusive, distant, and silent.

Facing this difficult reality, the community summons the vestiges of its energy and appeals directly to God, proffering the nation’s tragedy for His observation. The community petitions God to remember, look, and see their humiliation, following this with a harrowing catalogue of their extensive losses. Communication with God has been limited in the book, and this bid to mend ties suggests renewed faith. However, the bulk of the chapter has the community focused inward in first-person plural description of their own distress (verses 2-18). Toward the conclusion of the chapter, the community again turns directly to God, first in a description of His eternity (v. 19) and then in a rhetorical question that contains a hint of a plea (v. 20). In verse 21, the community’s boldness reaches its zenith, as they petition God to intercede actively to restore His relationship with His nation. Nevertheless, the book concludes with God’s silence; the community heaves a final sigh of despondence, concluding the chapter (and the book) with an expression of bewilderment and pain, flung directly at God: “For You have surely rejected us, You have been greatly wrathful against us” (v. 22).

As part of its movement toward reconciliation with God, the community twice interrupts its litany of suffering to contemplate why these events have occurred. Initially refusing to assume responsibility, the community assigns it instead to their predecessors (v. 6). As the chapter progresses, it gropes its way toward admission of sinfulness, giving rise to the communal assumption of responsibility: “Woe to us for we have sinned!” (v. 16). It remains unclear what precisely precipitates this conclusion, which emerges without warning, in a sudden flash of maturity and clarity.

Despite the distinctive compositional features of this chapter, which suggest the possibility of a renewed relationship with God, the chapter maintains its blunt assessment of the dismal reality. Recalling chapter 1, it returns us full circle to the original account of Jerusalem’s calamity. Jerusalem remains desolate, a widowed city, characterized by loss and by the word “*ein*” (“there is none”).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Lacking energy or hope for a better future, the chapter bleakly recounts the calamity and its consequences. Each verse of this chapter contains one brief binary sentence. Thus, a laundry list of woes emerges in a staccato beat, relentlessly battering the reader with dull, but persistent, force. The book has become increasingly shorter; its life force fades and diminishes as the community seems to lose the strength to articulate its grievances.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This is the only chapter that contains just one speaker. The voice of the anguished individual grows silent, yet the collective voice of the community somehow endures. Rising from the ashes of a shattered nation, it insists on its right to petition God. Indeed, the nation sustains privileges not accorded to an individual who has sinned. Although the book eschews unrealistic positivity or fraudulent solutions, chapter 5 restores the community’s prayerful mode, even briefly petitioning God to restore the relationship (v. 21). Ever truthful in its quest to present the community’s situation, this hopeful moment is short-lived, returning quickly to the grim experience of God’s rejection (v. 22). Nevertheless, in this petitionary chapter, the community transposes its paralyzing grief into a communal mission to regain God’s attention and reopen the channels of communication.

**Structure**

Unlike previous chapters, we cannot identify the structure of chapter 5 based on its different speakers, as the same speaker continues uninterrupted throughout the chapter. Dividing the chapter on thematic grounds elicits problems as well. Most of the chapter recounts the losses suffered by the community. Moving from the loss of life’s necessities (housing, drink, and food) to a description of torment and humiliation, the litany of grievances proceeds to its climactic calamity – namely, the desolation and desecration of the Temple Mount. The chapter ends with several disjointed statements: a brief theological reflection, a hope that flares up and extinguishes, and a dejected lament of God’s wrathful rejection.

Based on this thematic progression, some scholars divide the chapter as follows:[[7]](#footnote-7)

* Verse 1: Petition
* Verses 2-18: List of complaints
* Verses 19-21: Praise of God
* Verse 22: Closing lament

The chapter may posit a division by weaving two similar reflective comments into its composition, constituting two pauses that interrupt its litany of woe. This draws the reader’s attention to the manner in which chapter 5 grapples with the theological implications of the community’s miserable situation. The first seven verses of the chapter lead to the community’s initial deflection of responsibility, in which they forcefully assert, “Our forefathers sinned and they are no more, and we suffer their sins!” (verse 7). The following nine verses climax in an opposite conclusion, linguistically evoking its earlier assertion: “Woe to us for we have sinned!” (verse 16). This division leaves the final six sentences of the chapter with no clear linguistic or thematic connection to the first sixteen verses of the chapter, functioning as an epilogue both to the chapter and to the book as a whole. This division yields the following structure:

* Verses 1-7: A litany of grievances that concludes with no assumption of responsibility.
* Verses 8-16: A litany of grievances that concludes with recognition of sinfulness.
* Verses 17-22: Epilogue: Disjointed concluding reflections.

Both divisions offer different perspectives on the principal idea of the chapter. The first emphasizes its petitionary mode, albeit recognizing that the “prayer” consists of a list of complaints rather than direct communication with God or praise of Him. The second division highlights the theological grappling that takes place in this chapter, the community’s valiant and successful bid to achieve recognition of sinfulness. The second division regards the final verses as a separate entity, which may function as an epilogue not only for the chapter, but for the book as a whole.

***Eikha* 5:1**

**זכור ה' מה היה לנו**

**הביטה וראה את חרפתנו**

**Remember God, what we had**

**Look and see our disgrace**

An unambiguous petition, the chapter opens with the community flinging three imperative verbs at God, beseeching Him to remember (*zekhor*) what has happened to them, to look (*habita*), and see (*u-re’ei*) their humiliation.

Positioned as the key opening word in chapter 5, the word *zechor* makes its seventh and final appearance in the book. Memory and forgetfulness[[8]](#footnote-8) frame the chapter, evoking its significance in the book of *Eikha*. In general, memory plays an important role in the mutual (and immutable) relationship between God and Israel. God often obliges Israel to remember pivotal events,[[9]](#footnote-9) and God promises that He will remember His nation and not abandon them to an eternal punishment (*Vayikra* 26:42). Nevertheless, in the only previous usage of the verb *zakhar* that clearly modifies God,[[10]](#footnote-10) it appears in the negative (*Eikha* 2:1): “God did *not* *remember* (*ve-lo* *zakhar*) His footstool on the day of His burning anger.” God’s refusal to remember sets in motion the destruction of Jerusalem in chapter 2. Aloof and distant, God refuses to recall His intimate connection with His Temple, obviating Jerusalem’s only hope for receiving a reprieve for her sins. The nation’s appeal to God to remember at the opening of *Eikha*’s final chapter seems designed to set in motion the opposite trajectory, toward rebuilding the city and restoring the connection with a remote God.

The threefold appearance of the word *zakhar* in the center of the book (3:19-20) is especially noteworthy for understanding the use of the word *zekhor* in 5:1. In our examination of chapter 3, we noted that the word *zakhar* functions as a pivot for the *gever*’s transformation, whether it involves the *gever*’s own remembrances or his appeal to God to remember. The appearance of the word at the opening of *Eikha*’s final chapter hints to the possibility of a similar transformation. The community employs the same tactic that propelled forward the trajectory of chapter 3, in a bid to bring about a similarly significant pivot toward recovery and restoration of the relationship with God.

The two remaining imperative verbs in the verse (*re’ei* and *habita*) echo previous petitions directed toward God in the book. The speaker appeals to God to reconnect with His nation and desist from His decision to withdraw from His nation and hide His face from them (*hester* *panim*).[[11]](#footnote-11) Chapters 1 and 2 contain direct appeals to God that He look (*re’ei*)and see (*habita*) His nation (1:11; 2:20). The speaker in chapter 1 entreats God twice more simply to look (*re’ei*) at him (1:9, 20), although he omits the second verb, *habita*, in these verses. Chapter 3 employs both of these verbs in succession (though not in conjunction) in relation to God (3: 59; 60, 63), either as an appeal to God or as a description of God’s actions. Chapter 4 appears to consciously desist from issuing this appeal, asserting that “[God] did not continue to look at them (*le-habitam*).” Chapter 5 restores the customary petition in her initial verse, a heartfelt plea to restore communication. This functions first as a restoration of the failed communication of chapter 4. Moreover, the two verbs appear uniquely in conjunction with the appeal to God to remember (*zekhor*), creating a cluster of imperatives that reveal the determination of the community to elicit a response from God.

The word *zekhor* suggests that the community alludes to events that occurred in the past, while the request to look and see them evokes their current state of distress. Ibn Ezra notes this, explaining the verse as follows:

*Zekhor*:The [plea to] “remember” is in the heart and [the plea to] “look” is with the eye. Its explanation: [Remember] all of the troubles that passed over us prior to the exile, and [look at] the disgrace that we are presently in. (Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 5:1)

According to Ibn Ezra’s reading, this chapter introduces an amalgamation of past troubles alongside the present dismal state.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is difficult to separate the past from the present in this chapter. Which of the inventory of calamities do they recall from their memory, from the perspective of exile, and which of them represent an eyewitness account of their present situation? It seems impossible to discern one from the other. Nevertheless, one thing seems clear: This chapter describes an unbroken continuum of loss that began while they were still living in Jerusalem and accompanies them after the destruction. The nation finds it difficult to heal; living with its losses, the community unceasingly recalls the harm that it suffered, mixing together the catastrophe that occurred in the past and that which continues to haunt it in the present.

***Cherpateinu***

Before embarking on a lengthy description of the nation’s dismal state, the chapter summarizes it in one Hebrew word, “*cherpateinu*,” “our disgrace.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Calling upon God to bear witness to their humiliation, the community expresses the emotional fallout from the terrible events, the helplessness and torment that expunges human dignity.

Significantly, biblical passages often link the reputation of God and Israel, such that shaming Israel demeans God as well. Goliath’s pugnacious speech, designed to taunt and humiliate Israel (*I Shemuel* 17:10, 25) also humiliates Israel’s God (*I Shemuel* 17:45).[[14]](#footnote-14) Enemies sometimes follow their torments of Israel by questioning God’s fidelity to His nation or His very omnipotence. Taunts such as, “Where is your God?” (*Mikha* 7:10; *Tehillim* 42:11) reverberate hauntingly, compounding the people’s suffering. God’s ostensible abandonment of Israel to a terrible fate endures as a source of disgrace and humiliation for His people and for God Himself, leaving lingering questions about God’s power, loyalty, and trustworthiness.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indeed, the prophet Yechezkel describes the Babylonian exile as a desecration of God’s name:[[16]](#footnote-16)

And I poured my wrath upon them because of the blood that they spilled upon the land, and they sullied it with their idolatries. And I scattered them among the nations and they spread out through the lands; according to their ways and their deeds I judged them. And they came to the nations that they arrived there, and they desecrated My holy name when the [nations] said about them, “These are the nation of God and from His land they were exiled!” And I had compassion upon My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned amongst the nations where they had arrived. (*Yechezkel* 36:18-21)

The linkage between Israel’s and God’s shared status in the eyes of the world adds dimension and depth to the appeal to God to see Israel’s humiliation. Perhaps by observing Israel’s disgrace, God will witness the public desecration of His own name. This may induce Him to repair Israel’s situation, restoring dignity and honor to the nation that reflects God’s honor.

Indeed, in a stunning redemptive moment, Yechezkel describes God swooping in to redeem His people from the Babylonian exile and restore them to their land and good fortune. God does this not because they deserve this benevolence, but in order to sanctify His name following its terrible desecration:

So says God: Not for you I act, house of Israel, but for My holy name, which you have desecrated among the nations... And I will sanctify My great name… and the nations will know that I am God – says God – when I manifest My holiness through you before their eyes. And I will take you from among the nations and I will gather you from all the lands and I will bring you to your land. And I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you will be purified… I will give you a new heart and I will place a new spirit in your midst… and you will live in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you will be My nation and I will be your God. (*Yechezkel* 36:22-28)

In petitioning God to witness their humiliation in *Eikha* 5:1, the nation seems to appeal not just for sympathy, but for deliverance. Indeed, God’s desire to sanctify His name among the nation stirs God to remove the humiliation and restore Israel’s honor.

1. J. F. Burg, “Biblical Acrostics and their Relation to Other Ancient Near Eastern Acrostics,” in W. W. Hallo, B. W. Jones, and G. L. Mattingly (eds.), *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context* (ANET Studies 8; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), p. 286, notes that this disappearance indicates the poet’s exhaustion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first three sentences of the chapter function as notable exceptions to this, suggesting perhaps that as the chapter gains momentum, it achieves a more balanced (and less grief-stricken) tone. We will contend with some other exceptions in the commentary to the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The notion that Zechariah the prophet composed this chapter at the end of the sixth century BCE (an idea that we will explore in our conclusion to this chapter) supports the suggestion of its postponed composition. The chapter’s focus on the desolate Temple Mount suggests that its composition took place prior to the rebuilding of the Temple (520-516 BCE), a project spearheaded by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ancient textual traditions reflect this notion. Several Greek manuscripts introduce this chapter with the words, “A prayer,” or, “A prayer of Jeremiah.” Scholars note that national laments often conclude with a prayer for God’s intervention, as in *Tehillim* 28:9; 44:27. See e.g. Grossberg, *Centripetal*, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word *ein* (none) appears five times in chapter 1 (primarily in the context of the absence of a comforter) and three times in chapter 5, underscoring the similarities between these chapters, both of which describe a desolate city, emptied of her glory and bereft of her inhabitants. The word *ein* appears only twice more in the rest of the book (once in chapter 2 and once in chapter 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chapter 4 maintains two sentences in each verse, and chapters 1 and 2 have three sentences per verse. Chapter 3 likewise has one sentence for each verse, but contains three times the amount of verses. Thus, chapters 1, 2, and 3 have 66 sentences, chapter 4 has 44 sentences, and chapter 5 has 22 sentences. The book of *Eikha* weakens and fades, mirroring the ebbing of the vitality of the community. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although they do not have identical divisions, scholars who adopt this basic outline include Westermann, *Lamentations*, pp. 212-213; Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 103; Dobbs- Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In verse 20, the community posits a rhetorical question: “Why should you forget us for eternity?” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The obligatory nature of remembering certain events finds liturgical expression in the “six remembrances,” instituted at the conclusion of the daily morning prayer service. It is customary to declare Israel’s obligation to remember the Exodus from Egypt, the experience at Sinai (also known as Chorev), the eternal war against Amalek, the nation’s recalcitrant behavior during their wanderings in the desert, the punishment of Miriam when she spoke against Moshe, and the sanctification of the Sabbath. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is unclear whether the three appearances of the word *zakhar* in *Eikha* 3:19-20 describe God’s memory or human remembrances. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This state of the relationship between God and His nation is explicitly depicted in *Devarim* 31:16-18, as we noted in our examination of chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Although Ibn Ezra does not specify, it seems probable that he refers to the events that occurred in Jerusalem up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Nevertheless, R. Yosef Kara (*Eikha* 5:2) asserts that the past events include those associated with the exile of the ten tribes by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. Although he does not adduce *Eikha* 5:6 to support this claim, R. Kara is likely influenced by the reference to Assyria and Egypt in that verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We encountered the word *cherpa* twice in chapter 3 (verses 30 and 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The same word that appears in our verse (*cherpa*) appears in each of these verses in *I* *Shemuel* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This and similar arguments are propounded by several prominent biblical figures in their attempts to persuade God to have mercy on His nation (see e.g. *Shemot* 32:12; *Bamidbar* 14:13-16; *Yoel* 2:17; *Tehillim* 79:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also *Yeshayahu* 52:5; *Tehillim* 74:7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)