EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Shiur #20: Chapter 1: In Summation

Although its alphabetic structure suggests order, the first chapter of *Eikha* is thematically haphazard. The chapter flings about a myriad of topics, including: Jerusalem's tears, the exile of her population, the groans and sorrow of the suffering, the success and mockery of the enemies, the desecration of the Temple, the starvation of the population, and the inescapable, ever-looming certainty of death. The dizzying movement between the interior and exterior of the city, the Judean population and her friends, lovers, and enemies, and the past and the present, leaves the reader overwhelmed and slightly bewildered.

More disquieting are the different portraits of God in this chapter, compounded by the shifting perspectives regarding Israel's culpability. The chapter features Israel's sins, displaces them by focusing on God's rage, only to return to Israel's sinfulness. Measured theological pronouncements surface alongside God's angry acts of violence, hurled mercilessly against the cowering city. Jerusalem's crisis seems embedded in the chapter's erratic construction; a formerly ordered world weaves and flounders as the nation hovers on the brink of cataclysm.

A semblance of order emerges, nonetheless, from the interchange of voices in the chapter, creating a dialogue between the objective narrator in the first half of the chapter and Jerusalem in its second half. In reading the narrator's account, we remain distant from Jerusalem; although we empathize with her grief, we share in the narrator's impartial judgements as he denounces her sins. In the second half of the chapter, Jerusalem's voice breaks through, jarring the reader with her torrential tears, her raw pain, and her outrage at God's intemperance. These two separate movements lend thematic continuity and progression to the chapter.

Each of these sections progresses ineluctably toward admission of sinfulness, a central motif of the chapter. The objective narrator arrives at sinfulness more easily, progressing in a linear fashion to this conclusion (verses 5, 8-9). Unsurprisingly, Jerusalem requires more time to internalize her sin. At first, she surmises that the enemy is the putative source of her misery (verse 9). Soon after, Jerusalem turns her attention to God, bemoaning His active role in her calamity (verse 12). Describing her suffering as the product of God's anger

(verses 12-16), she dodges the guilty verdict hurled against her in verses 8-9. It requires the prompting of the narrator in verse 17 to propel Jerusalem's final movement toward achieving conviction of sinfulness (verses 18-22).

Jerusalem's Loneliness

One theme appears to hold this chapter together. Maintaining a consistently forlorn tone, chapter 1 features the loneliness of Jerusalem as she laments her departed populace. The ceaseless drone of mournful groans[1] accompanies five variations of the phrase, "she has no comforter\helper," (verses 2, 7, 16, 17, 21). The word *shomem*, meaning desolate, appears twice (verses 4, 16),[2] while the word *machamadim* (precious delights) appears three times (verses 7, 10, 11) in the context of loss, underscoring Jerusalem's emptiness. Words that designate the negative, *ein* (verses 2, 7, 9, 17, 21) and *lo* (verses 3, 9, 10, 14, and twice in verse 6), reverberate throughout the chapter, indicating how this chapter focuses on what is absent from the city.

Ideas and themes repeatedly highlight Jerusalem's desolation. The city sits alone and tears remain on her cheeks as she sobs quietly in the night (verse 2). Zion's roads remain deserted, and they mourn the absence of pilgrims (verse 4). Jerusalem has fallen to the enemies, who have removed the city's splendor and inhabitants (verses 3, 6). Jerusalem's friends prove to be unreliable (verse 2), and her neighbors are hostile (verse 17); even her loved ones do not answer her desperate call (verses 2, 19). Those who once respected Jerusalem now scorn her (verse 8), and the ritual impurity of the *nidda* surfaces as an apt metaphor for the city's solitary condition.

Jerusalem's isolation finds singular expression at the center of the chapter (verses 11-12), where we encounter a linguistic chiasm (AB-BA). Met with stony silence, Jerusalem's desperate (and futile) entreaty to God that He observe her (*re'ei* (A) *ve-habita* (B)) triggers her wild flail to find someone who will pay attention to her pain. Alighting upon some random passersby, she frantically seizes them, begging them to see her plight (*habitu* (B) *u-re'u* (A)). This desperate quest allows us to observe Jerusalem's solitude and her desperate need to find someone to alleviate her loneliness.

While highlighting Jerusalem's eerie emptiness – the absence of people, of loud sounds, of its characteristic hustle and bustle – the chapter largely disregards the destruction itself. It omits any description of the demolition of the houses and Temple,[3] the siege of the inhabitants, and the sounds and sights of Jerusalem's

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[1] A key word of this chapter is *anach*, meaning to groan (vv. 4, 8, 11, 21, 22).

[2] The Targum on 1:21 adds the word desolate into the verse. Jerusalem appeals to God to punish the enemies in a like manner as He punished Israel, highlighting Israel's desolation: "May you summon against them that they may be made desolate like me."

[3] This absence is highlighted by the fact that the chapter does describe the enemy entering the Temple and perhaps plundering it as well (see verse 10).

conquest.[4] This quiet chapter instead focuses primarily on the immediate aftermath of that conquest, registering the plaintive tones of horror as the city raises its head from the ashes to inspect the ruins. Anger is mostly absent;[5] shock and dismay prevail. Whimpers, moans, and quiet sobs thrum in the backdrop, a symphony of desolation, a loud crash of silence.

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[4] One possible exception may be verses 13-15, which use metaphoric language to describe God tormenting Jerusalem with fire and nets, weakening the city and crushing her young men. Moreover, the laconic phrase in verse 20 seems to allude to the siege. However, the overall tone of the chapter remains muted, especially in comparison to chapter 2.

[5] As part of the exception noted in the previous footnote, verse 12 alludes to God's anger, a heated emotion that precedes the singular description of God tormenting the city in verses 13-15.

Appendix One: The Chiastic Structure

Overall, this chapter seems to retain a chiastic pattern. As noted in our introduction to poetry, a chiasm is a literary device that involves a crosswise composition of concepts or words, repeated in reverse order, creating a ring structure (A-B-C-C-B-A). *Bereishit* 9:6 offers a compelling example of a tightly arranged chiastic structure:

<div align="center">

A   B   C   C   B   A

Shofekh dam ha-adam   ba-adam damo yishafekh

He who **spills** the **blood** of a **human**,   in that **human,** his **blood** will be **spilled**

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Chiastic patterns do not always appear in such close proximity. They are sometimes spread out over the course of a chapter or a narrative unit.[6]

To what end does the *Tanakh* construct its narrative and poetry in a chiastic structure? Chiasms appear in various ways and with various objectives. As we see in the example above, a literary unit may utilize a cyclical design to accentuate the concept of reward and punishment. Chiasms also draw attention to the parallels in a composition, prodding the reader to seek the meaning of these corresponding parts. At times, the chiastic structure constructs a concentric design, in which the parts revolve around a central axis (A-B-C-B-A), highlighting its epicenter.[7] Chiasms create a cyclical structure, which does not appear to proceed in a linear direction. This type of composition can suggest that there is no exit from the situation at hand; there seems to be no ability to progress onward.

According to some scholars, the alphabetic design of *Eikha* chapter 1 forges a consciously constructed unit.[8] By comparing the verses in reverse order (first verse to last verse, second verse to penultimate verse etc.), the chapter progresses incrementally toward its pivotal center.[9] Scholars have posited several variations of a chiastic structure for chapter 1, based on words and phrases that appear in each parallel set of verses.[10]

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[6] Of course, as the spread of these structures get wider, scholars regard their veracity with increasing skepticism. See J. Berman, "Criteria for Establishing Chiastic Structure: Lamentations 1 and 2 as Test Case," *Maarav* 21:1-2 (2014), pp. 57-58. See also J. W. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4:2 (1995), pp. 1-14.

[7] As noted in our unit on Introduction to Poetry, the overall structure of the book of *Eikha* is a concentric chiasm, designed to direct the reader's attention to its middle chapter.

[8] See e.g. A. Condamin, "Symmetrical Repetitions in Lamentations, Chapters I and II," *JTS* (1905), pp. 137-140; J. Renkema, "The Literary Structure of Lamentations [I]," in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, W. van de Meer and J. C. de Moor, eds. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), pp. 295-297; House, *Lamentations*, pp. 340-342.

[9] We have noted the significance of the center of *Eikha*, chapter 1, which contains an internal chiasm. See also Renkema, *Literary*, p. 297.

[10] I have not adopted the chiastic structure proposed by any one scholar, choosing instead to represent the correspondences that appear to me most persuasive. Scholars who present a chiastic design of chapter 1 include, G. Cohn, "The Literary Character of the Book of Eikha," in

1- *rabbati*
    2- *ein la menachem*
        3- *bein ha-mei**tzar**im*
          4- *kohaneha*
            5- *halechu shevi*
              6- *Zion*
                7- *tzar*
                  8- *kol*
                    9- God
                      10- ***paras*** *tzar*
                        11- *re'ei ve-habita*
                        12- *habitu u-re'u*
                      13- ***paras*** *reshet*
                  14- God
                15- *kol*
              16- *oyeiv*
             17- *Zion*
           18- *halechu va-shevi*
        19- *kohanai*
      20 – *ki **tzar** li*
    21- *ein menachem li*
22- *rabbot*

This structure comprises some weaker associations, while others are more persuasive.[11] Some of the linked words and phrases seem common[12] or appear elsewhere in the chapter,[13] rendering the correspondence between the two parts not unique. Nevertheless, the broader framework unveils a remarkable design,

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Studies in Five Megillot (The Jewish Agency for Israel, 2006), p. 165 [Hebrew]; Y. Moskovitz, "Eikha," in *Da'at Mikra: Five Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), pp. 7-8 [Hebrew]; Berman, *Criteria*, p. 64. See also note 8, above.

[11] Note that verses 7 and 16 contain a word-pair rather than the identical word (*tzar* and *oyeiv*, both words that mean enemy). See Renkema, *Literary Structure*, p. 296, who suggests this parallel. Alternatively, Aaron Demsky, *Literacy in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2012), pp. 272-275 [Hebrew], suggests that the phrase *oniya u-merudeha* (verse 7) corresponds to the phrase *eini yoreda* (verse 16) in terms of its alliteration.

[12] As noted by Berman (*Criteria*, p. 64), verses 8 and 15 contain the parallel word *kol*, although this word appears with high frequency in the chapter (16 times!). Moskovitz (p. 8) suggests a thematic parallel between verses 8 and 15, observing that these verses contain a patent reference to Jerusalem's femininity. Verses 9 and 14 share a reference to God, albeit using different names (see Renkema, *Literary Structure*, p. 294), but Berman (*Criteria,* p. 67) notes that in the variant found in Qumran (4QLam), the identical name of God appears in these verses. All of the less persuasive examples (from a lexical viewpoint) appear in the correspondence between verses 7-9 and 14-16. For this reason, Condamin (*Lamentations*, pp. 137-140) omitted these verses in his original presentation of this chapter's symmetrical structure.

[13] The phrase "*ein menachem*," for example, appears in five variations in the chapter (see also verses 9, 16, 17), and not exclusively in the linked verses 2 and 21.

one that seems deliberately woven into the artistic format of the chapter.[14]

This structure highlights two critical ideas in this chapter. First, its cyclical design allows us to glimpse the ceaseless suffering of Jerusalem. There is no way out of this relentless rotation of anguish. The chapter opens and closes with similar misery, with the absence of a consoler, and with a particular focus on the suffering of the priestly class. At its beginning, the chapter portrays the children going into captivity, and the very same dreadful image appears at the end. The chiastic structure casts a spotlight on the interminable pain of the fallen city, navigating the reader around a cyclical course that never moves forward, that never arrives at any destination.

The concentric structure also draws our attention to the chapter's center, to the inner chiasm that lies at its focal point. We have already examined this inner chiasm, which features Jerusalem's repeated evocative outcry, "Look (re'ei) and see (habita)!" directed both to God and to the unlucky passersby who stumble upon Jerusalem in her lonely hour of suffering. At the heart of this chapter, we encounter Jerusalem's desperate isolation, centrally located to highlight its pivotal role in this chapter.

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[14] In his treatment of chapter 2 (which I would likewise apply to chapter one, which contains 8 out of 11 lexical pairs), Berman (*Criteria*, pp. 61-63) persuasively argues that the concentrated presence of lexical correspondence in the chapter is unusual, and therefore significant. For example, when you search for a similar correspondence in chapters 3-4 of the book, you find only two possible pairs of congruent lexical elements in each chapter, even if you consider the most common words, such as *al* or *lo*.

**Appendix Two: The Word "*Eikha"*

The plaintive cry, "*Eikha*!*,"* an elongated form of the word *eikh*, "How?," opens chapters 1, 2, and 4.[15] Directing us to view these chapters as substantively similar, the rhetorical question launches these laments by expressing incredulity, pain, and outrage.

Isaiah also employs the word *eikha* in reference to the city of Jerusalem, linking these biblical passages:[16]

> How (*eikha*) has she become a harlot, this faithful city? I filled her with justice and righteousness dwelled there, and now [there dwell] murderers! (*Isaiah* 1:21)

Functioning as a rebuke as well as a lament, the word *eikha* may always contain elements of both. Isaiah laments Jerusalem's fallen state, even as he castigates her betrayal of God. *Eikha*'s lament over Jerusalem contains a strain of rebuke, suggesting that Jerusalem maintains some responsibility for her calamity. The following *midrash* on the verses in *Eikha* 1:1 notes this:

> R. Yehuda said: The language of *eikha* is language of reproach, as it says, "How has she become a harlot!" (*Isaiah* 1:21). (*Eikha Zuta* (Buber) 1:1)

In R. Yehuda's view, the word *eikha* connects Jerusalem's suffering to her earlier behavior, hinting that the book opens with an implied theological explanation for Jerusalem's tragedy.

Another *midrash* cites R. Yehuda's position as part of a debate regarding the nature of the word *eikha* in *Tanakh*:

> R. Yehuda said: The language of *eikha* is language of reproach, as it says (*Jeremiah* 8:8), "How (*eikha*) can you say, 'We are wise and God's instructions are with us?'" R. Nechemia said: The language of *eikha* is language of lament, as it says (*Bereishit* 3:9), "And God

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[15] Other laments open their rhetorical questions with the shortened version of the interrogatory, *eikh*. David laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in *II Samuel* 1 by repeating three times, "How (*eikh*) have the mighty fallen!" The word *eikh* also appears in laments over cities. For example, *Ezekiel* 26:17 cites the eulogy that will be uttered after the destruction of Zor: "How (*eikh*) you have been destroyed… this oft-praised city?" *Zephaniah* 2:15 cries over an unspecified city, "How (*eikh*) has [the city] become desolate?" *Jeremiah* 48:17 cites the lament of Moab's associates over her destruction: "How (*eikha*) has the strong staff been broken, the glorious rod?"
[16] This association is reflected in liturgical practices. For example, the *haftara* read in most communities on the Shabbat preceding the fast of Tisha Be-Av (commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple) includes *Isaiah* 1:21. *Megilla* 31b suggests that this *haftara* should be read on Tisha Be-Av itself (although most communities follow the second suggestion of the *gemara*, reading a passage from *Jeremiah* 8.)

called to Adam and he said to him, 'Where are you (*ayeka*)?'"
[meaning,] Woe to you (*oy lekha*)!" (*Eikha Rabba* 1:1)

Although R. Yehuda offers a different proof-text in this *midrash*, he again observes that the word *eikha* recalls prophetic rebukes. Perhaps R. Yehuda means to suggest that God punishes in order to reproach, offering an educational response to wayward behavior.

R. Nechemia disagrees with R. Yehuda, maintaining that the word *eikha* signifies lament. Oddly, however, R. Nechemia chooses a proof-text from God's probing question to Adam following his sin. In fact, God's words to Adam resonate with divine wrath and seem to constitute better evidence for R. Yehuda's position. This verse is an especially odd choice, given that God's question to Adam is not *eikha* (how?), but *ayeka* (where are you?). Orthographically, the consonants are identical, but the vowels render these words significantly different. Moreover, R. Nechemia's attempt to parse the word *ayeka* into two words that express grief ("*oy lekha*!", "woe to you!") is creative, but far from the simple meaning of the word. These implausible proofs suggest that R. Nechemia is willing to sacrifice the simple meaning in order to communicate a crucial idea. His reading suggests that even when it is clear that God reprimands, He is actually expressing a lament. God's love for His people is so pervasive that all of His rebukes are laced with sorrow; divine castigations always contain a deep chord of lament.