YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #65:**

***Eikha* *Rabba*: Filling *Eikha*’s Void, Part 3**

**The Practical Void: Offering Advice**

*Eikha* fails to provide any plan for Israel’s future. It offer no real pragmatic advice for rebuilding the community or reconstituting its relationship with God. This represents a stunning omission, given the dire circumstances that the community faces. Can they find a substitute to replace the canons of Jewish life as it was lived for so many years? How can this community continue to survive, lacking its familiar social and religious institutions? Can the community reconcile with God if there are no sacrifices, no Temple, and no priests to conduct the atonement services?[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Repentance**

*Eikha*’s silence on these matters constitutes a risky omission, one that could plunge the people into despair. To make matters worse, the book of *Eikha* thrusts the nation into further helplessness in its alarming contention that God deflects the nation’s prayers (*Eikha* 3:44). How can Israel continue to function if prayer is no longer effective? *Eikha* *Rabba* tackles this problem directly, as we see in the following *midrash*:

R. Chelbo asked R. Shemuel bar Nachmani: I have heard that you are successful at homiletic interpretations. What then is the explanation for the verse (*Eikha* 3:44): “You covered Yourself with a cloud to prevent prayer from passing through”? He replied: Prayer is likened to a *mikveh* (ritual bath), while repentance is likened to a sea. Just as the *mikveh* is sometimes open and sometimes locked, so too the gates of prayer are sometimes locked and sometimes open. But the sea is always open. So too, the gates are repentance are always open. R. Ana said: The gates of prayer are never locked! (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:60)

While R. Ana rejects the possibility that God does not accept their prayer (thereby rejecting the simple meaning of the verse), R. Shemuel bar Nachmani focuses on the power of repentance, which *always* remains efficacious. Repentance is an important theme in *Eikha* *Rabba*.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this *midrash*, it functions as practical advice on how to direct our spiritual energies when all communication with God appears to have ceased.

Many *midrashim* stress the ability of repentance to bring about a change for the better. In the following *midrash*, our enemies acknowledge the raw power of repentance, which is why they exert considerable effort to prevent Israel from wielding this cogent tool:

Nevuchadnezzar… commanded Nevuzaradan: This God of these [Israelites] accepts penitents and His hand is open to accept those who return. Therefore, when you conquer them, do not give them time to pray, so that they will not be able to repent and elicit God’s compassion. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 5:5)

Repentance returns Israel to God, and it also can hasten the advent of redemption or the end of days.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the next section, we will examine the manner in which *Eikha* *Rabba* relates to the coming of a messiah, a leader who will extricate Israel from the exile, rebuild Jerusalem, and renew Jewish sovereignty, thereby ushering in an eschatological era.

**Messianism**

*Eikha* mostly avoids looking forward. When it does look toward the future, it is generally in order to request vengeance upon its enemies. Other forward-looking verses include a vague assertion that Israel can return from exile if she ceases sinning (4:1) and an exceptional far-reaching call to God for restoration at the end of the book (5:21). *Eikha* lacks a messianic figure, a leader who will extricate the nation from its misfortune.[[4]](#footnote-4) To fill this void, *Eikha* *Rabba* contains several *midrashim* that direct our attention to the forthcoming arrival of the Messiah, whose arrival will be augured by the presence of enemies in the land of Israel:

R. Abba Bar Cahana said: If you see benches filled with Babylonians settled in the land of Israel,[[5]](#footnote-5) you should anticipate the legs of the Messiah… R. Shimon ben Yochai taught: If you see a Persian horse tied up in the land of Israel, you should anticipate the legs of the Messiah! (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:41)

*Eikha* *Rabba* nevertheless maintains a cautious ambivalence toward fostering messianic hopes among the nation. One reason for the rabbinic wariness may be attributed to the disappointing failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE), whose ideological underpinnings included the portrayal of Bar Kokhba as a messianic savior.[[6]](#footnote-6) More significantly, the messianic character of Christianity meant that rabbinic literature was careful not to allow messianic hopes to become too centrally featured in Judaism.

The book’s complex approach to Messianism is evident in *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:51. This *midrash* tenders a lengthy anecdote regarding the birth of a messianic figure, whose task is to deliver Israel from her misfortunes and return her from her exile:

A man was plowing when his ox whinnied. An Arab passed by and asked him, “What are you?” He answered, “I am a Judean.” He [the Arab] said to him, “Release your ox and unfasten your plow.” He asked, “Why?” He [the Arab] replied, “Because the Temple of the Judeans has been destroyed.” He asked him, “How do you know?” He [the Arab] replied, “From the whinny of your ox.” As they were speaking, the ox whinnied again. He [the Arab] said, “Hitch up your ox and your plow, for the savior of the Judeans has been born.” He [the Judean] asked, “And what is his name?” “Menachem is his name.”[[7]](#footnote-7) “And what is his father’s name?” “Chizkiyahu.” “And where can he be found?” “In the city of Bethlehem in Judah.”[[8]](#footnote-8) (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:51)

The *midrash* initially presents an exceedingly hopeful portrait. Immediately following the destruction of the Temple, the messianic savior bursts into the world. Nevertheless, the continuation of the *midrash* proves less auspicious. In an unsubtle polemic against Christian messianism, the search for this messiah (who is born in Bethlehem) proves futile. The message is both enigmatic and startling: It seems that while the Messiah exists in potential, one should not devote oneself to a search for this figure. The *midrash* continues to bounce back and forth between hope in a Messiah and reluctance to focus upon his imminent arrival.

In another about-face, *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:51 continues with some encouraging messianic statements, which bring prooftexts from biblical verses that anticipate a messianic figure. The *midrash* concludes with a lively debate with regard to the name of the coming Messiah.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Eikha* *Rabba* strikes a judicious balance in presenting a messianic vision. On the one hand, the promise of a messianic leader enables the nation to nurture hope, faith, and optimism as they confront a grim reality. On the other hand, the book maintains a prudent resistance to focusing on a messianic future.

In addition to the reasons stated above, there may be another reason that *Eikha* *Rabba* reflects a circumspect attitude toward messianism. Messianism is often rooted in a negative attitude toward the present, which results in undue focus on the future.[[10]](#footnote-10) *Eikha* *Rabba* focuses attention upon the present reality, as we will see in its encouragement to invest their energies in study of Torah. Thus, the book is willing to allow messianic hopes to emerge, but it does not encourage the nation to concentrate excessive attention upon future dreams.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Torah and Prayer**

As we saw, a series of *midrashim* in *Eikha* *Rabba* highlight Israel’s cleverness.[[12]](#footnote-12) These *midrashim* operate with both a psychological and practical objective. Evoking Israel’s intelligence boosts morale. More significantly, as we noted in the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-64-eikha-rabba-filling-eikha%E2%80%99s-void-part-2), it directs Israel’s attention to the study of Torah. The prominence of this theme in *Eikha* *Rabba* cannot be overstated. The book opens with a call to “raise your voice in words of Torah.”[[13]](#footnote-13) *Midrashim* often direct the community’s attention to the importance of Torah study, which enables Israel to preserve its identity and purpose in the diaspora.[[14]](#footnote-14) It also empowers Israel to defend its unique relationship with God, fiercely insisting upon the justness of this bond:

God said to Israel: You have been stubborn [and sinful – why should I forgive you?]. They said to him: Master of the Universe! So it is good for us and so it is proper for us and so it is fair for us [that you return us to you], for no other nation accepted your Torah except for us. (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:1)

*Midrashim* highlight the importance of both synagogues and study houses,[[15]](#footnote-15) locations that can flourish in exile as an apt substitute for the destroyed Temple. *Eikha* *Rabba*’s focus on Torah study steers Israel to construct a new identity around transportable activities, which do not require a particular location.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Eikha* *Rabba* seems to recognize that Torah study is bound to be a pivotal center of Israel’s self-definition in the exile. Lacking a homeland and a sacred center for worship, *Chazal* understand that Israel can draw spiritual purpose and strength from its unwavering devotion to Torah. The importance of Torah study for maintaining faith in its unique relationship with God finds unique expression in a poignant *midrash*:

“This I shall place upon my heart, therefore, I will hope” (*Eikha* 3:21). R. Abba bar Kahana said in the name of R. Yochanan: A parable. To what is this likened? To a king who married a matron and wrote her a generous marriage document, which read, “The following bridal chambers I am giving you and the following purple garments I am giving you.” The king then left her to go to a faraway land and was detained there. Her neighbors came to her and degraded her, saying, “The king has abandoned you and has gone to a faraway land and will never return to you.” She would cry and moan,[[17]](#footnote-17) but when she would come into her house, she would open her marriage document and read it and see [what was written in] her marriage document: “The following bridal chambers I am giving you and the following fine purple garments I am giving you.” Immediately she was comforted. After many years, the king returned. He said to her, “My daughter, I am amazed! How did you wait for me for all of those years?” She said to him, “My Lord king, had you not written for me such a generous marriage document, my neighbors would surely have caused me to lose hope!” Similarly, the idolaters mock Israel and say to them, “Your God has hidden His face and removed His presence from you and He will never return to you.” And she [Israel] cries and moans. However, when they enter the Synagogues and the Houses of Study and read the Torah, they find that it is written (*Vayikra* 26), “And I will turn to you, and multiply you, and place my dwelling place among you, and I will walk in your midst.” And then, they are comforted. Tomorrow, when the redemptive era will come, God will say to Israel, “My children, I am amazed by you! How did you wait for me for all of those years?” And they will respond to Him, “Master of the Universe! Were it not for the Torah that you gave us, the nations would surely have caused us to lose hope.” Therefore, it is written (*Eikha* 3:21), “*This* I shall place upon my heart [therefore, I will hope.]” “This” always refers to Torah, as it says (*Devarim* 4), “And *this* is the Torah [that Moshe placed before the children of Israel].” (*Eikha* *Rabba* 3:7)

Exile is fraught with God’s distance and inaccessibility, leaving Israel uncertain as to the state of its relationship with God. The envious and hostile surrounding nations exacerbate Israel’s insecurity, and their jeers echo in the backdrop of Israel’s exilic misery.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, Israel’s present reality seems intolerable, and it is possible that Israel’s only recourse is to hope in a distant future. Yet, the *midrash* does not resort to excessive attention upon eschatology. While eschatological hopes remain its ultimate aspiration, the *midrash* nevertheless proposes a lifestyle that concentrates on a routine, daily life. Synagogues and Study Halls emerge as prominent institutions, amidst a clear-eyed recognition that Torah study will be the secret of Israel’s survival during the period of God’s withdrawal.

*Chazal*’s perspicacity is nothing short of astonishing. Indeed, Israel’s devotion to both prayer and (perhaps especially) Torah study unites the exilic community and provides Israel with nobility, purpose, dignity, and grace throughout its turbulent history.

This *midrash* affords me an opportune conclusion for this VBM series. I am deeply grateful to God for the gift of *talmud* *Torah*, which consoled and strengthened the Jewish nation throughout their exile. I pray that the comfort of *talmud* *Torah* continues to help all families dealing with difficulties. In the words of *Tehillim* 119:92: “Were your Torah not my delight, I would have been lost in my misery.” Finally, I want to acknowledge my boundless awe and thankfulness that today we have the privilege to engage in the study of Torah in the land of Israel. May we be worthy of this great opportunity and continue to reap the blessings of this extraordinary time, as it says (*Tehillim* 119:165): “Great peace upon those who love Your Torah and they will not have hardships.”

"שלום רב לאוהבי תורתך ואין למו מכשול"

1. Interestingly, Cohen, *Destruction*, p. 27, points out that *Eikha* *Rabba* does not express particular concern over the loss of the sacrificial service. This does not mean that there is no mention of the loss of sacrifices – see e.g. *Eikha* *Rabba* *Petichta* 24, which briefly laments “the place where the children of Avraham would bring offerings to God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Petichta* 25; *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:40. *Eikha* *Rabba* 2:3 asserts that had Israel repented, God’s anger would have abated immediately. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Midrashim* often assert that repentance has the power to bring about redemption (e.g. *Yalkut Shimoni Isaiah* 484; 498; *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 42). While *Eikha* *Rabba* discusses both redemption and repentance, it does not explicitly note the connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 4:20, *Eikha* references the fall of the “messiah (literally, anointed) of God,” presumably referring to one of the last Davidic kings. See [*shiur* #53](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-53-eikha-chapter-four) for a full discussion of the identity of the “messiah” referred to in that verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Torah Temima*, *Eikha* 1:13, note 146, suggests that this refers not to the Babylonian enemies, but rather to the Judeans who return from the Babylonian exile to repopulate the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Eikha* *Rabba* 2:4 records a sharp riposte that R. Yochanan ben Torta flings toward R. Akiva, who regards Bar Kokhba as Messiah: “Akiva! Grass will grow between your cheeks and he [the Messiah] will still not have arrived!” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to *Sanhedrin* 98b, the Messiah’s name is intended to reverse the morose verse, “For a comforter (*menachem*) is far from me” (*Eikha* 1:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In naming the Messiah’s father, the *midrash* issues a subtle polemic against the Christian doctrine that their messiah is born to a virgin and is the divine son of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A similar debate appears earlier in this *midrash*, prior to the anecdote of the Judean and the Arab. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. J. Z. Werblowsky, “Messianism,” in A. A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds.), *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 598. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Werblowsky, *Messianism*, p. 598 notes: “Clearly Judaism was, to begin with, not a messianic religion.” And later (p. 599): “Of course, there is no denying that the messianic complex moved from marginality to centrality, and at certain periods even into the very center of Judaism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the various anecdotes presented in *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:4-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The second *midrash* in *Eikha* *Rabba* (*Petichta* 2) also focuses on the centrality of learning and teaching Torah, highlighting the importance of paying proper wages to teachers of Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Midrashim* express the importance of Torah learning in a negative context as well, by attributing the destruction of Jerusalem to the *absence* of Torah learning in the city (e.g. *Eikha* *Rabba* *Petichta* 2; 23; 34; 1:33). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See e.g. *Eikha Rabba Petichta* 1; 2; *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. To illustrate the rabbinic attempt to replace the losses with Torah study, we should recall the story (*Gittin* 56b) in which R. Yochanan ben Zakkai petitions Vespasian to give him Yavneh as a place for the Sanhedrin to reconvene so that Torah scholarship may continue. Oddly, while the story of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai’s encounter with Vespasian appears in *Eikha* *Rabba* 1:31, it omits this particular request. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The *midrash* indicates a repeated exchange between the hostile neighbors and the king’s lonely wife. Their routine mockery causes her to cry regularly, which forces her to console herself by reading her marriage document on a regular basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This recalls the writing of some of the early church fathers, who regard Israel’s exile as evidence that God cast off the Jewish nation as His chosen people and does not intend to restore their special status. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)