

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #14: *Eikha*: Chapter 1 (continued)

***Eikha* 1:8**

חָטָא חָטְאָה יְרוּשָׁלַם
עַל־כֵּן לִנְדָה הִתְהַ

כָּל־מְכַבְּדֶיהָ הִזְלוּהָ
כִּי־רָאוּ עֲרוּתָהּ

גַּם־הִיא נֹאנְחָה
וַתִּשָּׁב אָחֳזָר

**Jerusalem surely sinned
Therefore, she has become an [object of scornful] head-wagging¹**

**All those who honored her belittle her
For they have seen her nakedness**

**She too groans
And she recoils backward**

Jerusalem: The Sinful City

The haunting portrait of suffering abruptly gives way to harsh accusation: “Jerusalem surely sinned!” Until now, Jerusalem’s misery inclines the reader to empathize with her suffering. The tone shifts sharply here as the narrator points an accusatory finger at Jerusalem. A categorical explanatory statement follows the indictment (“therefore, she has become an [object of scornful] head-wagging”); Jerusalem’s sins have surely caused her sorry state.

This verse moves rapidly from one vivid miserable experience to the next. Jerusalem’s transgressions lead to external derision (“Therefore, she has become an [object of scornful] head-wagging,” and “All those who honored her belittle her”), and public humiliation (“For they have seen her nakedness”).²

¹ I will explain below why I have adopted the Ibn Ezra’s translation of the word *nida*.

² For prophetic anticipation of Israel’s humiliation, see *Hosea* 4:7.

Images involving outsiders quickly dissipate, bringing into focus her self-loathing (“She too groans and she recoils backward”), and in the following verse, her patently defiled garments (“Her impurities are on her hems”).

Nida

Biblical interpreters debate the specific meaning of the word *nida* in this verse (“therefore, she has become a *nida*”). In contrast to its appearance in *Eikha* 1:17, the *daled* lacks a *dagesh*, the diacritical mark that indicates the doubling of the letter. Accordingly, the root is not *n.d.d.*, but rather *n.o.d.*, meaning to wander.³ Based on this, Rashi explains that Jerusalem’s sins transform her into an aimless wanderer (cf. *Bereishit* 4:14).⁴ In Rashi’s view, Jerusalem’s punishment is exile, which results in the disdain of those who previously respected her.⁵

This same root (*n.o.d.*) can mean to move one’s head as a gesture of either mourning or contempt.⁶ Ibn Ezra adduces the latter meaning in this verse, maintaining that this word describes the head-wagging of those who scorn Jerusalem.⁷ This remarkably consistent reading of the verse has several advantages. Contextually, it flows naturally from verse 7, which concluded with the mockery of the enemies. It also flows well into the continuation of the verse, which explains that all those who once respected her now despise her, for they have seen her nakedness. Finally, this reading is consistent with *Jeremiah* 18:16, which warns “maiden Israel” that her sins will spawn desolation, followed by a description of passersby who will wag their heads.⁸

Despite the absence of the *dagesh* in the *daled*, one can hardly avoid the obvious association with the menstruant *nidda*.⁹ This use of the word *nidda* appears later in the chapter, linked there as well with the finality of the verbal *hayeta* (1:17).¹⁰ Moreover, this meaning coheres with the general theme of the following verse, in which Jerusalem’s physical impurity upon her hems

³ The word *nida* without a diacritical mark in the *daled* is a hapax legomenon.

⁴ The Greek has the word *σάλον*, which means turmoil. Possibly, this is an attempt to render the word *n.o.d.*, similar to the Aramaic usage, as fluttering, agitations, or turmoil (see BDB, p. 626). Perhaps a similar meaning is indicated in *Tehillim* 11:1.

⁵ *Hosea* 9:17 anticipates this exile with the word *nadad*.

⁶ See also Targum, *Eikha* 1:8; *Eikha Rabba* 1:35; Rasag, *Eikha* 1:8. In *Iyov* 2:11, the usage indicates empathy.

⁷ Ibn Ezra cites *Tehillim* 44:15 and (less clearly) *Iyov* 16:5. See also Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 70.

⁸ It is not certain whether the wagging of the head here is a gesture of contempt (as in *Tehillim* 44:15) or empathy (as in *Nahum* 3:7 or *Tehillim* 69:21).

⁹ Several biblical translations (Aquila, Symmachus, Syriac) render the word in this way. Rabbinic interpreters similarly note this association (e.g. *Ta’anit* 20a). See also Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 8; Albrektson, *Lamentations*, pp. 63-64; Provan, *Lamentations*, p. 44; and House, *Lamentations*, p. 335.

¹⁰ The word *d.v.h.* also appears twice in this chapter (verses 13 and 22). While the primary meaning of this word is unwell or faint, we must also note the association with the menstruant woman (see e.g. *Lev.* 15:33; 20:18). *Isaiah* 30:22 employs the word *davah* as a metaphor for the impurities of idolatry.

(presumably a reference to her menstruant state)¹¹ becomes a metaphor for her moral and religious impurity, which is obvious to all who see her.¹²

“And She Recoils Backward”

The backward slide seems to express self-loathing and shame.¹³ Jerusalem recoils in disgust from herself.¹⁴ Moreover, her backward movement suggests regression. It precedes and perhaps anticipates the downward spiral that occurs in the next verse. A *midrash* accordingly suggests that there is a relentless, continuous worsening of Jerusalem’s situation:

And she recoils backward. There was no day that was not worse than the other. This is as it says, “They have gone backward, not forward” (*Jeremiah 7:24*). (*Eikha Rabba 1:3*)

A midrashic reading suggests that Jerusalem specifically withdraws from her noble roles:

And she recoils backward. Backward from the priesthood, backward from kingship. (*Eikha Rabba 1:3*)

Biblical passages associate these roles with forward movements. Priestly sacrifices are said to be “brought close,”¹⁵ while David thanks God for having brought him forward to kingship (*II Samuel 7:18*).¹⁶ Indeed, these dynasties represent advancement toward the ultimate aspirations of Israelite society: serving God and disseminating His name in the world. Unsurprisingly, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, along with the monarchy and priesthood, involves a backward movement, in the opposite of the ideal direction.

Jerusalem’s Nakedness

What does it mean to see the nakedness (*ervah*) of a city? This metaphor contains a number of possible meanings. It can point to the defilement of the

¹¹ Rasag and Rashi, *Eikha 1:9*, explain the verse in this sense. Alternatively, this could refer to the blood that stains their garments from the corpses that litter the streets (see also *Eikha 4:13-15* and *Tehillim 106:38-39*).

¹² Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 19-20, rejects this reading, arguing that menstruation is a ritual impurity, which evokes no disgust or immorality (see also Berlin, p. 54). However, she maintains that the menstruant can serve as a **symbol** for moral impurity, as the common word *tamei* implies. This conveys the untouchability of the sinner, even if it is not for the same reason that we avoid contact with the ritually impure.

¹³ See Ibn Ezra, *Eikha 1:8*.

¹⁴ R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha 1:8*, explains that Jerusalem wishes that she could move backward and retract her sinfulness.

¹⁵ See e.g. *Vayikra 1:2* and throughout the book of *Vayikra*.

¹⁶ Similarly, a *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba 2:7*) explains that God’s words to Moshe, “Do not draw near (*Shemot 3:5*),” inform Moshe that he will produce neither kingship nor priesthood.

inhabitants of the city¹⁷ or their sale into prostitution.¹⁸ It can also refer to the manner in which the enemy exposes the physical city itself,¹⁹ stripping it of protective battlements and walls, baring its palaces and private inner chambers and confiscating its treasures. The punishment is not just physically devastating, but also shameful; the humiliation of exposure plays a central role in the description.

What manner of sins has Jerusalem committed to make her deserving of such suffering? The precise nature of these iniquities remain obscure. In any case, the text portrays Jerusalem as a woman whose exposed nakedness causes others to belittle her.²⁰ Jerusalem's feminine persona resonates throughout this chapter, which features Jerusalem's pitiable state: her lonely widowhood, her absent lovers, her traitorous friends, and her captured children. Now, however, sympathy yields to disgust as the images of her revealed nakedness and the stains on her hems come into focus, causing the reader to feel repelled by the sight of a sullied city.

God and Israel: A Marital Covenant

The metaphor of the spousal relationship between God and His nation offers a key to understanding the portrayal of Jerusalem's sin and punishment. In his introduction to the *Song of Songs*, Ibn Ezra draws attention to the pervasiveness of this metaphor throughout the Bible:

Do not be surprised that [Shelomo] compared *Kenesset Yisrael* to a bride and God to her beloved, for that is the way of the prophets. Isaiah said (5:1) "The song of my beloved to His vineyard," and also (62:5), "As the Bridegroom is joyous over the bride." Ezekiel said (16:7), "Your breasts became ready and your hair was grown and

¹⁷ The context of *Devarim* 23:14-15 suggests that the word *ervah* refers to contamination from excrement.

¹⁸ The word *ervah* generally retains sexual connotations.

¹⁹ Seeing the nakedness of a city can also mean to spy out a city, noting its vulnerabilities (*Bereishit* 42:9, 12). This meaning does not seem applicable to our verse.

²⁰ The word *hiziluha* may be derived either from the word *zol* or *zalal*. Both words have similar meanings – namely, to cheapen or regard something with little worth or value. In biblical Hebrew many roots are classified as "weak roots," such as those with a *vav* in the middle, or with a *hey* at the end, or those in which the second and third letter are identical. Conjugations of weak roots are often based on only two of the root letters (the "strong letters"). In many cases, we find a certain semantic fluidity between weak roots bearing the same two "strong" letters. In this case, the two roots *z.o.l.* and *z.l.l.* share the same pair of strong letters (*z.l.*), and hence it is not surprising to find an overlap in their meaning. (I am grateful to Dr. Avi Shmidman for the above explanation.) Ibn Ezra suggests that the word *hiziluha* means to belittle, functioning as an antonym of the word *kavod* (honor), and illustrating the radical change in Jerusalem's reputation ("All those who honored her belittle her"). More precisely, *zol* (cheap) seems to function as the antonym of *yakar* (worthy), as in *Jeremiah* 15:19 (as cited by Ibn Ezra).

Ibn Ezra seems to reject these readings, concluding that the root *zol* is different than the root *zalal*. He suggests (rather hesitantly) that the word here relates to the word *zol*, meaning flow (as in *Devarim* 32:2). In this reading, the enemies cause Jerusalem to flow with tears.

you were naked and bare,” and also (16:8), “I covered your nakedness,” and (16:11), “I decked you out in jewelry,” and all of that chapter [uses this metaphor]. Hosea said (2:21), “And I will betroth you to me forever,” (3:1) “Go and love a woman.” And in the book of *Tehillot* (45:1), “A Maskil. A song of love,” and (45:11), “Listen maiden and see, incline your ear.”

Biblical passages employ the spousal metaphor in various contexts. In its ideal state, this relationship evokes love, passion, ardor, monogamy, devotion, and abiding commitment between God and His nation. However, a committed relationship also entails obligations, and the spousal relationship leaves open the possibility of human infidelity, treachery, and immoral behavior. Prophets frequently portray Israel’s idolatry as harlotry (e.g. *Ezekiel* 6:9; 16:17; *Hosea* 2:6-7, 15).²¹ Instead of maintaining her exclusive pledge to God, Israel betrays her promises of loyalty and turns to foreign gods, often referred to as Israel’s lovers.²²

Less frequently, Jerusalem’s harlotry refers to a general betrayal of God, not specifically having to do with idolatry (e.g. *Isaiah* 1:21; *Hosea* 5:4). Spousal infidelity sometimes refers to Israel’s decision to create political alliances instead of relying on God.²³ Malbim interprets several prophetic passages in this way:²⁴

“And you played the whore [with your neighbors, the Egyptians]” (*Ezekiel* 16:26)... and this is the story when they turned to Egypt for assistance, and all of this occurred during the days of Ahaz. (Malbim, *Ezekiel* 16:26)²⁵

Israel’s betrayal of God seems destined to reach a disastrous conclusion. Having willingly revealed her nakedness to others, prophets warn that God will strip the nation/Jerusalem of her clothes and her dignity, displaying her humiliation to her

²¹ See also Radak, *Jeremiah* 3:1; *Ezekiel* 16:15; 23:3.

²² This is already indicated in the Torah, where idolatry is referred to as harlotry (e.g. *Shemot* 34:15-16). The ceremony enacted by Moshe when he finds the people worshipping the golden calf is intriguingly reminiscent of the *sotah* ceremony, performed when a married woman is suspected of infidelity. See also *Devarim* 31:16; *Shoftim* 2:17, 8:27, 33.

²³ In her quest for political alliances, Jerusalem plays the harlot in various ways. For example, in an effort to bolster relations, King Hezekiah tries to impress the king of Babylon by showing him the contents of his treasury (*II Kings* 20:13). Isaiah berates Hezekiah, prophesying that the king of Babylon will eventually empty the coffers that Hezekiah so willingly exposed. This narrative nicely fits the metaphor in which Israel reveals her nakedness willingly, followed by her forcible exposure and defilement. See, for example, Ezekiel’s prophecy (16:39): “I will deliver you into their hands and they will destroy your mounds and shatter your high places. And they will strip you of your clothing and take the vessels of your glory and leave you naked and bare.”

²⁴ See also Malbim on *Jeremiah* 13:25. However, most biblical interpreters assume that these passages also refer to Israel’s idolatrous practices.

²⁵ Malbim seems to conflate the nation’s turning to political alliances for assistance along with their idolatrous practices. See also Malbim’s explanation of *Ezekiel* 16:28.

former lovers.²⁶

Therefore... I will take [back] My wool and My linen that had covered her nakedness. And now, I will expose her disgrace in front of her lovers. (*Hosea 11-12*)

Therefore, I will gather all of your lovers to whom you gave your favors and all of those who you loved, along with those who you hated. And I will gather them against you from all around and I will reveal your nakedness to them and they will see your nakedness. (*Ezekiel 16:37*)

If you say in your heart, "Why did these things happen to me?" Because of your many sins, your hems were revealed, your heels exposed... This shall be your fate, recompense for your deeds, from me, says God, because you forgot me and relied on falsehood. Therefore, I lifted your hems over your face, and your shame will be seen. Your whoring and your lustful sounds, the depravity of your harlotries on the hills of the field, I have seen your vileness. Woe to you, Jerusalem, you shall not be purified! (*Jeremiah 13:22-27*)

Eikha 1:8-9 illustrates the manner in which this prophetic exhortation comes to fruition; these events expose Jerusalem's nakedness and impurities. Fittingly, those who seduced Israel now disdain and betray her.

Unsurprisingly, Israel's infidelity to God causes a deep rift in their relationship. Due to these sins, God threatens Judah with exile, a fate similar to that of her northern brethren:

And I observed that because of errant Israel's harlotries, I cast her off and I gave her a bill of divorce. And rebellious Judah did not fear and she went and whored as well. (*Jeremiah 3:8-9*)

Nevertheless, this metaphor contains within it potential for glorious reconciliation. Despite His ire, God maintains His love for His cherished nation; prophets intersperse prophetic rebuke with expressions of eternal love. In the midst of his denunciation of Israel's betrayal of God, Hosea proposes a renewal of the relationship between God and Israel, unique in its emotional depth and intensity:

And I will strike a new covenant with [Israel] on that day... And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice and loyalty and compassion. And I will betroth you to Me in faith and you will know God. (*Hosea 2:20-21*)

²⁶ Prophets use similar images to prophesy against foreign cities, such as Nineveh (*Nahum 3:5*) and Babylon (*Isaiah 47:3*).

Biblical readers cannot ignore the pledge that lies at the heart of this extraordinary divine-human love. Bound up in passion and exclusivity and destined for sublimity, Israel's intimate relationship with God resonates with promise.

By employing the metaphor of a marital relationship between God and His nation, *Eikha* evinces the once-passionate relationship:

He compared Israel to a woman and said about her in feminine person, “[How has] she sat [lonely!]” (*Eikha* 1:1). God said: I said (*Hosea* 2:21), “And I will betroth you to me with faith,” “Come with me from Lebanon, bride” (*Song of Songs* 4:8), and now, you sit lonely?! (*Pesikta Zutrata Eikha* 1:1)

When viewed within its broader biblical context, the spousal metaphor extends beyond the terrible consequences that we encounter in this chapter. It evokes a relationship originally distinguished by mutual love and commitment, and followed by dramatic betrayal and painful separation. The stage of joyous reunion hovers on the horizons of possibility, a prophetic promise to which Israel clings during her period of estrangement from God.