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**EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

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**Shiur #06: *Eikha*: Theology and Human Suffering (Part II)**

**An Inscrutable World**

Although *Eikha* does not produce an *Iyov*-like theological treatise on the meaning of suffering, this does not mean that the book lacks theological reflection. Subtly addressing the traumatized relationship between God and man in the face of atrocities, *Eikha* paints a complex portrait of the theology of human suffering.

*Eikha* portrays God with widely disparate demeanors, fluctuating between a just God (“righteous is God,” 1:18), wronged by a sinful nation (“Jerusalem has surely sinned,” 1:8), and One who has wrapped Himself in anger (“You cloaked Yourself in anger,” 3:43), acted capriciously, and wantonly spewed His wrath upon innocent victims (“Look God and see, to whom You have done thus!” 2:20). This confounding composite remains unrelieved by God, who offers instead a deafening and demoralizing silence.

*Eikha*’s depiction of human responsibility is likewise contradictory. While the notion of human sin and accountability can be found in *Eikha*, the book resists a one-dimensional depiction of the disaster, refusing to thrust responsibility solely upon human sinfulness. *Eikha* is not a book of confessions and acknowledgement of culpability. Often, anger and confusion overshadow any admission of guilt. The agonized portrait of human suffering implicitly asserts that the book cannot account for it tidily or easily. Its intense, graphic description of Jerusalem’s travails stuns the reader, leaving an indelible impression of raw, irredeemable suffering. Most poignantly, the suffering of the children implies the agony and death of innocents. The lack of specificity with regard to the sins shifts the emphasis away from the nation’s presumed debauchery, allowing the reader to focus on the enormity of the human suffering.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Israel can hurl accusations at God, whose excessive punishments seem disproportionate to the sins.

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<sup>1</sup> This disproportionate representation creates what Dobbs-Alsopp (*Lamentations*, p. 32) calls “a qualitative disconnect between Judah’s sin and the superfluity of the punishment she received.”

This complex portrait may be the best we can do to make sense of the human condition. Without a simple solution for the problem of human suffering, the book resists the urge to deny that injustice abounds. However, at the same time, *Eikha* declines to surrender the idea that God runs the world with justice and that human beings must take responsibility for their deeds. This complex portrayal accurately reflects the theological paradox of a divinely controlled world saturated with evil and injustice.

In a Talmudic discourse, R. Meir maintains that God denied Moses's bid to understand why the righteous suffer and the evil prosper; this question lies outside of the realm of human knowledge:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Yosi: Three things Moses requested from God and they were granted him... [Moses's third question] was to know the ways of God, and this was granted him, as it says, "Show me Your ways" (*Exodus* 33:13). He said to Him, "Master of the universe! Why is there a righteous person who experiences good and a righteous person who experiences evil? [Why is there a] wicked person who experiences evil and a wicked person who experiences good?"... And R. Meir disagreed with him, for R. Meir said: Two were granted to [Moses] and one [request] was not. As it says, "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (*Exodus* 33:19), even if he is not worthy. "And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (*ibid.*), even if he is not worthy. (*Berakhot* 7a)

How is it possible to maintain a relationship with God given such a disquieting paradox? This ability to navigate an inscrutable world depends upon one's willingness to live with complexity, as well as one's faith in God. Lacking a satisfying answer, *Eikha's* presentation of this complexity produces a jarring but magnificent portrait of humans who struggle mightily to balance fidelity to God with recognition of a cruel and unjust world.

The structure of the book reflects its theological complexity. The peripheral chapters of the book (1 and 5) focus on human acknowledgement of culpability, on the nation's assumption of responsibility for the devastation. Chapters 2 and 4 contain accusation and anger, protests against a God who lobs His punitive actions indiscriminately, even against innocent children. The central chapter of this book (chapter 3) probes God's ways, seeking and finding hope in God. This chapter, expressing faith in God's enduring compassion, lies at the pivotal center of the book and, correspondingly, at the heart of human experience. At the conclusion of our study, we will closely examine this structure. For the present, it is sufficient to acknowledge that this structure reflects the idea that the human-God relationship remains a complex affair, filled with backward and forward

movements. Nevertheless, at its core, we find, commitment, faith, and love for God.

### **The *Tokhacha* and the Literary Artistry of the Book**

It is difficult to imagine that *Eikha* could leave the theological question so flagrantly unanswered. The decline and fall of the Judean kingdom along with the apparent abrogation of God's promise to David of eternal dynasty<sup>2</sup> must have meaning within a retributive context, in which God's actions respond to human behavior. Only this approach corresponds to our belief in divine goodness. In this context, human sinfulness spawns human suffering. Nevertheless, as noted, the severity of the sin (and the absence of specific sins) does not appear to correspond to the degree of Israel's suffering, leaving open the question of the justness of these events.<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that *Eikha* provides a theodicy, we can discern it in the literary artistry of the book. *Eikha* incorporates numerous linguistic parallels to *Devarim* 28, a chapter commonly termed a "*tokhacha*,"<sup>4</sup> which establishes a covenant between God and His nation.<sup>5</sup> According to its tenets, Israel obligates itself to obey God and observe His commandments. If Israel fulfills its commitment, God promises a myriad of blessings. Disobedience, however, brings punishments, which *Devarim* 28:15-68 enumerates in frightening detail. By subtly weaving these punishments into its fabric, *Eikha* indicates that the fall of Jerusalem, the exile, and the accompanying catastrophic events are the expected consequences of Israel's failure to live up to its obligations. In fact, *Eikha* implies, none of these events should come as a surprise. Israel's disobedience and egregious sinfulness have led God to bring upon them the threatened punishment. By entwining expressions from the covenant into *Eikha*'s literary construct, the book imposes responsibility upon Israel for these events, in her failure to uphold her end of the bargain.

Linguistic parallels between *Eikha* and *Devarim* 28 appear in the following chart:

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<sup>2</sup> See *Tehillim* 89:39-50 for a scathing presentation of the incomprehensibility of this event within the context of God's promises.

<sup>3</sup> Although *Eikha* refrains from enumerating specific sins, the book does make direct reference to sin. These mentions appear especially in chapter 1, which repeatedly references Jerusalem's sins and rebellion (e.g. *Eikha* 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22).

<sup>4</sup> *Tokhacha* literally means rebuke. This appellation appears to focus on the second half of the chapter (*Devarim* 28:15-68), which enumerates the punishments that God will bring upon the nation if they sin. The term *tokhacha* does not appear to take into account the first part of the chapter (*Devarim* 28:1-14), which lists the blessings that God will bestow upon the nation if they obey Him. Perhaps a more accurate title for the chapter is covenant, in which both parties enter a relationship with full cognizance of their respective obligations. The same pattern appears in the other chapter known by the term *tokhacha* (*Vayikra* 26).

<sup>5</sup> Many have noted these allusions. See e.g. Albrectson, *Studies*, pp. 231-237; G. H. Cohn, *Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016), pp. 243-246.

<u>The Punishment</u>	<u>Eikha:</u>	<u>Devarim 28:</u>
Israel will not have respite ( <i>mano'ach</i> )	לא מצאה מנוח (א:ג)	ולא יהיה מנוח לכף רגלך (כח:סה)
Enemies will overtake Israel ( <i>hasig</i> )	כל רדפיה השיגוה (א:ג)	ורדפוך והשיגוך עד השמדך (כח:מה)
The enemy will be at the head ( <i>le-rosh</i> )	היו צריה לראש (א:ה)	הוא יהיה לראש ואתה תהיה לזנב (כח:מד) ונתנך ה' לראש ולא לזנב (כח:יג)
Israel's children will go into captivity ( <i>halakh shevi</i> )	בתולתי ובחורי הלכו בשבי (א:יח)	בנים ובנות... ילכו בשבי (כח:מא)
Gates ( <i>sha'ar</i> ) and walls ( <i>choma</i> ) will no longer function protectively.	חשב ה' להשחית חומה... ויאבל חל וחומה (ב:ח) טבעו בארץ שעריה (ב:ט)	והצר לך בכל שעריך עד רדת חמתך הגבהת... (כח:נב)
Israel will spiral downward ( <i>teired</i> )	ותרד פלאים (א:ט)	ואתה תרד מטה מטה (כח:מג)
Israel's king ( <i>melekh</i> ) will be exiled into the nations ( <i>goy</i> ).	מלכה ושריה בגוים (ב:ט)	יולך ה' אתך ואת מלכך אשר תקים עליך אל גוי אשר לא ידעת (כח:לו)
Israel will be mocked and disparaged among the nations ( <i>ha-amim</i> )	סחי ומאוס תשימנו בקרב העמים (ג:מה)	והיית למשל ולשנינה בכל העמים אשר ינהגך ה' שמה (כח:לז)
Parents will consume ( <i>akhal</i> ) their children, the fruit of their womb ( <i>peri</i> ) from hunger.	אם תאכלנה נשים פרים, עללי טפחים (ב:כ)	ואכלת פרי בטןך, בשר בניך ובנתיך (כח:נג)
The enemy will not honor ( <i>lo yisa</i> ) elders ( <i>zaken</i> ) or priests and will not act graciously ( <i>lo yachon</i> ) to elders and youth ( <i>na'ar</i> ).	פני כהנים לא נשאו זקנים לא חננו (ד:טז) נערים בעץ כשלו (ה:יג)	גוי עז פנים אשר לא ישא פנים לזקן ונער לא יחן (כח:נ)
The enemy will come, as swiftly as an eagle ( <i>neshar</i> ).	קלים היו רדפינו מנשרי שמים (ד:יט)	ישא ה' עליך גוי... כאשר ידאה הנשר (כח:מט)
The phrase <i>al tzvar</i> (by our necks) describes Israel's burdens and exhaustion.	על צוארנו נרדפנו (ה:ה)	ונתן על ברזל על צוארך (כח:מח)

The rarity of some of the shared words and phrases strengthens the connection between these passages. The word *mano'ach* (*Eikha* 1:3 and *Devarim* 28:65), for example, appears outside of these passages only five times in the Bible.

God and His people base their relationship on a covenant, a contractual agreement with mutual terms and obligations. Clearly outlined alongside the consequences, the conditions provide clear guidelines for the nation's wellbeing. Although this does not erase the trauma and questions remain unresolved, the forewarning mitigates the theological disaster, the sense that the punishment is unexpected, disproportionate, and unfair. Perhaps the following verse references the biblical covenant:<sup>6</sup>

God did that which He planned; He executed His word that He has  
commanded in days of old. (*Eikha* 2:17)

As we will see, *Eikha* also subtly weaves references to prophetic rebukes and warnings throughout the book. In this way, *Eikha* further indicates that Israel bears responsibility for her catastrophic fall. Prophetic exhortations included predictions of impending disaster and even explicit cautionary threats of the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the exile of Jerusalem's inhabitants. Had Israel only listened to her prophets, she might have avoided this situation. We will encounter many of these prophetic references during the course of our study.

These subtle allusions to previous biblical admonitions seem mired in hopeless defeat; it appears that Jerusalem has received her just desserts. Nevertheless, if we examine the passages more carefully, they actually convey an inspiring formula for rehabilitation. If the destruction of Jerusalem is a consequence of disobedience, then the situation is reversible; one only has to return to one's own obligations to receive God's blessings. Indeed, according to the Torah, God forges an eternal, immutable covenant with Israel. Punishments, even those that appear catastrophic on a national level, do not abrogate the covenant.<sup>7</sup> The reverse is true: punishments that mirror the covenantal stipulations affirm that the

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, both Rashi and R. Yosef Kara refer to the covenant of *Vayikra* 26 in their explanation of this verse. The Targum on this verse refers generally to God's words to Moshe, without specifying what they are.

<sup>7</sup> This is unlike the Ancient Near Eastern Lamentation over the destruction of the city of Ur, which seems to adopt the fatalistic notion that a city's destruction permanently seals its fate: "Why do you concern yourself with crying? The judgment uttered by the assembly cannot be reversed... Urim was indeed given kingship but it was not given an eternal reign. From time immemorial, since the Land was founded, until people multiplied, who has ever seen a reign of kingship that would take precedence forever? The reign of its kingship had been long indeed but had to exhaust itself. ... Abandon your city... and accept the decree." (Translation taken from Black, J.A., Cunningham, G., Ebeling, J., Flückiger-Hawker, E., Robson, E., Taylor, J., and Zólyomi, G., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford 1998–2006.)

covenant remains in place, promising that Israel's return to obedience will reverse the catastrophic punishments and repair the relationship between God and His nation.

R. Akiva notes this message in the celebrated story of his astonishing reaction to the destruction of the second Temple:

Rabban Gamliel, R. Elazar ben Azariah, R. Yehoshua and R. Akiva... were coming up to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus, 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. 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, attesting to God's ongoing involvement in His nation's fate and future. God did not abandon Israel; rather, He consciously chastises His people, guiding them to behave properly. Ultimately, the fulfillment of a prophecy, even a punitive one, confirms the truth of the prophetic tradition. Implicit in punishment is the truth of biblical theology and the faith in a restored glory, an idea that has long provided comfort and strengthened belief in a hopeful future.

## Conclusion

In this shiur and the previous one, I have presented three possible approaches to the elusive theology of *Eikha*. First, perhaps, we should not search for theology in the book, but rather examine it exclusively from the perspective of its emotional

agenda. *Eikha*'s realistic portrayal of human experiences harnesses a range of emotions to describe Israel's response to the catastrophe and fluctuating feelings toward God. Second, the lack of systematic theology may illustrate the uncertainty and ambiguity that accompany the bid to uncover God's elusive nature. Third, we noted that entwined into the weave of the book's construction, we can discern allusions to the *tokhacha* of *Devarim* 28 (and other prophetic admonitions), indicating that these events were forewarned, avoidable, and subject to change if Israel repents her errant ways.

In spite of the abiding theological questions, remarkably, human faith does not evaporate due to the hardships. According to *Eikha*'s portrayal, in spite of the difficult questions, faith in God and His goodness remain steadfast (e.g. *Eikha* 3:21-22), even growing stronger and deepening. Israel's continued endurance testifies to the resilience of faith that lies at the core of human existence.