YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #61:**

***Eikha* Chapter Five**

***Eikha* 5:21**

הֲשִׁיבֵ֨נוּ יְקֹוָ֤ק׀ אֵלֶ֙יךָ֙ וְֽנָשׁ֔וּבָה

חַדֵּ֥שׁ יָמֵ֖ינוּ כְּקֶֽדֶם

**Return us to You God and we will return**

**Renew our days like previous [days]**

Rhetorical questions (“Why should You forget us forever?”) give rise to hope, which surges forward in this uniquely spirited request. Overcoming the book’s largely defeatist attitude, the community finally asserts itself optimistically, petitioning God to take initiative and restore a hopeful future.

The anomalous nature of this bold request emerges with greater clarity when we consider the previous direct appeals to God in the book. Over the course of the book’s five chapters, *Eikha* engages either in decidedly minimal requests or those that seek redress rather than rejuvenation. On several occasions, the book issues a direct entreaty, imploring God merely to look at His nation or His city, to turn His glance toward His people.[[1]](#footnote-1) This petition suggests that God deliberately disregards His people, averting his eyes from their misfortune. The minimal request offers more of an insight into the current broken state of the relationship than hope for its imminent restoration. Bitter supplications for divine vengeance upon enemies also do not reflect forward-thinking plans for renewal.[[2]](#footnote-2) Until this point in the book, Israel’s requests remain steeped in a bitter present rather than in a quest for a potentially brighter future.

The precise nature of the community’s request in 5:21 remains subject to debate. Targum understand the verse as a plea to God to help us repent, while Ibn Ezra regards the petition as a concrete bid to return the community to God’s city, thereby restoring the daily service of God in the city. Whatever its precise meaning, this verse features a striking mutuality in the relationship between God and His people.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though the community requisitions God to initiate reconciliation (“Return us to You”), it continues immediately with a promise to mirror God’s action (“and we will return”). Without God’s initiative, reconciliation seems impossible.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nevertheless, Israel assumes its share of responsibility for the reestablishment of the severed relationship.

The request simultaneously looks forward and backward, encapsulating the timeless Jewish perception of history. Steeped in an unbearable present, the beleaguered community yearns for a glorious past (*kedem*), anticipating the reinstatement of that glory in a revitalized future.

What are these days of old?[[5]](#footnote-5) Can we identify the glorious past that the community desires? R. Yosef Kara offers a general timeframe:

Like the days when Israel was immersed in [its] land and Jerusalem and her environs were settled in tranquility… Like the days when [God] chose Jerusalem to be a throne for [Him]. (R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 5:21)

According to R. Kara, Israel longs for a period of peaceful existence in the land, characterized (and facilitated) by harmonious co-existence with God.

Although R. Kara does not identify a specific era, his description evokes the glorious period of Shelomo, a time of tranquility and security in Jerusalem. Shelomo’s cardinal act is his construction of the Temple, which enshrines God’s presence in the city and infuses the nation with new spiritual fervor and prospects. In fact, a *midrash* explains the similar phrase “years of old (*shanim* *kadmaniyot*)” (*Malachi* 3:4) in this way:

The offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to God like the days of yore and the years of old (*shanim* *kadmaniyot*). The “days of yore” [refers to] the days of Moshe, while the “years of old” [refers to] the years of Shelomo. (*Vayikra* *Rabba* 7:4)

As the community experiences its devastating spiritual and physical collapse, she glances back at an ideal period in Israel’s national history, issuing one final, courageous plea to God to restore the community to its ideal period.

This phrase also evokes the primordial ideal, the elemental story of God’s creation of humans, where God situates them in the Garden of Eden.[[6]](#footnote-6) The sparse description of the garden includes the elliptical information that God plants the garden “*mi-kedem*”(*Bereishit* 2:8). Translated in different ways, this word can indicate either a spatial or a temporal setting.[[7]](#footnote-7) Whatever its precise meaning, the phrase *yemei* *kedem* linguistically evokes the Garden of Eden.[[8]](#footnote-8) This linguistic allusion suggests that the final request in the book petitions God to restore the shattered community to the primeval period of humanity. The community longs to return to Eden both because it depicts a humanity defined by pristine purity and one that is actively engaged in an intimate relationship with an immanent God.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, the desire to return to the Garden bespeaks of the yearning to return to the original purpose of humankind. In alluding to the Garden of Eden, the community displays its aspiration to return to a harmonious life, in which humans tend a fertile earth, animals do not threaten humans, man and woman live in partnership, and humans interact with God in obedience to His will.[[10]](#footnote-10)

***Eikha* 5:22**

כִּ֚י אִם־מָאֹ֣ס מְאַסְתָּ֔נוּ

קָצַ֥פְתָּ עָלֵ֖ינוּ עַד־מְאֹֽד

**For You have surely[[11]](#footnote-11) rejected us**

**You have been greatly wrathful against us.[[12]](#footnote-12)**

The slight glimmer of hope emerges briefly in verse 21, only to disappear in verse 22, eclipsed by the misery that overtakes the book. Appropriate to its context, the book ends on a sober note, as the community emits a concluding sigh of despair.

Two words dominate this final verse: *ma’as* (rejection) and *katzaf* (anger). Harsh depictions of divine abandonment and wrath, these words offer a bleak depiction of the community’s perception of God at the conclusion of the book. Here the community appears to respond to its own query directed toward God in *Jeremiah* 14. As in our verse, the verse in *Jeremiah* employs the doubling of the word *ma’as* (rejection) in its address of God:

Have You surely rejected (*ma’os* *ma’asta*) Judah? Has Your soul been repulsed by Zion? Why have You struck us and we have no remedy? [We] hope for peace, but there is no good; for a time of healing, but behold there is terror. (*Jeremiah* 14:19)

The heartfelt question is followed by a sincere confession. Recognizing its sins, the community entreats God to maintain His relationship with Israel for the sake of His own honor (*Jeremiah* 14:20-21).[[13]](#footnote-13)

The book of *Eikha* does not venture in the confessional direction found in *Jeremiah* 14. Submerged in a dismal reality, the community does not attempt to convince God to offer them clemency. Instead, *Eikha* remains engulfed in theological despair, anchored to a reality in which God remains distant and angry. Suffering overshadows any visions of a hopeful future as the community resignedly shoulders the burden of their present. In the final moments of the book, the Judean community remains consumed by sorrow, heaving a final mournful exhalation.

*Eikha* demurs from concluding on a note of false optimism or facile recovery from disaster. It prefers candid assessment above wishful fantasy. The book’s commitment to an honest representation of human suffering makes it truthful, accessible, and relevant.

**The Epilogue**

In spite of the book’s unyielding honesty, an abiding danger lurks in its conclusion. Human beings require hope and *Eikha*’s final note of despair leaves the community of Israel hovering over a perilous abyss, uncertain of its future. This ending is especially jarring during the annual public reading of the book on *Tisha* *Be-Av*.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Eikha’s* final verse leaves the listeners stunned, flailing in the misery of an unknown future. During the course of its exilic history, the nation endures seemingly endless persecutions and misery, calling into question God’s continued fidelity. *Eikha*’s ending, which exudes despondency over God’s abandonment, may weaken Israel’s already precarious faith. On this backdrop, an interesting tradition developed: The public reading of the book does not conclude with its final verse.[[15]](#footnote-15) Instead, following the completion of the reading, the congregation chants the uplifting penultimate verse aloud, followed by the communal reader who echoes their reading. In this way, the community resists and even undermines the final message of the book.[[16]](#footnote-16) Refusing to accept despair, the community exerts its privilege to petition God, alleviating the harsh ending of the book and instead concluding with a bold request: “Return us to you God and we will return, renew our days like previous [days]!”

**Finding Hope in *Eikha***

Rabbinic sources also brought their authoritative weight to bear on *Eikha’s* dismal conclusion. The authors of *Eikha* *Rabba*, who contend with their own community’s calamity of the destruction of the Second Temple, could not allow *Eikha* to foster despair. Instead, *midrashim* often reverse the simple meaning of the book, abandoning textual exegesis in order to find hope and optimism within it. To this end, *Eikha Rabba* becomes a study in creative exegesis, in which the *midrash* offers a highly creative interpretation that results in the overturning of the simple meaning of the verse. I will devote a separate chapter to this topic in the epilogue to this study.

The danger that Israel will lose hope at the book’s conclusion is also somewhat mitigated by the linguistic allusions to prophecies generously strewn throughout the book. Allusions to prophetic forewarnings of an upcoming disaster suggest that the calamity functions as part of a divine plan, as just retribution for Israel’s sins. Moreover, *Eikha* linguistically weaves prophecies of restoration into its book. These prophecies offer a counterbalance and a solution for *Eikha*, in which the joys of redemption overthrow the horror of catastrophe. While we have strewn references to these prophecies throughout this series, I will devote a separate chapter to the manner in which the book of *Eikha* intertwines various prophecies into the book.

In the next *shiur*, we will examine the broad structure of *Eikha*, its organizational principles, and underlying meaning.

1. We have discussed these petitions throughout this book. See, for example, our discussion on *Eikha* 1:9. See also *Eikha* 1:11, 20; 2:20; 5:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, *Eikha* 1:22; 3:64-66. See also our discussion on *Eikha* 2:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, similarly, *Jeremiah* 31:17. Other biblical verses simply petition God to return us to Him, omitting the mutual responsibility expressed in our verse. See e.g. *Tehillim* 14:7; 85:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interestingly, when God calls Israel to penitence in *Zechariah* 1:3, He reverses the order, commanding Israel to initiate the return to God: “Return to Me, says God and I will return to You!” See also *Malachi* 3:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In our examination of the phrase *yemei* *kedem* in *Eikha* 1:7, we noted that biblical passages do not employ this phrase consistently to refer to one specific event. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The different approaches delineated do not necessarily contradict one another. The era of Shelomo constitutes an ideal recreation of Gan Eden. See Yael Ziegler, “Paradise Regained: *Eretz Yisrael* and the Garden of Eden,” *The Koren Machzor for Yom Ha-Atzma’ut and Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2015), pp. 101-108. Thus, the longing for Shelomo’s period and the longing for Gan Eden represent similar quests. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Biblical commentators argue over the correct interpretation of the word *kedem*. Onkelos, *Bereishit* *Rabba* 15:3, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban translate this word in a temporal context, explaining that God planted the Garden of Eden earlier than the creation of humans. However, Rashi and Radak prefers a spatial explanation, maintaining that the word *kedem* indicates an eastern location for the Garden. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also Rashi’s similar explanation that the phrase *yemei* *kedem* in *II* *Kings* 19:25 and *Isaiah* 37:26 refers to the primordial era. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I am referring to the initial description of the lifestyle in the Garden, presented laconically in the second chapter of *Bereishit*. The third chapter depicts the unravelling of this harmonious lifestyle, caused by disobedience and betrayal. The narrative offers no information regarding the timeframe of these events. How long do Adam and Eve live in that ideal existence prior to their sin and expulsion? The timeless nature of the narrative leaves this question unanswered. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a more detailed description of the harmonious and ideal lifestyle of Gan Eden and its theological aim, see Yael Ziegler, “Paradise Regained: Eretz Yisrael and the Garden of Eden,” *The Koren Machzor for Yom Ha-Atzma’ut and Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2015), pp. 101-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The translation of the word *im* (in general and in this verse in particular) has long occupied exegetes and scholars (see e.g. the review of the scholarship in House, *Lamentations*, pp.470-471). I have translated the word *im* as an asseverative rather than a conditional word. The Targum seems to adopt this reading, translating the phrase “*ki im*,” as *arum*, meaning, ”because,” rendering an asseverative statement. Ibn Ezra translates the word *im* as conditional, rendering the following reading of *Eikha*’s final verse: “For even if You have rejected us in our sins, You have already been excessively angry with us!” Ibn Ezra’s following words anticipate imminent redemption: “And He in His mercy will have mercy upon us.” This reading allows the book to trail off toward a tacitly optimistic conclusion. While this hopefulness alleviates the dismal tone of *Eikha*’s conclusion, it does not appear to represent accurately the dejected timbre of *Eikha*’s final notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interpreters and translators have explained this verse in a broad variety of ways, some of which render completely opposite meanings. In order not to conclude this book with a confusing array of readings, I have chosen not to examine the range of possibilities, selecting instead the interpretation that I believe best reflects the spirit and tone of the words of the book’s conclusion. For a review of the different possible readings of this verse, see Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In an interesting twist, *Soferim* 18:4 states that *Jeremiah* 14:19-22 should be read on *Tisha* *Be-Av*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Yerushalmi *Shabbat* 16:1 offers anecdotal evidence of the custom of reading *Eikha* on the fast of *Tisha* *Be-Av*. However, it appears as an official custom only in *Soferim* 14:3; 18:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This seems to be an early custom, found written in some Massoretic manuscripts. (It does not, however, appear in the Leningrad Codex). A possible reference to this custom appears in Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 5:1 (see the explanation of the Maharsha, *Chiddushei* *Aggadot*, among others, although Rabbeinu Yona explains the Yerushalmi differently). There is some evidence that this custom is found among early liturgical poets (*paytanim*), such as R. Eliezer Hakalir. Rashi cites this custom in his commentary on *Eikha* 5. See also Rama, *Orach* *Hayyim* 559:1. This tradition maintains a broad application, in which we avoid concluding any public reading on an inauspicious note. See e.g Rambam *Hilkhot* *Tefilla* 13:5, 7. Thus, the custom of the community when attending a public reading that concludes the books of *Isaiah*, *Trei* *Asar* (namely, *Malachi*), and *Kohelet* is to chant the penultimate verse following the conclusion of the reading, which ends on a negative note. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This coheres well with the special rights and power accorded to the community of Israel that we discussed in chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)