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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #59:**

***Eikha* Chapter Five**

***Eikha* 5:8-10**

**עֲבָדִים֙ מָ֣שְׁלוּ בָ֔נוּ**

**פֹּרֵ֖ק אֵ֥ין מִיָּדָֽם**

**בְּנַפְשֵׁ֙נוּ֙ נָבִ֣יא לַחְמֵ֔נוּ**

**מִפְּנֵ֖י חֶ֥רֶב הַמִּדְבָּֽר**

**עוֹרֵ֙נוּ֙ כְּתַנּ֣וּר נִכְמָ֔רוּ**

**מִפְּנֵ֖י זַלְעֲפ֥וֹת רָעָֽב**

**Servants ruled us**

**There was none to extricate us from their hand**

**We risk our lives to bring bread**

**Because of the sword in the desert**

**Our skin were darkened as though by an oven**

**Because of the fevers of starvation**

Moving rapidly from one atrocity to the next, the chapter presents an array of images. The inventory of the people’s devastation includes the loss of their autonomy followed immediately by severe economic woes compounded by the frightening threat of death by sword. The inability to obtain bread results in terrible starvation, which discolors their skin and renders them unrecognizable. The distorted appearance of the malnourished community increases their degradation. Forced to relinquish their right to political autonomy, physical survival, and basic human dignity, everything is dislocated and distorted.

The Judeans surrender their sovereignty to others, to individuals dubbed servants, underlings unaccustomed to power. Who are the “servants” who attain political power over the community? This may refer to the Babylonian lackeys who cooperate with the Babylonian masters, functioning as their (perhaps temporary) governors over conquered territory.[[1]](#footnote-1) These nations are themselves conquered, servants of the Babylonians.[[2]](#footnote-2) Presumably, however, those who rule us refer to the enemies who have conquered Judah – namely, the Babylonians. Why would *Eikha* label the Babylonians “servants”? The Targum suggests that this epithet relates to *Bereishit* 10:10, which presents Babylon as a descendant of Cham, who was cursed by Noach to servitude.[[3]](#footnote-3) Possibly, this verse simply reveals a disdainful attitude to the Babylonian conquerors,[[4]](#footnote-4) whose power endures fleetingly, fizzling out not long after they reach great heights of power.[[5]](#footnote-5) Perhaps for this reason, *Isaiah* 23:13 describes Babylon (Chaldea) briefly and dismissively: “Behold the land of Chaldea; this is the people that never existed.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Irrespective of the specific identity of the servants, this depiction offers a painful portrayal of an upended social system, a complete reversal of fortune and roles. Chaos reigns as the uncouth and uneducated govern others.[[7]](#footnote-7) When formerly suppressed peoples take charge, their unpreparedness and residual anger can find expression in excessive cruelty toward those whom they now dominate.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Bleakness dominates this verse, as the community states poignantly, “There was none to extricate us from their hands.” This desperate utterance recalls their futile reliance upon Egypt, who fail to rescue Judah from the Babylonian invasion.[[9]](#footnote-9) The word *poreik* also evokes God, who extricates (*va-yifrikeinu*) His nation from its enemies (*Tehillim* 136:24). The community offers no reason for the absence of a savior. It is simply a fact that the Judean community acknowledges, an apt illustration of their hopelessness and helplessness.

Nothing particularly new attends the depiction of the starvation of the community. They risk their lives for bread (as they did in *Eikha* 1:19), a commodity which is sorely lacking in the city (see *Eikha* 2:12; 4:4).[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, they venture out into far-flung places in a quest to survive, risking a trek into the desert (see *Eikha* 4:19) to obtain bread (see also 5:6, where they make unwise alliances for bread).[[11]](#footnote-11) Lack of nutrition alters their appearance, which becomes blackened, dry, and wrinkled,[[12]](#footnote-12) as in *Eikha* 4:8. This concise summary of hunger illustrates its centrality in the book.[[13]](#footnote-13) At no point do their fortunes change for the better.[[14]](#footnote-14) Famine remains the most pressing problem, depleting the community of its vigor, morality, dignity, and identity.

***Eikha* 5:11-14**

**נָשִׁים֙ בְּצִיּ֣וֹן עִנּ֔וּ**

**בְּתֻלֹ֖ת בְּעָרֵ֥י יְהוּדָֽה**

**שָׂרִים֙ בְּיָדָ֣ם נִתְל֔וּ**

**פְּנֵ֥י זְקֵנִ֖ים לֹ֥א נֶהְדָּֽרוּ**

**בַּחוּרִים֙ טְח֣וֹן נָשָׂ֔אוּ**

**וּנְעָרִ֖ים בָּעֵ֥ץ כָּשָֽׁלוּ**

**זְקֵנִים֙ מִשַּׁ֣עַר שָׁבָ֔תוּ**

**בַּחוּרִ֖ים מִנְּגִינָתָֽם**

**Women were tortured in Zion**

**Young maidens in the cities of Judah**

**Officers were hung by their hands**

**They did not honor the faces of the elders**

**Young men bore a grindstone**

**And youth stumbled with wood**

**Elders ceased from the gates**

**Young men from their songs**

The first-person description disappears, replaced by a sustained third-person plural description of the suffering of different segments of the population. In suspending their self-portrait of suffering, the community pauses to look around, dazed by the myriad images of distress. A catalogue of humiliation emerges; each sentence hovers briefly upon the misery of distinct sectors of Judah’s populace.

Opening with the women and the young maidens, the verb used to describe their debasement is the word *inu*. This word means to torment or afflict, and often connotes sexual torture or rape.[[15]](#footnote-15) Both terrible torment and deliberate degradation, the rape of women in warfare signifies the powerlessness (or absence) of the male population, who cannot protect their wives and daughters. The fading authority of the former leadership in verse 12 illustrates this well. Officers are publicly hung by their (now ineffectual) arms,[[16]](#footnote-16) and the elders receive no respect.[[17]](#footnote-17) Who has committed these atrocities? This point remains suspended without clarification; for the present depiction, it matters little who is responsible for the community’s disgrace.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The third snippet (5:13) offers a snapshot of backbreaking labor, presumably compulsory. This indicates what has happened to the strapping male population, who generally protect the women and ensure that the elderly obtain respect. The select young men bear a grindstone and the youth stumble under the weight of heavy wood. It is unclear whether there is any point to this labor; is it compulsory and pointless,[[19]](#footnote-19) or do they engage in this grueling work in order to obtain the scarce necessities of life? Again, this seems less important than the humiliation of the labor[[20]](#footnote-20) and the fact that it occupies these men, preventing them from attending to the critical role of protecting their city.

In any case, nothing functions properly, certainly not as Judah once did. Elders no longer sit in the gates, where they once rendered judgement[[21]](#footnote-21) and lent an air of authority and wisdom to the bustling cities, and young men cease their music, busy with their weighty burdens (5:14).

In this dizzying whirlwind of degraded and abused survivors, no one has been spared. Old and young, male and female, noble and common – all fall prey to the agony and shame of conquest. Emptied of all semblances of her former honor, Judah lacks splendor, dignity, or freedom; normal human activity ceases, and the survivors suffer the ceaseless battering of the victors.

***Eikha* 5:15-16**

**שָׁבַת֙ מְשׂ֣וֹשׂ לִבֵּ֔נוּ**

**נֶהְפַּ֥ךְ לְאֵ֖בֶל מְחֹלֵֽנוּ**

**נָֽפְלָה֙ עֲטֶ֣רֶת רֹאשֵׁ֔נוּ**

**אֽוֹי־נָ֥א לָ֖נוּ כִּ֥י חָטָֽאנוּ**

**The joy of our hearts has ceased**

**Our circle dances have turned to mourning**

**The crown of our head has fallen**

**Woe to us for we have sinned!**

Returning to its collective self-portrayal, the community describes the cessation of its joy, the abrupt discontinuation of its merry dances. The joy-filled whirling around the city transforms into gyrations of mourning. Movement does not cease; instead, exuberant dance shifts seamlessly into twisting agony. Joy vanishes from our hearts; life as we knew it ceases to exist.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The brief allusion to prior life in the city recalls its joie de vivre and high-spirited energy, its central role as a city of pilgrimage before it was overturned (*nehepakh*). This recollection evokes the dire prophecy of Amos, who prophesied that God would reverse their fortunes:

And I will transform (*ve-hafakhti*) your celebrations to mourning and all of your songs to lamentation. (*Amos* 8:10)

Joy does not simply disappear; in Amos’s prophecy, God removes it from the city, forcing the city into mourning. Yet this reversal is not unidirectional. Just as God can transform joy into grief, He can transform grief back into joy. Indeed, Jeremiah promises a reversal of this catastrophe using similar language and ideas as those found in Amos’ ominous prophecy and its fulfillment in our verse:

Then the young maiden will rejoice in her circle dance, with young men and elders together, and I will turn (*ve-hafachti*) their mourning into joy and I will comfort them and make them happy from their anguish. (*Jeremiah* 31:12)[[23]](#footnote-23)

The word for joy, *mesos*, recalls Jerusalem’s effect on the world, as described in *Eikha* 2:15: “Is this the city about which it was said, ‘[She is] perfect in beauty, a joy (*masos*) for all the land’”? Jerusalem’s existence inspired widespread joy, whether because of God’s evident presence in her midst (e.g. *Tehillim* 46:5-6; 48:2), the divine morality that emanates from the city (e.g. *Isaiah* 2:3; *Tehillim* 102:22), Jerusalem’s splendor (*Tehillim* 48:3), her festive gatherings (e.g. *Hosea* 2:13), or her role as a unifier of tribes and peoples (*Tehillim* 122:3-4). Jerusalem’s destruction has the opposite effect, terminating joy and leaving behind a bleak and cheerless existence.

In a poignant climax of despair, the community proclaims decisively, “The crown of our heads has fallen!” The fallen crown may refer to the collapse of the Davidic dynasty (e.g. *Jeremiah* 13:18), the loss of God’s regal presence (e.g. *Isaiah* 28:5) or, more generally, the ruin of the noble city, her majestic Temple, and her princely populace. The crown also functions as a figurative reference to the glory and honor of the king (*Shir* *Ha-Shirim* 3:11) and of Israel (*Ezekiel* 16:12). Its removal causes shame and dishonor (*Iyov* 19:9). Isaiah’s prophecy of renewal includes the restoration of Jerusalem as a glorious crown (*Isaiah* 62:3), along with the restoration of joy (*Isaiah* 62:5) and protection for the city.

Thus concludes the chapter’s litany of loss and suffering. In a flash of cognition, the community issues a final theological statement: “Woe to us, for we have sinned!” Lending coherence and continuity to the chapter, this realization reverses the previous theological musing, which foisted responsibility onto previous generations (verse 7). Fifteen verses after the launch of this chapter, the community finally assumes responsibility for its fate, illustrating the difficulty of this process. Having groped their way toward admission of sin, the community concludes with a statement that reflects religious growth and maturity. It does not appear that anything precipitates this development. Surprising and inexplicable, the nation’s willingness to concede their culpability illustrates the innate nature of this process, perhaps its inevitability. Indeed, several passages in *Jeremiah* envision the Judean community engaged in a similarly poignant admission:

We lie in our shame and our disgrace covers us, for we have sinned to God, our God, we and our fathers, from our youth until today, and we did not listen to God. (*Jeremiah* 3:25)[[24]](#footnote-24)

This admission parallels the conclusion of chapter 1 (see 1:22). The tentative but steady movement toward recognition of sinfulness envelops the book of *Eikha*. This does not constitute the only theological approach toward suffering in the book, but the fact that it constitutes its periphery suggests its significance. Recognition of human responsibility for the workings of the world must surround and encompass all human investigation into the preeminent theological questions that arise. Within that context, one can press further and deeper, probing God’s role in human affairs.

Thus concludes the book of *Eikha*. We can now turn our attention to its epilogue, to the summary thoughts at the end of the book.

1. Some scholars adduce *II Kings* 25:24 as evidence that the servants of the Babylonians governed Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the parallel passage in *Jeremiah* 40:9 suggests a different reading of the verse in *II* *Kings*, according to which the Babylonians themselves rule over the remaining Judean community. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibn Ezra suggests that this refers to Edom, a country once ruled by Israel. If so, it recalls the passionate anger felt toward the Edomites that we saw at the conclusion of chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This, however, is not entirely accurate. In actuality, Canaan is cursed with servitude (*Bereishit* 9:25-27), and Babylon is a descendant of Kush, not Canaan (*Bereishit* 10:6-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is possible that the word “servants” refers to the Babylonians, in keeping with the notion that God appointed Nebuchadnezzar as His servant, “*avdi*” (*Jeremiah* 27:6), to subjugate the nations. This reading would change the tone of the verse, proffering a positive context in referring to the Babylonians as servants (of God!). I am skeptical of any reading that minimizes the disdainful attitude that inheres in the word “servants” in *Eikha* 5:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Based on the brevity and fleeting intensity of Babylonian rule, *Chazal* explain that Babylon’s success was orchestrated by God for the sole purpose of destroying Jerusalem and the Temple (e.g. *Chagiga* 13:2; *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:31; *Gittin* 56b; R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 1:5.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. An obscure verse, the JPS translation renders it, “This is the people that has ceased to be.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Isaiah* 3:4 warns of this sort of situation. See also *Kohelet* 10:5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Mishlei* 30:21-22, which does not elaborate, but certainly recognizes the danger of a servant turned ruler. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Note our previous discussion on this important episode in *Eikha* 4:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See *II* *Kings* 25:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It seems odd to go to the desert in a quest for bread. Perhaps this indicates their desperation. Possibly, the sword of the desert comes to them, as wild bands emerge from the nearby desert looking to procure food. In this reading, simply venturing out of the city (to obtain hidden storages of food? See e.g. *Jeremiah* 41:8) endangers them. The desert may even be a literary trope, which portrays the city as a “desert-like” society, in which lawlessness reigns and the sword determines who obtains food. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See R. Yosef Kara’s translation of *nichmaru* in *Eikha* 5:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeremiah’s prophecies ominously warn the people of “sword and starvation” (e.g. *Jeremiah* 16:4). The people and their false prophets deny this possibility (e.g. *Jeremiah* 5:12; 14:13-15), which ultimately leads to its implementation, as we see in these verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As we have noted, it is difficult to date this chapter in a precise manner. Whether the events occur before, during, or after the destruction of Jerusalem, the ruinous situation remains generally the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See e.g. *Bereishit* 34:2; *Devarim* 21:14; *Shofetim* 9:24; *II* *Samuel* 13:12. See also Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 5:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It is unclear whose arms *Eikha* 5:12 describes. It could be the arms of the enemy, who use their power (that is, their arms) to string up the officers. Alternatively, (as I have suggested above) the officers may be hung by their arms in a grotesque posture that recalls crucifixion. This coheres well with the general debasement featured in this section. Moreover, the enemy’s general absence from this section leads me to conclude that the verse refers to the officer’s arms, rather than those of the enemy. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As to who did not honor the elders, see our discussion on *Eikha* 4:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The fact that the enemy remains unnamed leaves open the possibility that the section describes general lawlessness that prevails in the city, perhaps following its conquest. The perpetrators may be the enemy or the enemy’s lackeys (Edom or Moab), or even (horrifying as it sounds) wicked inhabitants of the city who take advantage of the chaos and disorder to commit atrocities of their own. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rashi (*Eikha* 5:13) regards this as the conditions in which the Babylonians drive the young men into exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Some scholars suggest that the description of the men bearing a grindstone is women’s work (e.g. *Isaiah* 47:2) or that of prisoners (e.g *Shoftim* 16:21), designed to humiliate the men (see e.g. Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 105). However, the verse describes them carrying the grindstone, not using it to grind flour. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Targum adds the word *Sanhedrin* to his translation, indicating that this verse illustrates that the Supreme Court ceases its function. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The verb *shavat* (to cease) appeared in the previous verse as well, depicting the cessation of normal activity in the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A similar reversal appears in *Tehillim* 30:12. See *Berakhot* 55b, which juxtaposes these two verses (along with *Devarim* 23:6) in its recommendation for recitation by someone who wants to reverse a bad dream. Each of these verses feature the word *hafokh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See also e.g. *Jeremiah* 14:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)