YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #60:**

***Eikha* Chapter Five**

***Eikha* 5:17-18**

 **עַל־זֶ֗ה הָיָ֤ה דָוֶה֙ לִבֵּ֔נוּ**

**עַל־אֵ֖לֶּה חָשְׁכ֥וּ עֵינֵֽינוּ**

 **עַ֤ל הַר־צִיּוֹן֙ שֶׁשָּׁמֵ֔ם**

**שׁוּעָלִ֖ים הִלְּכוּ־בֽוֹ**

**About this our hearts were miserable**

**About these our eyes darkened**

**About the desolation of the mountain of Zion**

**Foxes frequent it**

Sidelining the dire sights that continue to grieve the community, the book winds down its tale of woe by focusing on its pivotal disaster. The destruction of the Temple emerges as the true cause of the nation’s misery.[[1]](#footnote-1) Its demolition constitutes the loss of the sacred center of Israel’s universe, the symbolic meeting place between God and His nation. This calamity spawns confusion and hopelessness. How, after all, can Israel mend her ruptured relationship with God without the Temple, priests, sacrifices, and the Temple rituals associated with the Day of Atonement? How can Israel hope to reconstitute itself as a nation, lacking her nucleus, around which everything revolves?

The terrible loss elicits a physical response; hearts fill with misery and eyes darken, ostensibly flooded with tears.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hearts and eyes frequently appear together in biblical passages, constituting a word pair that often indicates an intellectual or emotional experience involving understanding[[3]](#footnote-3) or yearning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Despite the body parts that depict the community’s wretchedness, the city lacks any physical presence in its precinct. Even the Temple Mount, once the bustling heart of the sacred city, emerges lifeless and desolate, eerily empty of all human company. Only foxes frequent the area of the Temple, and the presence of animals that frequent destruction illustrates its derelict state.[[5]](#footnote-5) More distressingly, these impure animals tread on holy ground, in an area previously divided into zones that restricted entrance to the impure, to non-priests, and to non-Israelites. Now, brazen beasts traverse anywhere they like, even encroaching upon the Holy of Holies. Sanctity and distinctions evaporate and animals profane the sacred space. Jerusalem is a wreck of shattered doctrines.

**R. Akiva and the Foxes**

These events, though grievous, do not come without warning. The covenant of *Vayikra* 26 painstakingly delineates the manner of punishment should the people violate their religious obligations:

And I will place your cities in ruins, and I will render your Temples desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors. (*Vayikra* 26:31)

This verse enables the community to cope with the events, at least theologically. The destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple occur for a reason, as part of an ongoing relationship with God. After all, had the community kept to its commitments, the calamity could have been avoided. This perspective allows for a solution; after ascertaining the behavior that led to the catastrophe, the nation can repair its conduct and begin the process of rejuvenation and reconstruction.

An oft-cited incident involving R. Akiva transposes *Eikha* 5:18 to the catastrophe of the destruction of the Second Temple, arriving at a hopeful conclusion, similar to the one cited above:

R. Gamliel, R. Elazar ben Azariah, R. Yehoshua, and R. Akiva… were coming up to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Har Ha-Tzofim, they tore their clothes. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They began to cry, but R. Akiva laughed [with joy]. They said to him, “Why do you laugh [with joy]?” He said to them, “Why are you crying?” They said, “This is the place about which it was said, ‘A foreigner who draws near shall die’ (*Bamidbar* 1:51). And now, foxes traverse it; shall we not cry?!” He said to them, “This is why I laugh [with joy]… The verse made the prophecy of Zechariah contingent upon the prophecy of Uriah. And Uriah said, ‘Therefore, because of you Zion will be ploughed up like a field’ (*Jeremiah* 26:18). And Zechariah said, ‘Old men and old women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem’ (*Zechariah* 8:4). Until the [punitive] prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was afraid that the [promising] prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled. But now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is certain that the prophecy of Zechariah will be fulfilled!” They said to him, “Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!”(*Makkot* 24b)

R. Akiva regards the destruction of the Temple as an event that is part of the ongoing relationship between God and His nation. The fulfillment of a prophecy, even a punitive one, confirms the truth of the prophetic tradition. This in turn provides comfort and strengthened belief in a hopeful future. According to this *gemara*, despite the fact that they stand amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, R. Akiva succeeds in renewing his colleague’s faith in prophecy.

***Eikha* 5:19-20**

**אַתָּ֤ה יְקֹוָק֙ לְעוֹלָ֣ם תֵּשֵׁ֔ב**

**כִּסְאֲךָ֖ לְדֹ֥ר וָדֽוֹר**

**לָ֤מָּה לָנֶ֙צַח֙ תִּשְׁכָּחֵ֔נוּ**

**תַּֽעַזְבֵ֖נוּ לְאֹ֥רֶךְ יָמִֽים**

**You God shall sit forever**

**Your throne is from one generation to the next**

**Why should you forget us forever**

**Forsake us for the length of days?**

Demonstrating once again the remarkable vitality of faith, the book winds to its conclusion with a brief philosophic musing, a declaration of God’s immortal endurance. This reflective statement emerges abruptly, without warning, a burst of clarity that follows the sorrow-filled observation of Zion’s desolation. Turning directly to address God, the community employs the personal pronoun, *ata*, to assert the fact of God’s immutable existence.

In spite of the ruins and desolation of the Temple Mount, God’s eternal sovereignty endures. Phrased as an incontrovertible theological statement, the community pronounces God’s independence from any physical structure. As biblical prophets consistently maintain, God’s existence does not depend upon the Temple, nor does a building function as an actual measure of divine dominion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Biblical texts often describe God’s throne in the heavens, expressing God’s amorphous reign and His omnipresence.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Aramaic Targum on this verse explicitly makes this point, rendering, “You God are forever, *the house of your dwelling is in the heavens*, the throne of your glory is for generations.” The statement of God’s eternity disavows the potential for arriving at an erroneous theological conclusion, categorically rejecting the notion that the destruction of God’s Temple spells the end of God’s omnipotence.

The description of God seated on a throne evokes God’s judgment.[[8]](#footnote-8) This image suggests that the desolation that envelops Jerusalem is punitive, ostensibly a result of God’s verdict. But it also leads into the next two verses, in which the community bursts forth with questions addressed to the seated judge (verse 20), followed by a request for reprieve and clemency (verse 21).

What is the nature of the parallel questions of verse 20: Why should you forget us forever? [Why should you] forsake us for the length of days? Do they express complaint or bewilderment, supplication or resolute faith?

Possibly, the questions reflect the irrepressible bitterness of the nation.[[9]](#footnote-9) God’s judgment against the long-suffering nation endures, with no end in sight. In this reading, the questions constitute a bitter challenge to God’s abiding decree. Compounded by God’s eternity, the decree that leaves Jerusalem in ruins stretches out into an interminable future, unrelieved by any divine indication of regret or compassion. In this reading, the bold request that follows this verse (verse 21) is driven by desperation, a wild flailing that obtains no results (verse 22).

R. Saadia Gaon regards the questions in verse 20 as an entreaty. In his view, the community pleads with God: “Do not forget us forever, nor forsake us for the length of days!” Recalling the prayer that launched the chapter (verse 1), “Remember, God!” the community concludes the chapter by entreating God not to forget them. The petitionary mode seems to gain momentum, and the verse that follows contains an even bolder appeal to God (verse 21): “Return us to you, God, and we will return; renew our days like previous [days]!” This reading highlights Israel’s action and faith in prayer.

This verse may pose rhetorical questions, whose implied answers reflect the persistent faith of the community. Would you, God, actually forget us forever? Is it possible that you would forsake us for the length of days? After all, as Rashi comments, God took an oath of fealty to His nation, an assurance that is rooted in His own eternity![[10]](#footnote-10) Any proclamation that asserts God’s eternity therefore functions as a recollection of God’s enduring commitment to Israel. In this reading, these questions constitute a confident utterance, rhetorical questions that express resolute faith in God’s ultimate loyalty to His nation.

In Rashi’s view, God’s eternity functions as a panacea for the nation’s temporary troubles, reassuring Israel that God will certainly not reject Jerusalem or her people forever. Isaiah extends a similar idea to a nation fearful that God has abandoned them, employing the same two verbs found in *Eikha* 5:20:

And Zion said, “God has *forsaken* me and God has *forgotten* me.” Can a woman forget her child, [can she prevent herself] from having compassion upon the child of her womb? Even if she would forget, I will not forget! (*Isaiah* 49:14-15)

God, who convened an everlasting covenant with His people, has no intention of forsaking or forgetting His people. In contrast to the opening of the book, which focused on Jerusalem, *sitting* lonely and abandoned in a posture of grief and isolation, the book closes with God, regally *seated* upon His everlasting throne. This reassuring image of God’s eternal strength provides a measure of hope in Israel’s restoration.

However, the fact that the philosophic musings do not yield an unambiguously encouraging reflection underscores the complexity of the conclusion of *Eikha*. Short on solace, grasping for faith in a hopeful future, and still mired in its calamity, the book does not end with a decisive pivot toward recovery. Instead, the ambiguous philosophic musing seems designed to convey a motley mixture of the community’s sentiments: bitterness, muted hope (expressed in prayer), and a deep chord of faith.

***Tehillim* 102 and *Eikha***

As noted above, the mere recognition of God’s eternity can transform the community’s state of mind. Consider, for example, *Tehillim* 102, which depicts an abrupt and remarkable movement from despair to rejuvenation.

Characterized by anguish, loneliness, and despair, the first section of this chapter (verses 1-12) depicts a terrible state of physical and existential instability and danger. Distanced from God, the poet hovers on the brink of an abyss, bereft of hope and support:

God, listen to my prayer and allow my cries to come before You! Do not hide Your face from me on the day that I am anguished! Incline Your ear to me! On the day that I call, answer me quickly! For my days vanish in smoke and my bones char as on a pyre. Struck like grass, my heart withers, for I even forget to eat my bread. With the sound of my moans, my bones cleave to my flesh…. For I eat ashes like bread and my drink mixes with tears. Because of Your anger and wrath! For You carried me, and then You flung me aside. My days stretch like a shadow and I wither like grass. (*Tehillim* 102: 2-6; 10-12).

From the bowels of profound despair, the chapter suddenly pivots, shifting its attention from its own misery to God. What effects this transformation? In a laconic but cogent statement, the psalmist utters the transformative sentence:

You God, shall sit forever, and Your remembrance is from one generation to the next. (*Tehillim* 102:13)

Terse and undramatic, this utterance produces an astounding change in the tone and subject of the chapter. Suddenly, in the next verse, the poet reacquires an abundance of confidence and hope, brimming over with optimism and excitement. The verses that follow portray God in His compassion and glory, energetically reconnecting with His people, reconstructing their city, and restoring their national dignity:

You will surely arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to be gracious to her, the appointed time has come! ... For God has built Zion and He may be seen in His glory. He has turned to the prayer of the desolate and has not spurned their prayer… For God has looked from the height of His holiness, God beholds the earth from the heavens. To hear the groaning of the prisoner and release those destined for death. In order that we recount the name of God in Zion and His glory in Jerusalem when the nations gather together with the kingdoms, to serve God. (*Tehillim* 102:14, 17-18, 20-23)

The brief declaration of God’s eternity functions as a bridge that propels the sufferer from utter despair to joy, hope, and confidence in his renewed fortune.

Perhaps then, the brief utterance at the end of *Eikha* (nearly identical to that in *Tehillim* 102:13) allows for the possibility of a similar transformation. Although *Eikha* does not progress past the statement of God’s eternity, by utilizing the transformative verse of *Tehillim* 102, the book of *Eikha* leaves tantalizing hope in its wake. This interpretive proposition can alleviate the conclusion of *Eikha*, which seems to trail off into a desolate, hollow future. The allusion to *Tehillim* 102:13 suggests to the reader that *Eikha* will obtain a similar turnaround, emerging from despair into a triumphant and glorious restorative period.

***Tehillim* 102 and Modern Events**

Events of the past century lend new resonance to the ebb and flow of *Tehillim* 102. Its first section uncannily reflects the Holocaust. Any inmate of the Nazi concentration camps, whose days vanished like smoke and stretched out like a dark and ominous shadow (102:4, 12), could easily have spoken the words of the poet. Deprivation and hunger left their bones cleaving to their flesh, while the subdued moans suggest the depletion of their energy (102:6). Their moans were drowned out by the mocking degradations of the enemy, who reviled and cursed the nation of Israel (102:9). In their humiliation and privation, all food tasted like ashes and all drink mixed with tears (102:11). Withered bodies mirrored the withering of souls as misery and suffering prevailed, a portrait of lusterless, spare subsistence. Most painfully, *Tehillim* 102 records the desperate, unanswered pleas that the sufferer flings before God, imploring Him to respond (102:2-3). God’s silence rings louder than the ebbing cries of the wretched poet.

Yet, in an instant, the portrait of a wretched nation shifts, transforms, and revitalizes. In an exhilarating and dramatic pivot, the Jewish People rise from the ashes of destruction and energetically embark upon the project of rebuilding their historic homeland. After two thousand years of wandering in an often hostile diaspora, the State of Israel emerges – a mere three years after the Holocaust – offering a restored existence for the Jewish People. In an evocative fulfillment of the second section of *Tehillim* 102, God appears to arise from His eternal throne (102:13-14), answering the prayers of His wretched and drained nation (102:18, 20-21), and showering them with His renewed compassion (102:14). This abrupt and stunning divine about-face begets the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the restoration of the splendor and magnificence of God’s city (102:17). This in turns draws the attention of the world, who acquire new regard for God’s omnipotence, His glory, and His name (102:16, 22-23).

The events of the past century affirm that the unassailable fact of God’s eternal reign indeed offers hope to His long-suffering nation. The enduring covenant with God allows a nation in the throes of misery to once again attain hope for a promising future.

1. Some scholars suggest that verse 17 refers to previous events in the chapter, all of which cause a grief-stricken response within the community. The threefold use of the word *al* (about) at the beginning of the sentence seems to connect verses 17 and 18, indicating that the deepest cause for misery is the ruins on the Temple Mount (see also Rashi on *Eikha* 5:17). Moreover, in my view, the previous verse (verse 16) concludes the main part of the chapter with its stark theological utterance that recalls verse 7 and illustrates the progress of the community. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Ibn Ezra on *Eikha* 5:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. *Mishlei* 23:26. In this usage, a third body part, ears for hearing, appears often alongside these. See e.g. *Ezekiel* 40:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Bamidbar* 15:39; *Jeremiah* 22:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Ezekiel* 13:4, which links foxes to ruins. In *Shir* *Ha-Shirim* 2:15, foxes are the figurative symbol of ruined relationships, which somewhat coheres with the image of foxes who frequent places of destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In asserting God’s willingness to destroy His own Temple, Jeremiah suggests that God’s power does not depend upon it. Many of the people consider Jeremiah’s assertion blasphemous and do not accept this theological premise. See *Jeremiah*, chapters 7 and 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See e.g. *Isaiah* 66:1; *Tehillim* 11:4; 103:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. *Tehillim* 9:8-9; Rashi on *Tehillim* 45:7; *Mishlei* 20:8. See also Malbim’s explanation of *I Kings* 22:19; *Tehillim* 29:10, and the interpretation in *Shemot* *Rabba* 4:3 of God sitting on a chair in *Isaiah* 6:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, similarly, the response to the destruction of the Temple in *Tehillim* 74:1: “*Why* God have you rejected for eternity?” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rashi bases this on the interpretation in *Berakhot* 32a of *Shemot* 32:13. While Rashi does not clarify that he reads these questions as rhetorical, that seems to be the implication of his comment. See also Ibn Ezra and R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 5:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)