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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #57:**

***Eikha*: Chapter Five**

***Eikha* 5:2-5**

**נַחֲלָתֵ֙נוּ֙ נֶֽהֶפְכָ֣ה לְזָרִ֔ים**

**בָּתֵּ֖ינוּ לְנָכְרִֽים**

**יְתוֹמִ֤ים הָיִ֙ינוּ֙ וְאֵ֣ין אָ֔ב**

**אִמֹּתֵ֖ינוּ כְּאַלְמָנֽוֹת**

**מֵימֵ֙ינוּ֙ בְּכֶ֣סֶף שָׁתִ֔ינוּ**

**עֵצֵ֖ינוּ בִּמְחִ֥יר יָבֹֽאוּ**

**עַ֤ל צַוָּארֵ֙נוּ֙ נִרְדָּ֔פְנוּ**

**יָגַ֖עְנוּ וְלֹ֥א הֽוּנַֽח־לָֽנוּ**

**Our estates turned over to strangers**

**Our houses to foreigners**

**We became orphans without a father**

**Our mothers are like widows**

**Our water we drank [in exchange] for money**

**Our trees came for pay**

**Pursued by our necks**[[1]](#footnote-2)

**We wearied and they gave us no respite**

Following the brief petition of verse 1, the chapter rapidly moves to a lengthy description of the community’s destroyed world (verses 2-16). In determined and succinct strokes, the community offers a self-portrait of devastation. Ordinary life unravels as the chapter steadily lists the loss of the basic exigencies of life: land, estates, homes, fathers, husbands, drinking water, and wood. Households and family structure collapse and vanish. Exhaustion sets in, driven by the unremitting pursuit of a relentless enemy.

Although the chapter does not open with the customary word that signifies lament (“*eikha*!”), the initial three verses of the chapter employ the meter of lamentation that we identified in previous chapters.[[2]](#footnote-3) Thus, the chapter initially presents itself (somewhat misleadingly) as a lament, as the community seems to sob and swallow its words, unable to complete its sentences as it recalls its misfortune. Beginning in verse 4, however, the community offers an account tempered by balanced meter,[[3]](#footnote-4) reflecting an equilibrium heretofore unseen in the book. Perhaps, in chapter 5, time has passed since the catastrophe, allowing the community to regain its footing and reflect sorrowfully on events without choking back tears.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Verse 2 contains two parallel sentences, portraying foreigners and strangers ousting Judah’s inhabitants and rendering them landless and homeless. The ancestral land (*nachalateinu*) parallels the houses (*bateinu*), while the invasive foreigners (*zarim*) parallel the strangers (*nochrim*), as they work in tandem to replace the Judeans and move into their places of residence. Homelessness is not the only problem; this description alludes to the psychological effect of witnessing others enjoying the fruits of your labors, taking for themselves what is rightfully yours.[[5]](#footnote-6) Aware of its devastating effect, the *tochacha* in *Devarim* ominously warns of this scenario:

You will betroth a woman and another will sleep with her, you will build a house and you will not dwell in it, you will plant a vineyard, but will not consecrate it. Your ox will be slaughtered in front of your eyes and you will not eat from it, your donkey will be stolen from in front of you and will not return to you, your sheep will be given to your enemies… a nation that you do not know will consume the fruits of your land and all of your labor. (*Devarim* 28:30-33)[[6]](#footnote-7)

The loss of the land estates (*nachalot*) represents yet another disruption of the nation’s religious assumptions. God commands the nation to divide the *nachalot* (land estates) proportionately among the families entering the land (*Bamidbar* 26:52-56). A family’s *nachala* is an inalienable possession, bequeathed upon it by God (*Bamidbar* 36:2; *Joshua* 18:4-6, 10; 21:41). The land returns to the family without fail every Jubilee year (*Vayikra* 25:10, 13, 23), irrespective of the family’s current financial state or social status. Biblical passages and later rabbinic sources discourage families from selling their houses and land,[[7]](#footnote-8) while encouraging other members of the family to buy the family estates on the market in order to keep them close to the family (*Vayikra* 25:25-34).[[8]](#footnote-9) This attitude contains strong religious undertones, displayed clearly in the words of Navot, who refuses to sell his ancestral property to King Ahab (*I Melachim* 21:3): “God forbid that I should give the property of my forefathers to you!” After all, because God bequeathed upon the family their portion of land, it would be an act of ingratitude and even impiety to relinquish it.

The word *nachala* also often refers to the land as a whole, and not simply the individual family portions. This land is divinely bestowed upon Israel (*Devarim* 4:21, 38), who have the responsibility and the privilege of maintaining it. The collapse of this system represents yet another loss of divine endowments, a bequest that vanishes along with all that God had previously given to them.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The verb that describes the terrible upheaval in verse 2 is *nehefkha*, meaning to overturn. This word frames the description of Jerusalem’s disgraceful state, appearing again in verse 15 to portray the replacement of joyful dance with gyrations of agony. Employed in various contexts, the verb *hafakh* can signify an utter and complete transformation of an object (e.g. *Shemot* 7:15, 17; *Jeremiah* 13:23; *Yoel* 3:4), a person (*I Shemuel* 10:6), a state of mind (*Shemot* 14:5), or a city (*Jonah* 3:4). It also alludes to a change of fortune, often effected by God (e.g. *Devarim* 23:6; *Jeremiah* 31:12). More specifically, this word frequently describes the devastation of Sodom and Amorah (e.g. *Bereishit* 19:21; *Isaiah* 13:19; *Jeremiah* 49:18; *Amos* 4:11; *Eikha* 4:6) that results in the total annihilation of the formerly thriving cities, which are transformed into a wasteland. Physically, these cities appear overturned, collapsed and flipped over. Functionally, the cities no longer operate, losing their glory and utility in an instant. The word suggests an upside-down state, a sweeping scope of destruction, and an unlikely, if not impossible, recovery.

Following on the heels of the loss of property and houses, the community describes the dissolution of family and household. Fathers disappear, leaving behind orphaned children and widowed mothers. The absence of the men suggests either their death in battle or their capture by the enemies. Strikingly, the verse does not clarify what has happened to these men.[[10]](#footnote-11) The chapter remains focused on the myriad losses of the hapless survivors and on the empty hull of a nation depleted of its people, glory, property, dignity, security, and equilibrium.

Reduced to a populace of orphans and widows, the nation is especially vulnerable, lacking in male protection and provisions. This also bespeaks of the impending failure of any viable social infrastructure. Numerous biblical passages mandate special treatment of these weak and susceptible members of society who lack the means for support and safety (e.g. *Shemot* 22:21; *Devarim* 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13). Nevertheless, if all of society have become defenseless and needy, then no one can afford to offer the widows and orphans care, compassion, or assistance; everyone is equally disadvantaged. Under these circumstances, perhaps God will muster compassion and hear the cries of the widows and orphans, as He promised to do in the case of society’s failure to function compassionately (*Shemot* 22:21-22).[[11]](#footnote-12)

Possibly, however, the reference to the absence of the father evokes God Himself (e.g. *Shemot* 4:22; *Jeremiah* 31:8; *Hosea* 11:1), who has deliberately withdrawn from His nation as part of their punishment. In this scenario, the people’s vulnerable state has no possible reprieve, as they cannot even invoke the special protection that God generally accords to the widows and orphans.

The description of the widowed population recalls the city’s widowed state at the beginning of the book (*Eikha* 1:1). The word *almana* links together chapters 1 and 5 and illustrates the merging of the city’s experience (in chapter 1) with that of the community. The widowed state of the city occurs simultaneous to that of the populace, but they are also identical; city and population blend and blur, sharing the same heavy burden of responsibility and the same miserable fate.

Moving rapidly to the next atrocity, the community describes the loss of their own resources. Deprived of control over their land, the local population must pay for their water and trees, resources generally unrestricted and free of charge, certainly for the locals.[[12]](#footnote-13) In this description, the enemies who currently retain the rights to the water and trees remain obscured in the background; the verse focuses on the survivors, bewilderedly forced to pay others for the right to survive in their own land.[[13]](#footnote-14) A metrically balanced verse, which contains synonymous parallelism that is rare in the book, the community displays their anguished reality in an even, nearly emotionless, manner. Reality sinks in as the conquerors appropriate Judah’s land; the inventory of loss includes the basic necessities of life, transfer of land, houses, water, and trees to the conquerors is complete.

Following these losses, the community depicts its pursuit and exhaustion; the community cannot find rest.[[14]](#footnote-15) This verse seems out of place within the context of the litany of loss. Moreover, it remains unclear what the verse is actually describing. Does this verse contain a description of the enemies propelling them toward exile, where they find no rest? Is it a description of their capture and enslavement? Or perhaps it portrays the Judean community toiling to produce food upon their land, which they shall never enjoy. The last possibility seems most consistent within the chapter, which appears to represent the present situation of Jerusalem’s populace (see e.g. verses 2, 11, 18).

The initial phrase, “we were pursued by our necks,” is particularly obscure. Is it an idiom that represents the enemy “breathing down its neck,” suggesting close pursuit that is both relentless and threatening? Many biblical interpreters (both traditional and modern) assume that the phrase alludes to a yoke of enslavement, metaphoric or actual, placed upon their necks.[[15]](#footnote-16) This leads to the exhaustion and inability to rest described in the next part of the verse.[[16]](#footnote-17) In this reading, the verse in its entirety portrays the condition of forced labor, imposed upon them by others – presumably by the same foreigners who occupy their land and houses.[[17]](#footnote-18) Alternatively, the verse may simply evoke the sentiments of the survivors; weary and drained, the community feels pursued and downtrodden, unable to emerge from a state of unremitting misery.[[18]](#footnote-19)

The phrase “*lo* *hunnach*” (“they gave us no respite”), recalls the causative verb commonly used to describe the ideal attainment of secure settlement in the land (e.g. *Devarim* 12:10; *Joshua* 23:1). Often used in conjunction with God’s active role in providing the nation with rest in their land, the negative use of the verb *hunnach* in our verse highlights the loss of God’s support and endorsement. God’s active involvement in securing and supporting Israel’s well-being in her land dissipates, deepening their pain by alluding to the divine gifts and beneficence that they have lost.

1. The phrase *al tzavareinu*, which I have loosely translated as “by our necks,” may be an idiom that points to an enemy in close pursuit. Perhaps it refers to a yoke borne on their necks as the enemy drives the Judean community into captivity. We will examine this shortly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For an explanation of *kinah* meter, see [shiur #7](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-07-biblical-poetry-and-book-eikha-part-i) in this series: *Biblical Poetry and the Book of Eikha (Part I)*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. An exception is verse 14, which is composed in *kinah* meter. The epilogue to the chapter, which in my view functions as the epilogue to the book, returns mostly to *kinah* meter, circling back to the painful reality of mournful lamentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Eikha* *Rabba* 2:4 portrays R. Yochanan engaging in more extensive exegetical analysis of *Eikha*’s text than Rebbe (R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi). The *midrash* rejects the possibility that R. Yochanan is a more skilled exegete, concluding instead that Rebbe, who lived a generation before R. Yochanan, recalls the catastrophe with sobs, preventing him from sober analysis. It is worth pointing out that R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi was born 65 years *after* the destruction of Jerusalem! [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. It is instructive to draw from the contemporary experience of those who survived the Holocaust. Returning shattered from the camps or their hiding places, they generally found their houses occupied by others, a terrible experience that deepened their loss and compounded their sense of displacement and alienation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See also *Jeremiah* 6:12, where the prophet warns the people that their houses will be given to others because of their sinfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See *Tosefta* *Erakhin* 5:6 and Rambam, *Hilkhot* *Shemitta* *Ve-Yovel* 11:3, which express the religious reservations and recoil from selling ancestral property. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See *Bamidbar* 36:7, 9, which takes pains to assure that the land inheritances remain within the tribe. See also *Micha* 2:2, where the prophet berates the people for the evils that they have committed in taking the houses and family estates of others. While this may refer specifically to the act of stealing, the reference to houses and *nachalot* suggests the violation of the law of family property. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Strikingly, God bemoans the loss of His house (*beiti*) and estate (*nachalati*) in *Jeremiah* 12:7. It is perhaps a small comfort that God’s misfortunes are linked with Israel’s in this manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. R. Yosef Kara maintains that the fathers are not actually gone; rather, their inability to help their children and families denies the fathers their paternal role. Lacking their essential ability to nurture their families, their wives are like widows and their children like orphans. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See also *Devarim* 10:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See Ibn Ezra and R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 5:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ibn Ezra asserts that this describes the siege, prior to the actual destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. R. Yosef Kara maintains that the correct translation of the word *hunnach* (which contains a massoretic dot in the letter *nun*) is that others did not leave us the fruits of our toil. He maintains that without the dot, the meaning would be that we could not find rest. Indeed, the verb seems to be in a causative form, suggesting that others cause our state. However, it could mean that others did not allow us to rest, rather than preventing us from enjoying the fruits of our labor. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See e.g. Rashi, R. Yosef Kara; Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 95; Westermann, *Lamentations*, pp. 208, 214. Ibn Ezra reads this verse as a continuation of the previous verse: “If we bring the water or the trees **upon our necks**, the enemies **pursue us** and **our toil is for naught**, for **they do not leave for us** that which we have brought.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Their pursuit, exhaustion, and inability to find rest all recall chapter 1 (e.g. verses 3 and 6), which (as we will demonstrate) functions as the parallel chapter to chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Verse 13 contains a similar depiction of forced labor. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)