YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot***

**Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**on the occasion of their twelfth *yahrtzeits***

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**Shiur #58:**

***Eikha* Chapter Five**

***Eikha* 5:6-7**

**מִצְרַ֙יִם֙ נָתַ֣נּוּ יָ֔ד**

**אַשּׁ֖וּר לִשְׂבֹּ֥עַֽ לָֽחֶם**

**אֲבֹתֵ֤ינוּ חָֽטְאוּ֙ וְאֵינָ֔ם**

 **וַאֲנַ֖חְנוּ עֲוֹנֹתֵיהֶ֥ם סָבָֽלְנוּ**

**We gave a hand to Egypt**

**[To] Assyria, for our fill of bread**

**Our fathers sinned and they are no more**

**And we suffered for their iniquities[[1]](#footnote-1)**

To understand these verses, we must address several issues that affect their basic meaning.

Who forged alliances to obtain bread in verse 6?**[[2]](#footnote-2)** Possibly, this describes alliances forged by previous generations, referring to the political associations that prophets repeatedly condemned.[[3]](#footnote-3) Alternatively, this verse may describe ties forged during the current crisis, in which Jerusalem’s populace scrambles for bread to survive.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Furthermore, the tone and substance of the theological reflection in verse 7 remains unclear. Does the community voice a theological protest, outraged that the suffering Judeans bear no actual responsibility, yet suffer for the crimes of others? Or does this verse simply portray a continuum of sins, begun by their predecessors and perpetuated by the current generation?[[5]](#footnote-5) In this reading, the present generation bears the weight of accumulated sinfulness, suffering the punishment deserved by past generations along with that which they themselves have earned.

**Seeking Help from the Egyptians and the Assyrians**

While verse 7 certainly reflects backward, noting the role of previous generations, the perspective of verse 6 remains unclear. Is it a continuation of the description of the current situation, or is it a prelude to the presentation of the sins of the fathers? If verse 6 continues the portrayal of present circumstances, then it is difficult to understand the reference to Assyria.[[6]](#footnote-6) What is the role of Assyria in assisting Judah during the calamity brought about by the Babylonian empire? Their empire collapsed long ago, along with any major role that they played in events involving the Judean community.[[7]](#footnote-7) Some scholars conclude that the pair is simply a geographical description for the Ancient Near East, denoting the broad swathe of land from the southwest (Egypt) to the northeast (Assyria).[[8]](#footnote-8) Others suggest that Assyria and Egypt become a term used for improper alliances, even if the reference is not to these specific powers.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Alternatively, this verse may not be describing the present situation. Perhaps it looks backwards at previous events, trying to make sense of the present horrific circumstances and preparing us for the verse that follows. Recalling the ill-advised alliances gives the suffering community the opportunity to identify the sins of their predecessors that spawned this calamity.[[10]](#footnote-10) This reflection leads to the following verse, in which the community holds the sins of the fathers responsible for the disaster, at least in part.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**“To Satiate With Bread”: Excuse or Condemnation?**

The phrase “to satiate with bread” appears to suggest the desperation caused by hunger.[[12]](#footnote-12) Striking an almost defensive tone, the community explains that they had no choice; if they wished to obtain food, they had to forge alliances with other nations.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, the dependence on other nations likely stems from God’s abandonment. If God had taken care of us and satiated us with bread,[[14]](#footnote-14) we would not have had to turn to outside sources. Read in this way, the community offers an excuse for their ill-advised alliances.

Possibly, however, the phrase, “to satiate with bread,” suggests not a desperate grasp for survival, but rather a greedy desire for a life of luxury. Indeed, the phrase *sava lechem* sometimes describes the lifestyle of the wealthy, those who do not simply have the minimum, but who live a life of corrupt extravagance and overindulgence.[[15]](#footnote-15) Intriguingly, this phrase appears in a hostile exchange between the nation and Jeremiah, which takes place after the survivors of the catastrophe go to Egypt instead of obeying God and remaining in Israel. Jeremiah urges them to cease their idolatry, maintaining that their sins caused the catastrophe in Jerusalem (*Jeremiah* 44:1-14). The surviving Judeans hold the opposite view, asserting that it was only when they worshipped idols that they prospered:

“This thing that you spoke to us in the name of God, we shall not listen to you. For we will continue doing that which we said, to bring incense to the Queen of the Heavens and we will pour libations for her as we and our forefathers, our kings and officers did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. *And we were satiated with bread* and we lived well and saw no evil. However, since we stopped bringing incense to the Queen of the Heavens and pouring her libations, we lost everything, and we perished by the sword and by hunger.” (*Jeremiah* 44:16-18)

The nation’s warped perspective causes them to seek prosperity by worshipping idols. It is possible that the use of this phrase in *Eikha* 5:6 intimates that the community forged improper alliances not in a desperate quest for basic survival, but in a similarly distorted value system. In this reading, the community acknowledges that Judah formed alliances out of a crass desire for sumptuous living.

**Theology of Protest or Confession**

Pausing for a moment to reflect, verse 7 contains a brief theological statement, focusing upon the sins of the absent fathers set alongside the present condition of their children.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, the verse does not clarify whether the community issues this utterance in a tone of outrage or compliance, whether it is a protest or a submissive statement of confession.

Does the word *avoteinu* (our fathers) contrast with the word *anachnu* (us), or are these words parallel, suggesting a continuum of behavior? Interpreting this verse largely depends upon our understanding of the word *savalnu*, which means to bear a heavy load, often a physical one associated with forced labor.[[17]](#footnote-17) The burden may be figurative rather than physical, as in our verse; it can refer to a burden of guilt, a burden of sins, or a burden of pain. I translated the word above to mean to bear a burden of suffering, creating a contrast between the sins of the fathers and the (unfair) suffering of the children for their father’s sins. Alternatively, this word can indicate a load of sins, indicating that the children perpetuate the *sinning* of the fathers, thereby assuming partial responsibility for the catastrophe.

Both Ibn Ezra and R. Yosef Kara suggest that the community draws an equivalence between the transgressions of their fathers and their own, which link together to result in the current calamity.[[18]](#footnote-18) This reading resolves the theological problem introduced by the possibility that children can suffer for the deeds of their parents. Indeed, while *Shemot* 34:7 states that God visits the sins of the parents upon the following generations, several biblical passages assert the opposite – namely, that children do not die for the sins of their parents, nor do parents die for the sins of their children.[[19]](#footnote-19) Many rabbinic interpreters resolve the contradiction between these passages and *Shemot* 34:7 by explaining that sons only suffer for the sins of their fathers when they perpetuate those behaviors.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Nevertheless, people tend to be oblivious to their own sins, preferring to deflect responsibility upon others. Biblical passages from the period of the *churban* reflect this human foible. Echoing the Judean community’s assumption that they suffer for the sins of previous generations, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel battle this apparently popular notion, in a bid to convince the people of their own guilt and of God’s justness:

In those days they will no longer say, “Fathers eat sour grapes and the teeth of the children are blunted.” Instead, each person dies for his own sin; every person who eats sour grapes shall have his teeth blunted. (*Jeremiah* 31:28-29)

What do you mean by citing this proverb upon the land of Israel, when you declare, “Fathers eat sour grapes and the teeth of the children are blunted”? I swear, says God, that you shall no longer speak this proverb in Israel. Behold all lives belong to Me, the life of the father and the life of the child, [both] belong to Me and [only] the soul of the sinner shall perish! (*Ezekiel* 18:2-4)

Despite the adamant position of the prophets, one can sense that this message does not easily convince the people.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Within this context, it seems likely that the verse reflects the abiding (and erroneous) notion that God treats their generation unfairly and that they suffer solely for the sins of others. Indeed, the verse reads more simply as a grievance, as I have rendered it above: “Our fathers sinned and they are no more, and we suffered for their sins!” In this schema, the community expresses its outrage over their perception that they suffer without cause for crimes that they have not committed. The mention of Assyria in the previous verse supports this reading, suggesting that the community recalls past alliances as a prelude to foisting responsibility upon the previous generation. The tension between responsibility and suffering, and the theological quandary that it creates, climaxes in this simple utterance.

The similar employment of the word *saval* twice in *Isaiah* 53 may lend further support to this reading. That chapter describes the servant of God who suffers for the sins of others.[[22]](#footnote-22) In the first instance, the word *saval* describes the pain that the sufferer bears:

Indeed, he carried our sickness and he bore (*sevalam*) our pain. We thought that he was plagued, struck, and tormented by God. Yet, he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed by our iniquities... And God struck him for the iniquity of us all. (*Isaiah* 53:4-6)

In the second appearance of this word in the chapter (*Isaiah* 53:11), the sufferer bears the iniquities of others (*avonotam hu yisbol*), similar to our verse.

Who is the servant who suffers? Rabbinic interpreters offer different possible approaches. Rashi, for example, maintains that the sufferer represents the collective Israel during the period of exile:[[23]](#footnote-23)

It is the way of this prophet that he mentions all of Israel as one individual as it says, “Do not be afraid, my servant Jacob” (*Isaiah* 44:2), and also here, “Indeed, my servant shall prosper” (ibid. 52:13). (Rashi, *Isaiah* 53:3)

Ibn Ezra (*Isaiah* 53:2) raises the possibility that this section represents only the pious people in Israel, those who *behave* as servants of God in exile.[[24]](#footnote-24) Others search for an individual sufferer: the Mashiach,[[25]](#footnote-25) Jeremiah,[[26]](#footnote-26) or Isaiah.

Abravanel suggests another possible reading of *Isaiah* 53.[[27]](#footnote-27) According to Abravanel, this entire chapter describes the death of the worthy Judean king Josiah, the pious servant who dies in battle despite his righteousness. In Abravanel’s view, *Isaiah* 53 contains several harsh expressions of Israel’s outrage and protest over Josiah’s undeserved death. Josiah, after all, invested all of his energies and resources in ridding the country of idolatry and guiding the people to worship God properly.

Within this context, we can better understand why the community insists so adamantly upon their own righteousness (in contrast to their fathers). Josiah transforms the community, enlisting them to join in his religious fervor and piously remove idolatry from their midst. This religious campaign, begun in the twelfth year of Josiah’s reign, reaches a heightened pitch in the eighteenth year, when Josiah repairs the Temple and convenes the people together to celebrate Passover with unprecedented ardor and participation.[[28]](#footnote-28) Josiah’s pious reforms endure unabated until his death in the thirty-first year of his reign, an era marked by newfound piety and worship of God.

Perhaps then, the nation regards itself as undeserving of punishment, due to Josiah’s reforms. Unlike previous generations, the generation of the *churban* lived under the auspices of King Josiah, acceding to his reforms and ostensibly repenting of their sinful idolatry.[[29]](#footnote-29) Why should they suffer for the idolatrous sins of previous generations? This attitude can account for the outraged utterance of *Eikha* 5:7.

Nevertheless, as we noted in the historical introduction to the book, according to Jeremiah, Josiah’s generation only half-heartedly repented and joined in his religious renovations.[[30]](#footnote-30) Rabbinic interpreters likewise note the generation’s recalcitrance, suggesting that Judah’s populace deceived their virtuous king, pretending to rid their house of idolatry, while actually maintaining their heinous practices.[[31]](#footnote-31) A well-known *midrash* vividly depicts the duplicitousness of the nation:

[Josiah] would send a pair of students to purge their homes of idolatry. When they would enter, they would not find anything. However, when they left, [the inhabitants] would say, “Close the doors.” When they closed the doors, there was a graven image inscribed there.[[32]](#footnote-32) (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:53)

If their repentance was fraudulent, why would they declare their innocence in *Eikha* 5:7? Do they not know of their own spurious acts? Perhaps this inaccurate self-observation simply reflects human nature. Humans are notoriously self-deceptive when it comes to their own behavior. Indeed, it should not surprise us if the Judean community perceives themselves as innocent, even when they are not.

Alternatively, they may feel that no matter how sinful they are, their righteousness far surpasses those of their predecessors. Indeed, unlike Judah’s inhabitants during the reign of Menasseh or Amon, they at least engaged in a modicum of reform, even if it is lackluster and irresolute. Moreover, several biblical passages assert that God’s decree against Jerusalem and the Temple follows the sins of Menasseh, prior to Josiah’s reform. Thus, the utterance of *Eikha* 5:7 rings with some measure of accuracy.

*Eikha* 5:7 does not represent the conclusive theological utterance of the chapter. Even if the community initially presents itself as suffering unjustly, they change their mind in verse 16, when they assume full responsibility for their own sins: “Woe to us for we have sinned!”[[33]](#footnote-33) According to this reading, chapter 5 (like chapters 1 and 3) gropes its way to recognition of sinfulness and confession. This process is rare and exceedingly difficult, but it reflects the courage of the Judean community, who eventually assume responsibility for the events. In this way, they begin the arduous and healing process of repentance.[[34]](#footnote-34)

1. As is customary in translations, I chose one interpretation in order to translate the verse, thereby deflecting the verse’s inherent complexity, which spawns more than one possible interpretation. In my upcoming examination of this verse, I will elaborate on the possible translations and explain the reason that I chose this interpretation of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Several biblical verses indicate that the phrase, “to give one’s hand,” refers to an alliance. See e.g. *Ezekiel* 17:18; *I Chronicles* 29:24. Rashi explains that we stretched out a hand in order to obtain assistance from these countries, while R. Yosef Kara asserts that this verse describes the creation of an unequal relationship, in which Judah must obey and accept the dominance of the nation to whom it extended its hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. *Hosea* 7:11; *Isaiah* 31:1-3; *Jeremiah* 2:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As we have seen, the famine in Judah features prominently in this book (e.g. *Eikha* 2:12, 20; 4:1-10) and plays a central role in the crisis caused by the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (see II Kings 25:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The above translation does not reflect this approach, which would instead translate: “Our fathers sinned and they are no more, and we perpetuated their iniquities.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We discussed at some length the role of Egypt during this crisis in our examination of *Eikha* 4:17. Significantly, the remaining community in Judah emigrates to Egypt soon after the murder of Gedalia ben Achikam (*Jeremiah* 43:7). The decision to go to Egypt, taken against Jeremiah’s express counsel (*Jeremiah* 42:7-22), illustrates their continued reliance on Egypt for both political support and abundant food (see *Jeremiah* 42:14, cited by R. Yosef Kara in his commentary on *Eikha* 5:6.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One edition of the Targum removes Assyria from this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 119, suggests this and the following idea as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See e.g. *Jeremiah* 2:18, 26; *Hosea* 7:11; 12:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We have examined the sin of forging alliances with other nations in previous chapters, most notably in chapter 1, where this theme emerges prominently. See 1:2, 8, 17, 19. See also our discussion on 4:17. These alliances obviate the people’s reliance on God, causing Israel to rely instead on untrustworthy (and essentially powerless) political ties. To compound this problem, these alliances with other nations often influenced Israel to worship those nations’ idols, either because the allies required it, or because the gods of the more powerful nations appear powerful, or simply because forging intimate friendships with idolaters rendered the nation susceptible to the penetration of external ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. While this reading does not necessarily suggest that they bear no measure of responsibility, it seems to cohere better with the reading of verse 7 as a complaint, in which the community refuses to assume responsibility for the events, instead defiantly foisting accountability onto previous generations. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Some scholars (e.g. House, *Lamentations*, p. 463) interpret this as a figurative phrase, suggesting that the quest for bread is in fact a quest for political assistance. I see no evidence for the employment of the phrase in this way elsewhere in *Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While there is no evidence that Israel ever allied itself with Assyria to obtain food, they did often go down to Egypt to obtain food during a famine. Accordingly, this phrase may be a metaphor (see House’s suggestion in the previous note), which indicates their perception that their very survival depends upon alliances. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The phrase “to satiate with bread” can describe God’s role in providing sustenance for His nation (e.g. *Shemot* 16:12) and for humans in general (e.g. *I Samuel* 2:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ezekiel* 16:49 employs the phrase to describe Sodom’s prosperity. For another negative use of this phrase, see *Mishlei* 30:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note the similarity to the vanished fathers in *Eikha* 5:3, which likewise employs the word *ein* (“there is none”) to depict the fathers’ absence. This loss (presumably a result of death or captivity) spawns vulnerable orphans and widows. In our verse, it is the fathers’ transgressions that leave the community vulnerable and exposed to punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, several biblical verses (e.g. *Shemot* 6:3) refer to the slavery in Egypt as *sivlot* *Mitzrayim*, “the burdens of Egypt.” See also *Bereishit* 49:15; *Isaiah* 46:7; *Tehillim* 81:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Daniel* 9:16 contains a confession in plural form in which “our sins” link up with “the sins of the fathers” to cause the destruction of Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Devarim* 24:16; *II* *Kings* 14:6; *Ezekiel* 18:1-20; *II* *Chronicles* 25:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See e.g. *Sanhedrin* 27b; Targum Onkelos and Yonatan, Rashi, Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 34:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Under the current circumstances, this position is understandable. As we have seen, during the national calamity, children die alongside adults, and righteous people suffer alongside those who are sinful. This situation, typical of any national catastrophe, leaves acute theological questions, which remain unanswered. It seems easiest to assert that God does not run His world in a righteous way, as the Judean community maintains in *Eikha* 5:7. Moreover, as I have noted, *Shemot* 34:7 plainly notes that God visits the sins of one generation upon the following generations (although sometimes exegetes interpret the verse differently). We will discuss below the reason that this generation in particular seems to regard itself as righteous in contrast to their predecessors, a perception that is erroneous, yet emerges from a genuine assessment of their generation’s deeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. While Rashi reads the entire section in this way, some exegetes explain that the sufferer does not suffer for the sins of others, but suffers at the hands of those who sin by tormenting him. Nevertheless, this does not appear to be the simplest meaning of the passage. We cannot avoid the sense that biblical exegetes are swayed in their attempt to debunk the classical Christian reading of this passage, in which they identify the sufferer as Jesus, who suffers for the sins of others in order to obtain atonement for them. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Rashi on *Isaiah* 53:8. Many traditional exegetes adopt this position. See e.g. Radak, *Isaiah* 52:13; R. Yosef Kara, *Isaiah* 53:13; Ibn Kaspi, *Isaiah* 53:13; Kuzari II:34; Metzudat David, *Isaiah* 52:13; Malbim, *Isaiah* 53:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibn Ezra also suggests that the servant is the collective Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibn Ezra, *Isaiah* 52:13, brings this as one possibility. See also Targum Yonatan, *Isaiah* 52:13 (and 53:10); nevertheless, the Targum maintains that it is not the servant of God who suffers, but the evildoers among the nations. Moreover, he claims that Mashiach will bring about atonement not by suffering, but by teaching Torah, building the Temple, or praying on the people’s behalf. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Rasag, *Isaiah* 52:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Abravanel interprets the entire passage twice, in extensive detail. First he interprets it as if the suffering servant is Israel. The second time, he interprets the passage as a portrayal of Josiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See *II Chronicles* 35:18. While the text does not clarify what exactly makes this Passover celebration unprecedented since the days of Samuel, I have chosen to describe it as the most ardent Passover, due to the passion and excitement of Josiah’s reform. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. King Josiah died 23 years before the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple. Jerusalem’s populace at the time of the Babylonian siege and subsequent exile surely included many people who had witnessed (and participated in) Josiah’s reform. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See e.g. *Jeremiah* 3:6-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In Abravanel’s reading of *Isaiah* 53, he notes that although some may assume that the generation of Josiah were likewise righteous, *Isaiah* 53:6 supports the rabbinic notion that the people had not properly embraced Josiah’s reforms. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This idea may be based upon the description of the nation’s idol-worship in Isaiah 57:5-13, and especially verse 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Of course, those who read the statement in verse 7 as a confession of sorts would say that verse 16 is simply restating verse 7. In my opinion, the contrast between the verses lends it its drama and significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. As the Rambam notes (*Hilkhot* *Teshuva* 1:1), repentance begins with confession of sins. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)