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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #63:**

***Eikha* *Rabba*: Filling *Eikha*’s Void (Part I)**[[1]](#footnote-1)

While the book of *Eikha* laments the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 BCE, early Jewish interpretation of the book takes place within a context of other national catastrophes.[[2]](#footnote-2) First, the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE left the nation dazed. Two unsuccessful uprisings followed,[[3]](#footnote-3) leaving a growing toll of death and suffering. Rabbinic exegesis of *Eikha* illustrates the manner in which the religious leadership utilized the biblical book to cope with their own calamities.

A compendium of rabbinic commentaries on the book of *Eikha*, *Eikha* *Rabba* complies exegesis written over the course of several hundred years following the destruction of Jerusalem’s Second Temple. Filled with vivid, detailed *midrashim*, this book offers special insight into *Chazal*’s role as educators and counselors seeking to offer their community guidance and advice in contending with their current situation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ibn Ezra alludes to the rich multiplicity of Eikha’s *midrashim* in his introduction to his commentary on *Eikha*: “Some [*midrashim*] contain riddles, secrets, or exalted allegories, some [*midrashim*] soothe wearied hearts with insightful themes, and some are designed to strengthen those who stumble and fill those who are empty.”

In order to apply the book of *Eikha* to their contemporary reality, rabbinic literature presupposes a timeless meaning for the book of *Eikha*.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Eikha*’s lamentations incorporate all past tragedies and anticipate all future ones.[[6]](#footnote-6) A verse in *Eikha* can refer to the death of Aaron,[[7]](#footnote-7) the exile of the ten tribes,[[8]](#footnote-8) or the martyrs of the Tannaitic period.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Eikha* *Rabba* 5:9 applies one verse in *Eikha* to four different time periods: Israel’s wanderings in the desert, Daniel’s vision, Isaiah’s prophecies, and finally concluding with the contemporary troubles of the rabbinic period, which trumps previous troubles in terms of severity.

Rabbinic literature often conflates the two *churbans*, interpreting many verses in *Eikha* as a forecast of and lament over the second *churban*.[[10]](#footnote-10)Note, for example the following interpretation of the double language of *Eikha* 1:2:

She shall surely cry (*bakho* *tivkeh*) in the night (*Eikha* 1:2). The [double language of the] two cries – what is its purpose? Rava said in the name of R. Yehuda: One for the First Temple and the other for the Second. (*Sanhedrin* 104b)

The book of *Eikha* tenders an evocative description of pain and loss. Nevertheless, its approach to dealing with the aftermath of loss proves woefully inadequate. It lacks a well-developed explanation for the nation’s suffering, offering instead a laconic portrayal of general sinfulness. Evil enemies jeer and prosper, prevailing in spite of their cruelty. God’s role (although occasionally justified) is brief and often unpleasant, laced with wrath and hostility. The book’s theological grappling appears in a mere nineteen verses at the book’s center (3:21-39), plus an additional two verses toward its end (5:19-20). *Eikha* offers little by way of rehabilitation, consolation, or hope for the future. For interpreters looking for positive messages for a suffering community, *Eikha* falls short of their needs.

*Eikha*’s rabbinic interpreters fill in the void left by the book. *Midrashim* on *Eikha* manage to extract from it messages of rehabilitation, consolation, and hope. This often involves creative interpretation, sometimes even the twisting of a word or a plain meaning in a bid to obtain the required results. For example, *Eikha* contains no words of consolation. The root *nacham* (comfort) appears six times in the book, all framed in a negative or rhetorical context. Instead of surrendering the quest and constructing an uplifting message of its own, *Eikha* *Rabba* radically reinterprets a bleak verse:

She has no (*ein*) comforter. R. Levi said: In every place [in the Bible] where it says “*ein*,” [“there is none”], she will ultimately have: (*Bereishit* 11): “And Sarai was barren, she had no (*ein*) child,” and she ultimately has [a child], as it says (*Bereishit* 21): “And God remembered Sara.” Similarly (*I Samuel* 1): “And Chana has no (*ein*) children,” and then she has, as it says (*I Samuel* 2): “For God remembered Chana.” Similarly, “She is Zion, none (*ein*) seeks her,” and she ultimately has [one that seeks her], as it says (*Isaiah* 59): “And a redeemer came to Zion.” Here too, you say, “She has no comforter,” and she will ultimately have, as it says (*Isaiah* 51): “I, I [God] am your comforter.” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:26)

*Eikha Rabba* engages in this sort of bold exegesis in another verse that implies hopelessness:

“Servants ruled us; there was none to extricate us from their hand” (*Eikha* 5:8). Servants ruled us: That refers to Egypt. There was none to extricate us from their hand: Were it not for Moshe! Another interpretation: Servants ruled us: These are the four kingdoms. There was none to extricate us from their hand: Were it not for God! (*Eikha* *Rabba* 5:8)

In a series of interpretive statements, R. Shimon ben Lakish repeatedly declares that although “God despairs of the righteous in this world, He will yet return and have compassion over them [during the time of redemption]” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:1; 3:6; 3:9; 3:20). While two of these statements seem to align with the simple meaning of the verse (3:26, 31), two of the statements reverse the basic meaning of a despondent verse with this assertion (3:2; 3:18).

Why do *Chazal* need to reinterpret the book of *Eikha* in addressing their calamity? If the book of *Eikha* does not offer consolation, why go to such lengths to extract messages of comfort from it?

Ironically, *Eikha Rabba*’s disregard for *Eikha*’s textual meaning presupposes *Chazal*’s respect for the book. In the rabbinic post-prophetic reality, textual exegesis becomes the method for eliciting the word of God. To help their constituents deal with their enormous catastrophe, rabbinic interpreters look to the biblical book of national tragedy to obtain divine messages of consolation and advice. The creativity and energy that underlie this exegesis testifies to the importance that rabbinic interpreters ascribe to the biblical text.

**The Theological Void in *Eikha*: Sins**

By desisting from directly addressing the critical questions, *Eikha* creates a theological vacuum. Why, in fact, does God destroy Jerusalem at this time? Which specific sins cause this terrible catastrophe, and why is this generation more deserving of punishment than previous ones?

*Eikha*’s refusal to delineate specific sins spawns a lingering sense of disproportionate judgement.[[11]](#footnote-11) The resulting incomprehension and dismay at God finds expression in sporadic horrified outbursts, which periodically erupt throughout the book: “God stamped like a winepress on maiden daughter of Judah!” (1:15) and, “God completed His wrath, spilled out the anger of His nostrils” (4:11). Despondency laces the following statement: “My endurance is lost and my hope in God” (3:18), while bewildered accusation seems to accompany this one: “Look God and see! To whom have You done this?” (2:20). Although these emotional outbursts often subside in the verses that follow, eruptions continue to flare up, exposing the theological tensions that lie under the book’s surface.

For rabbinic interpreters, *Eikha* does not provide adequate answers, leaving a dangerous vacancy.[[12]](#footnote-12) Without specific sins, the calamity seems unwarranted and, more threateningly, it hints to the terrifying prospect of divine abandonment.[[13]](#footnote-13) This may be the backdrop of the huge variety of explicit sins introduced by *Eikha* *Rabba* to explain the *churban*.[[14]](#footnote-14) *Midrashim* sketch an elaborate portrait of a sin-filled city, presenting an unsystematic panoply of sins. Jumbling together sins against God with sins against their fellow man, severe sins along with less serious ones,[[15]](#footnote-15) the Midrash indicates that the nation’s sins are ubiquitous and indiscriminate. Jerusalem’s inhabitants are morally and religiously untethered, and their lifestyle is unconstrained by social or sacred norms.

To illustrate the breadth of the sinfulness, I offer a partial list of sins mentioned in *Eikha* *Rabba*:[[16]](#footnote-16)

* They worshipped idols.
* They refused to listen to prophets.
* There were no righteous people in their midst.
* They did not do good deeds.
* They did not pay their teachers.
* They abandoned the Torah.
* They transgressed the thirty-six sins that are punishable with *karet* (excision).
* They spilled blood.
* They ceased bringing sacrifices.
* They were cruel to the gentiles.
* They took advantage of poor people.
* They stopped learning Torah.
* They profaned God’s name.
* They contaminated the Temple.
* They profaned Sabbath and Yom Kippur.
* They were arrogant and vulgar.
* There were false prophets.
* They denied the oneness of God.
* They denied the Ten Commandments.
* They did not believe in circumcision.
* They transgressed the covenant of Sinai.
* They were joyful at the downfall of their fellows.
* They did not turn to God in repentance.
* They ate leavened bread on Passover.
* They held onto the collateral of the poor person.
* They withheld wages from their workers.
* They stole the charity to the poor.
* They ate the tithes for the poor.
* They continued to enslave the indentured Hebrew servant after the sabbatical year.
* They hated their fellow without cause.
* They engaged in improper sexual relations and prostitution.
* They removed from the necks the yoke of heaven.
* They engaged in witchcraft.

The *midrashim* of *Eikha* *Rabba* also cite Israel’s perennial sins (the golden calf, the spies), casting blame for the *churban* upon the historical transgressions that accompany Israel for all generations. *Eikha* *Rabba* seems to flail about in all directions, frantically searching for explanations that makes sense of the terrible calamity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The *gemara* in *Shabbat* 119b compiles a similar list, explaining that Jerusalem was destroyed because they no longer prayed the *Shema* in the morning or night (due to excessive revelries and inebriation); because they abolished schools of learning; because they no longer experienced shame (to act abominably in front of each other); because they had no respect for their superiors; because they did not rebuke one another; and\or because they reviled learned people. The point of this catalogue is not to malign the already battered community, but rather to elucidate the *churban* in a way that offers the nation a route to recovery. If the catastrophe occurred because of their sins, then the simplest recourse is to repent and reconcile with God.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is a hopeful message indeed.

Some Rabbinic interpreters explicitly refer to the hope that underlies this record of sins. R. Akiva expresses this in the story cited earlier,[[19]](#footnote-19) where he joyously explains to his dejected colleagues that the *churban* confirms God’s covenant with Israel: “Now that the prophecy of Uriah [that Zion would be destroyed] was fulfilled, it is certain that the prophecy of Zechariah [that Zion will be restored] will be fulfilled!” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 5:18).[[20]](#footnote-20) If sins spawned the calamity, thereby leading to the fulfillment of the prophecies of doom, then God’s covenantal relationship with Israel is not over. Instead, this constitutes evidence that God will surely remain faithful to His promise of reward.

**The Theological Void in *Eikha*: God’s Relationship with Israel**

A second troubling theological problem of the book relates to God’s role in the events. *Eikha* opens by describing a widowed city, alluding both to the disappearance of Jerusalem’s populace and her God.[[21]](#footnote-21) Other verses overtly describe God’s desertion, asserting, for example, that “God’s face scattered them – He did not continue to look at them” (*Eikha* 4:16). The recurring refrain asking God to look and see His nation (e.g. *Eikha* 1:12; 2:20; 5 :1) implies that God has turned His face away from His people and is no longer interested in their fate or in maintaining a relationship with them. This state of God’s absence leaves a dearth of hope and a profound uncertainty as to how to repair the situation.

The depiction of God becomes more menacing when coupled with God’s hostile posture in the book. Alarmingly, the principle enemy named in the book is God (*Eikha* 2:4-5): “He poised His bow *like* *an* *enemy*; He steadied His right hand *like an adversary*. God was *like an enemy*, He swallowed Israel. He swallowed all of her palaces, He destroyed its fortresses, and He increased in Judah mourning and moaning.” God is filled with anger in the book, and He uses it to afflict Israel, with devastating results (*Eikha* 1:12): “Is there any pain like my pain that has been committed against me, when God made me grieve on the day of his burning anger?” The book generously metes out depictions of the terrible effects of God’s wrath: “I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His anger… He walked me in darkness and not light(*Eikha* 3:1-2); “God completed His wrath, spilled out the anger of His nostrils. He lit a fire in Zion and it consumed her foundations” (*Eikha* 4:11).

For rabbinic educators, this presentation of God is untenable. How can Israel reconcile with God if He is angry and unforgiving? And how can a spiritual leader present God as an adversary to a shattered nation? God’s silence is likewise troubling, especially since hundreds of years have elapsed since the destruction, while only seventy years passed before the Second Temple was rebuilt.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*Eikha* *Rabba* frequently reverses *Eikha*’s depiction of God. God may well be justifiably incensed at his recalcitrant nation. Nevertheless, the *midrashim* vividly depict God mourning and lamenting His nation’s misfortune and suffering: [[23]](#footnote-23)

About these things I cry (*Eikha* 1:16). “How I wish that my head were water and my eyes a fount of tears so that I could cry day and night for the slain of the daughter of my nation” (*Jeremiah* 8:23). Who said this verse? Jeremiah [could not have] said it, for he could not abstain from eating, drinking, and sleeping! It must be that God said this, for He does not sleep. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:16)

*Bakho* *tivkeh* (“she surely cries”). [Jerusalem] cries and causes others to cry with her. She cries and causes God to cry with her, as it says (*Isaiah* 22:12), “And God summoned on that day for weeping and lamenting.” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:23)

God said to His ministering angels, “What does a human king who is in mourning do?” They said to Him, “He wears black and covers his head with sackcloth.” He [God] said, “So will I do.” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:10)

In *Eikha* *Rabba*, God experiences sorrow and deep empathy for His nation’s suffering. In sharing Israel’s grief, God becomes a source of consolation. More poignantly, God is presented as a principal casualty of the catastrophe, in which His chief role is victim rather than perpetrator:

God said to His ministering angels, “Come let us go, you and I, and see what has happened to my house – what the enemies have done to it. Immediately, God and His angels went, with Jeremiah leading the way. When God saw the Temple, He said, “Surely, this is my house and this is my resting-place! Enemies have come and done with it as they please!” At that moment, God wept and said, “Woe to me for my house! My sons – where are you? My priests – where are you? My beloveds – where are you? What shall I do for you? For I warned you and you did not repent.” God said to Jeremiah, “Today I am like a person who had one child and he made for [that child] a wedding canopy, but [the child] died while he was under it.” (*Eikha Rabba Petichta* 24)

At the moment that the *Shechina* [God’s presence] exited the Temple, she [impulsively] turned back to caress and kiss the walls of the Temple and its pillars. Then she [the *Shechina*] wept and said, “Be at peace my Temple! Be at peace my royal house! Be at peace, my precious house! Be at Peace!” (*Eikha* *Rabba* *Petichta* 25)

“I was watchful, and I am like a lone bird on a roof” (*Tehillim* 102:8). God said, I was watchful so that I could rest my *Shechina* upon the Temple forever, but I became like a [lone] bird. Just as the bird, when one takes his goslings, she sits alone, so too God said, “I burned my house, and destroyed my city and exiled my children among the nations and now I sit alone [and cry]: *Eikah*!” (*Eikha Rabba Petichta* 20)

In these *midrashim*, God cries with Israel and suffers along with them. God is deeply bereft – suffering the terrible loss of His house, His city, His children and His future. In the view of the Rabbinic interpreters, God certainly has not abandoned Israel. According to some *midrashim*, God accompanies Israel into exile:

R. Yehuda the son of R. Simon said: Come and see how precious the children are to God, for the ten tribes were exiled, and the *Shechina* did not go into exile; Judah and Benjamin were exiled, and the *Shechina* did not go into exile; the Sanhedrin was exiled, and the *Shechina* did not go into exile; the watches were exiled, and the *Shechina* did not go into exile; but when the children were exiled, the *Shechina* went into exile as it says, “Her young children went into captivity before the adversary.” And then it says, “Departed from the daughter of Zion is all of her glory.”… What is this [glory]? This is God. (*Eikha* *Rabba* [Buber] 1:3)

The word that came to Jeremiah from God (*Jeremiah* 40:1). What was that word? [God] said to him: “Jeremiah, if you stay here, I will go with them [into exile], and if you go with them, I will stay here.” [Jeremiah] said to Him: “Master of the Universe, if I go with them, what can I do to help them? Let their King and Creator go with them, for He can help them very much.” (*Eikha Rabba Petichta* 34)

God’s company is a source of consolation, ensuring that they are not alone in the exile and that God guarantees their future redemption.

*Eikha* *Rabba* offers a completely different portrayal of God than the one in the book of *Eikha*. In transforming God into a victim and companion, the *midrashim* reverse the meaning of the book. This indicates both the extraordinary freedom of rabbinic interpretation and their resolute determination to utilize *Eikha* in a manner that is efficacious for their downcast constituents.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue to explore the book of *Eikha* *Rabba* and the manner in which it mines the book of *Eikha* for much-needed inspiration and guidance.

1. This brief examination of *Eikha* *Rabba* is not comprehensive. My intention is to show some of the ways in which the *midrash* interacts with the biblical text, especially its attempt to fill some of the void created by the biblical book. To further examine the fascinating subject of *Eikha* *Rabba*, see A. Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2011), pp. 183-196 [Hebrew], especially the bibliography on pp. 193-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to S. D. J. Cohen, “The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), pp. 18-39, for his general approach to the intersection of *Eikha* and *Eikha* *Rabba*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I refer to the uprising of the Jews of Cyrenaica, Egypt, and Cyprus in 115-117 CE and the disastrous end of the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The urgency of the need for a contemporary explanation of the *churban* may explain why *Eikha Rabba* is one of the oldest works of midrashic literature. *Eikha* *Rabba* (also called *Aggadat Eikhah, Megillat Eikhah, Midrash Kinot, Eikhah Rabbati*) was completely approximately in 500 CE, apparently in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The fact that *Eikha* lacks narrative, dates, or identified persons facilitates this approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In *Chazal*’s view, *Eikha* may also refer to all pain suffered by all individuals. This is because the book is not about a city or a temple, a religion or a point in history. It is a timeless story of humans who suffer. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:56 explains that *Eikha* 1:21 refers to Aaron’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. E.g. *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:23 (explaining 1:2); 4:20; 5:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Eikha* *Rabba* 2:4 posits that *Eikha* 2:4 refers to the death of the Ten Martyrs. *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:51 explains *Eikha* 3:51 as a lament over the children who died in the siege of Beitar. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A typical formulation interprets a verse first about the Babylonian king, Nevuchadnezzar, and then interprets the same verse as referring to the Roman emperor, Vespasian. See e.g. *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:2; 3:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The book of *Eikha* often acknowledges that general sinfulness caused the *churban*, even if it does not specify. *Eikha* *Rabba* mirrors this perception, concluding fourteen of its thirty-six proems with the words, “Because they sinned they were exiled, and because they were exiled, Jeremiah began to lament over them, ‘How has the city sat lonely!’ (*Eikha* 1:1).” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on this topic, see A. Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the rabbis, this suggestion touches upon a sensitive spot, given the Christian doctrine of supercessionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Midrashim* often explain the events as due recompense for the people’s sinfulness. Several *midrashim* begin with the words, “Had you been worthy…” and continue by explaining that their unworthiness led to the opposite result (“But now, since you were not worthy.”) See e.g. *Eikha Rabba Petichta* 11; *Petichta* 19; *Petichta* 23. Another refrain in *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:57 indicates that Israel’s punishment derives directly from its sins (“You will find that that with which Israel sinned, he is struck.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In a *midrash* that likely has its origins in a bid to admonish his listeners and cause them to transform their behavior, R. Huna opines that the punishment occurs because of people who played ball on Shabbat (*Eikha* *Rabba* 2:4). This does not seem to be a literal attempt to explain the horrific events; indeed, some of the *midrashim* in *Eikha* *Rabba* appear to function less as discourses on events of the past and more as hortatory admonishments for their present behavior (see Cohen, *Destruction*, p. 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. My intention is to offer a sense of the wide range of sins mentioned in *Eikha Rabba*. In order not to make this unwieldy, I have desisted from bringing the source for each of these *midrashim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Some of the *midrashim* elaborate on the sins, offering detailed stories that illustrate how deeply sinfulness has penetrated into the psyche of Jerusalem’s inhabitants. See, for example, *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:36; 4:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As we will see in the next *shiur*, many *midrashim* in *Eikha* *Rabba* describe the efficacy of repentance. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See [*shiur* #60](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-60-eikha-chapter-five). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This anecdote also appears in *Makkot* 24b, which is the source that I cited from previously. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In [*shiur* #10](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-10-eikha-chapter-1-continued), I discussed the identity of Jerusalem’s deceased husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cohen, *Destruction*, p. 29 (especially footnote 29), notes that the problem of God’s silence is exacerbated by the Christian doctrine of supercessionism and the similar pagan argument, which points to the abject state of the Jews as evidence that their religion is false. This argument first appears in Cicero and was advanced both by Celsus in the second century and by Julian in the fourth. Cohen notes that the common biblical motif of "What will the nations say?" (e.g. *Shemot* 32:12) is developed not by *Eikha*, but by *Eikha* *Rabba*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See M. Ayali, “The God Who Suffers the Sufferings of Israel,” in S. Heller- Willensky and M. Idel (eds.) *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem:Magnes, 1989), pp. 29-50 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)