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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #64: *Eikha* *Rabba*:**

**Filling *Eikha*’s Void (Part 2)**

**A Psychological Void: Building Morale**

*Eikha* dwells on the past and present, offering only brief glimpses into a possible future. Practically, this means that *Eikha* offers no real advice for moving past the dismal present toward a promising vision for Israel. Moreover, the biblical book does not seek to strengthen the people; it offers little by way of encouragement, reassurance, or coping devices. Rabbinic *midrashim* rush to fill this void, tendering a whirlwind of suggestions, anecdotes, and directives designed to boost spirits and navigate Israel away from its dismal morass and toward rehabilitation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The subtext of *Eikha* *Rabba* presents an array of coping devices (psychological, practical, and religious) to its demoralized community. Guidance is offered not solely for the present situation, but to accompany Israel in its forthcoming difficult times. Indeed, the wise and compassionate messages found in this rabbinic compendium continue to be pertinent and to bolster Israel throughout the long and difficult years of exile. *Chazal*’s ability to intuit Israel’s present and future needs contributes greatly to Israel’s perseverance and ability not simply to survive, but also to flourish in exile.

One pressing problem that rabbinic leadership faces relates to Israel’s bleak psychological state. *Eikha* describes the unravelling of Israel’s societal infrastructure, as well as the humiliation of jeering enemies and the loss of her self-esteem: “Look God and see our shame!” (*Eikha* 5:1). A similar situation emerges again following the second *churban*, compounded this time by the rise of Christianity and the doctrine of supercessionism.[[2]](#footnote-2) *Midrashim* in *Eikha* *Rabba* offer several recourses to restore Israel’s ebbing dignity. They paint a vivid portrait of Israel’s glorious past, drawing attention to its unequalled brilliance. *Midrashim* also accentuate Israel’s evident advantages over her neighbors and enemies, even though in the present reality Israel stands alone, uprooted, unprotected, and shunned.

**Israel’s Glorious Past**

The book of *Eikha* often utilizes the medium of comparison between a splendid past and a dismal present. The regal city that once teemed with people now sits isolated, an abandoned, “widowed” city. Its inhabitants, who ate delicacies and dressed in silken finery, now languish on the streets from starvation and cling to the garbage for warmth. These recollections deepen the sense of loss by highlighting the chasm between Israel’s former glory and present abasement.

*Midrashim* also describe the tragedy of Jerusalem’s precipitous fall. However, in a clever twist, instead of focusing only on the terrible reversal, *midrashim* enthusiastically explicate passages that reference Jerusalem’s past, offering fond embellishments of Israel’s past wealth and luxurious lifestyle in a bid to reinstate the dignity of a wretched people:[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Precious children of Zion [who were once valued as gold]” (*Eikha* 4:2). What was their value? When a non-Jerusalemite would marry a Jerusalemite, he would give her her weight in gold. When a Jerusalemite [man] would marry a non-Jerusalemite woman, they would give him his weight in gold. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 4:2)

*Midrashim* may overtly exaggerate Jerusalem’s previous greatness, as in the following *midrash*:[[4]](#footnote-4)

“The city that was full of people.” R. Shemuel taught: Jerusalem had twenty-four districts. Each district had twenty-four neighborhoods and each neighborhood had twenty-four marketplaces. Each marketplace had twenty-four streets and each street had twenty four courtyards. Each courtyard had twenty-four houses and each courtyard produced a populace double the number of those who left Egypt. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:2)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Striking a posture of confidence and even triumph, these *midrashim* reverse the primary meaning of the contrast between past and present. While perusing Jerusalem’s former situation as it is reconstructed by rabbinic exegesis, one is swept up into the fantasy-like depictions of Israel’s dazzling magnificence and can almost (but not quite) obliterate the actual context, which describes the dismal present.

**The Past as Preparation for a Glorious Future**

To boost morale, some *midrashim* assert that the destruction functioned as expiation, wiping away their sins in anticipation of a restored future:

The Rabbis said: The book of *Eikha* was better for Israel than forty years of Jeremiah’s prophecies. Why? Because Israel received full atonement for their sins on the day that the Temple was destroyed. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 4:25)

**Imbued Strength and a Pre-Existing Cure**

*Eikha* *Rabba* also reassures the community that God has instilled in them the endurance to withstand their misfortunes:[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Berechia said: “God strengthened me to stand amidst all [of the misfortunes].”[[7]](#footnote-7) You find in Mishna Torah [ninety-eight punitive] admonitions. Afterward, it is written (*Devarim* 29:9), “All of you *stand* here…” You are all strong enough to stand amidst all [of the misfortunes]. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:1)

Another *midrash* maintains that before God allowed this catastrophe to come upon Israel, He prepared its cure. To illustrate this, the *midrash* draws from a series of verses from the book of *Isaiah*, each of which counters a verse in the acrostic first chapter of *Eikha*:

Rabbanan said: Because they sinned from *aleph* until *tav* [and *Eikha* describes their punishments from *aleph* until *tav*],[[8]](#footnote-8) they are comforted from *aleph* until *tav*. You also find that regarding all of the terrible prophecies that Jeremiah prophesied against Israel [in *Eikha*, ch. 1], Isaiah preceded him with a cure… Jeremiah said, “She surely cries (*bakho* *tivkeh*) in the night” (*Eikha* 1:2), and Isaiah said, “She surely will *not* cry (*bakho lo tivkeh*)…” (*Isaiah* 30:19). Jeremiah said, “Judah has been exiled in suffering” (*Eikha* 1:3), and Isaiah said, “He will gather up the dispersed of Judah” (*Isaiah* 11:12). Jeremiah said, “The roads (*darkhei*) to Zion mourn [for there is no one who comes on the festival]” (*Eikha* 1:4), and Isaiah said, “A voice calls out, ‘Prepare in the desert a road (*derekh*) for God!’” (*Isaiah* 40:3). (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:23)

This systematic *midrash* continues to list each verse and its counterpart in *Isaiah*, which establishes that the nation is well-prepared to contend with the calamity. *Eikha* *Rabba* firmly proclaims that these troubles will not defeat Israel, for God has given His nation the strength to withstand them.

**Israel’s Advantage: Intelligence and Resourcefulness**

A fascinating, if slightly disturbing section of *Eikha* *Rabba* contains a series of stories in which Israel’s cleverness trumps the power, brutality, and riches of the enemy:

A man from Athens went to Jerusalem and mocked the inhabitants of Jerusalem.[[9]](#footnote-9) The [Jerusalemites] said, “Who will go and bring him here [so that we can teach him a lesson]?” One man said, “I will go and bring him here with a shaved head.” The Jerusalemite went to Athens and was hosted by that same man. In the morning, they went together to stroll in the marketplace. One of his [the Jerusalemite’s] sandals broke. He said to a shoemaker, “Take this trimisa [a gold coin] and fix this sandal…” The next day the two went out to stroll in the marketplace when the other sandal broke. He said to him [the Athenian host]: “Take this trimisa to a shoemaker so that he can fix my sandals.” He [the Athenian] said: “Are sandals so expensive in your [city]?!” [The Jerusalemite] said, “Yes!” He said, “How many dinar?” He [the Jerusalemite] responded, “They start at nine or ten dinar; if they are cheap, they can be seven or eight dinar.” The Athenian said, “If I come to your [city] with merchandise, could I sell it there?” He said, “Yes, but you will not be permitted to enter the city without contacting me.” He [the Athenian] arranged his affairs, acquired sandals, and came to Jerusalem, sitting at the gates of the city. He sent for him [the Jerusalemite], who arrived and said to him [the Athenian], “We [Jerusalemites] have an agreement that no person may enter to sell his merchandise unless his head is shaved and his face is blackened.” He [the Athenian] said to him, “And what do I have to lose if I shave my head and sell my merchandise?” So he shaved his head and sat in the marketplace. When a person came to buy sandals from him, he said, “How much is this pair of sandals?” He [the Athenian] replied, “Some for ten dinar, some for nine dinar. But I have nothing less than eight dinar.” When the [buyer] heard that, he struck him on the head with the sandals and left without purchasing anything. He [the Athenian returned to the Jerusalemite and] said to him, “Did I treat you so badly when you were a guest in my place?” The Jerusalemite responded, “From now on, you will not insult the residents of Jerusalem!” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:13)

This story may trouble modern readers, given the deceit used by the Jerusalemite to ensure that the Athenian scoffer desists from his affronts.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is therefore important to bear in mind the powerless and miserable situation of the once-noble people. This anecdote illustrates the willingness of the *midrash* to provide Israel with a psychological boost, even if it entails reneging on the usual directive toward humility and compassionate behavior.[[11]](#footnote-11) It also informs the powerless community that they can easily outmaneuver their enemies, thereby compensating for its weak position and inferior stature.

Evoking Israel’s intelligence is good for her self-esteem. More significantly, it reminds Israel that despite her many losses, there is still one thing that no one can take from the forlorn people – namely, its intelligence, an advantage often highlighted in *Eikha* *Rabba*:[[12]](#footnote-12)

“[Once] great among nations” (*Eikha* 1:1)… Great in intellect. R. Huna said in the name of R. Yosi: Wherever a Jerusalemite went in the provinces, they arranged a seat of honor for him to sit upon in order to listen to his wisdom. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:4)

This theme relates to another prominent theme in *Eikha* *Rabba* – the focus on the importance of Torah study. As we will see in the next *shiur*, the promotion of this creative activity empowers the community, enabling Israel to retain meaning, dignity, and communal pride during her exile. Torah study constitutes a portable way to maintain Israel’s spiritual identity, offering the nation a mechanism to conduct a relationship with God even after the destruction of the Temple and the exile. We will explore the importance of Torah study in *Eikha* *Rabba* at length in the next *shiur*.

1. *Eikha* *Rabba* also certainly presents a fair amount of the expected pain and grieving that dominates in the biblical book. While *Eikha* *Rabba* is not primarily a book that consoles and rehabilitates, in this *shiur*, I will highlight its surprisingly positive messages and tone. As Cohen notes (*Destruction*, p. 22), “Although the works have identical interest, they have radically different emphases and conclusions. *Lamentations* is dominated by bitterness and despair, *Lamentations* *Rabbati* – by consolation and hope.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  The following statement by the third century Christian theologian Origen represents the Christian view: “God has given to the congregation of Israel a writ of divorce on account of her sins, [as evidenced by the fact that] they do not possess ... the Temple and have been driven from their place” (Origene, *Homelies sur Jeremie* [Nautin; Paris, 1976], p. 263 and n. 2. See also R. Kimelman, “Rabbi Yokhanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980), pp. 588-594.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example the series of *midrashim* that describe the wealth and pampering of Miriam bat Baitus in *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:47-50. Each of these *midrashim* end by describing her terrible privations as a result of Jerusalem’s capture. These *midrashim* paint a vivid (and apparently uncritical) portrait of Miriam’s former lavish lifestyle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:2 contains a series of *midrashim* that attempt to calculate the great numbers of inhabitants of Jerusalem. A similar idea appears in *Eikha* *Rabba* 2:4, which records a series of anecdotes that draw special attention to the glory of Jerusalem prior to the destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If one computes the number of people who lived in Jerusalem according to this *midrash*, it emerges that nine and a half trillion people resided in Jerusalem prior to the destruction! A similar *midrash* (*Eikha Rabba* 3:70) maintains that there were 500 elementary schools in Beitar prior to its destruction, and each of these schools had no less than 300 pupils. Thus, there were no less than 150,000 children in Beitar. While this number is large, it is not inflated to an unrealistic degree, as in the previous *midrash*. Interestingly, modern day Beitar-Illit has the highest percentage of children in any Israeli city (63%). With an annual birth rate of 1,800 births, the modern city mirrors the *midrash*’s depiction of its ancient counterpart. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The same idea appears in *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:4, making it a repeating theme in the book, [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This *midrash* is based on *Eikha* 3:1, which opens, “*ani* *hagever*,” “I am the man.” The word *gever* etymologically indicates strength. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In order to clarify the link between sin, punishment, and consolation, I have added the sentence in brackets in this midrash from a previous one (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:20.) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Based on the continuation of the *midrash*, it seems that the Athenian mocked the Jerusalemites for their unattractive appearance (shaved heads and blackened faces) following the city’s destruction. *Eikha* *Rabba* 5:5 indicates that the Roman rulers commanded Judeans to shave their heads and faces as a sign of their servitude. In the same *midrash*, a blackened face is used as a metaphor for a humiliated person. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A number of *midrashim* detail the mockery of the enemies, underscoring its negative impact. See e.g. *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:5. This is an important (and distressing) theme in *Eikha* as well (e.g. 1:7, 21; 2:16; 3:61-63). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Reizel, *Midrashim,* p. 188, where she summarizes G. Hasan-Rokem’s approach to this series of *midrashim*. See also G. Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. B. Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). *Eikha* *Rabba* stresses the wisdom in Israel, rather than asserting that the nations are unintelligent: "Should a person tell you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it" (*Eikha* *Rabba* 2:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Cohen, *Destruction*, pp. 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)