

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

EIKHA: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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Please pray for a refua sheleima for טובה מאטל בת חנה אטל

Shiur #24: Eikha Chapter 2 (continued)

Eikha 2:4

דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב
נָצַב יְמִינוֹ כְּצֹר

וַיִּהְיֶה כָּל מַחְמַדֵּי־עֵינַיִן

בְּאֵהָלֵי בַת־צִיּוֹן
שָׁפַר כְּאֵשׁ חֲמָתוֹ

**He poised His bow like an enemy
He steadied His right hand like an adversary**

And He killed all those precious to the eye

**In the tent of the daughter of Zion
He spilled out His anger like fire**

God's agents vanish completely in this verse. Instead, God comes into focus, bow in right hand, poised to smite Israel. A powerful, invincible foe – God is twice designated enemy in this verse, followed by a third in the following verse – God carefully arranges and unleashes devastation. The same right hand from the previous verse, formerly taut and held in a willfully inactive posture, now releases and swings into controlled action, smiting Jerusalem's precious inhabitants.

While the first and third sentences conform to the customary binary sentence structure, the verse constructs its middle sentence as one single line. This construction draws attention to the middle sentence of the verse, whose stark disclosure jars the reader. God killed all of those precious to the eye. This

account requires no elaboration; the potency of the announcement lies in its bareness and brevity.

Who are those “precious to the eye”? In the previous chapter, the word *machamadim* appeared several times (1:7, 10, 11). We considered the possibility that this reference to something desirable could allude either to objects or to humans. The context of our verse, however, clearly signifies humans. The phrase *chamad ayin* generally connotes members of the immediate family, either one’s spouse or children.¹ Here, the phrase most likely means children, foreshadowing and preparing us for the central image of this chapter – the inexplicable death of the children in verses 11-12.²

By placing the description of the death of the precious ones in the center of the verse, it both highlights it and surrounds it with God’s divine hostility, enmity, and anger. This produces a feeling of injustice, of *tzaddik ve-ra lo*, reflecting and drawing attention to the tense theological atmosphere that prevails in this chapter.

The Enmity of God

Does the *kaf ha-dimayon* (a comparative preposition that compares God to an enemy) allay the impact of describing God as an enemy?³ Whether God is an actual enemy or simply behaves *like* an enemy seems to matter little, so long as He is described functioning in a hostile role. While uncommon, this alarming portrait of God does appear elsewhere in the Bible. Set within a context of human betrayal of God’s munificence, *Isaiah* 63:10 offers the most explicit parallel to the depiction of God in our verse:⁴

I will recall God’s kindnesses, the praises of God for all that God has bestowed upon us, and for all of the good for the house of Israel that He bestowed upon them, in accordance with His compassion and the greatness of His kindness... He was for them a savior. In all of their troubles, He was troubled... [He] delivered them in His love, and in His compassion He redeemed them, and He took them and bore them all of the days. And they rebelled and

¹ In *I Kings* 20:6 the phrase may connote either spouse or children – or more likely, both (see *I Kings* 20:5). *Ezekiel* 24:16-18 clearly refers to a wife, while *Ezekiel* 24:21, 25 seems to refer to the children.

² *Eikha Rabba* (Buber) 2:4 suggests that this phrase refers to the children. The *midrash* raises another possibility: that this phrase refers to the Sanhedrin, the legislative body, whose “eyes” (namely their understanding) are an important part of their job. This idea correlates well with the destruction of leadership, likewise a central feature of this chapter (e.g. *Eikha* 2:2, 6, 9).

³ Both the Targum (on this verse and especially on the next, where he adds the word *damay*, meaning “similar to” an enemy, but not actually one) and the 19th century commentary *Palgei Mayyim* (on *Eikha* 2:5) emphasize this *kaf ha-dimayon*, insisting that God cannot be an actual enemy.

⁴ See also *Job* 16:9.

grieved His holy spirit, **and He turned into their enemy and He battled them.** (*Isaiah* 63:7-10)

This unsettling portrait of divine enmity has terrifying implications.⁵ God's omnipotence renders him a formidable enemy indeed.

But despite the horror that attends the notion of God's enmity, it does not suggest the termination of the relationship between God and His nation. When viewed within the context of Isaiah's historical overview, it becomes clear that the sole cause of God's hostility was Israel's egregious betrayal. Isaiah follows the description of God's enmity with Israel's direct plea to God to restore the relationship, to recall His great love and compassion for His people (*Isaiah* 63:15). Geared by their admission of sinfulness alongside their belief in God's parental love and commitment (*Isaiah* 63:16; 64:7), the nation turns to God in great distress and beseeches Him:

Do not be excessively angry with us, God, and do not forever remember our sin. Look, please, at Your nation, at all of us! Your holy cities have become a desert; Zion has become a desert, Jerusalem a desolation. Our Holy Temple and our glory, where our fathers praised You, was consumed by fire and all of our precious delights were ruined. Will you restrain [Yourself] over these things, God? Will You be silent and excessively torment us? (*Isaiah* 64:8-11)

God does not answer immediately, but when He finally does, His response is conciliatory and affectionate:

For I will construct a new heaven and a new earth... and I will create Jerusalem as a joy and her nation as a delight. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem and I will delight in my people, and there be not be heard in [the city] any more sounds of sobs or sounds of wails... And they shall build houses and dwell [in them], and plant vineyards and eat their fruit... They will not toil in vain and they will not birth [children destined] for horrors, for they are children of those blessed of God, they and their descendants. And before they call I will answer; they are yet speaking and I will hear. (*Isaiah* 65:17-24)

Despite its alarming implications, God's hostile response to Israel's repeated transgressions will not endure endlessly, according to Isaiah. Israel's repentance, regret, and pleas generate forgiveness and rejuvenation, a renewal of commitment and love between God and His errant nation.

⁵ For some of the philosophic implications of this anthropomorphic description of God, see *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* 87.

Eikha 2:5

הָיָה אֱ-דֹנָי כְּאֹיֵב
בָּלַע יִשְׂרָאֵל

בָּלַע כָּל-אַרְמֹנֹתֶיהָ
שָׁחַת מִבְצָרָיו

וַיִּרְבַּ בְּבֵת-יְהוּדָה
תְּאֲנִיָּה וְאֲנִיָּה

**God was like an enemy
He swallowed Israel**

**He swallowed all of her palaces
He destroyed its fortresses**

**And he increased in Judah
Mourning and moaning**

God's enmity continues unabated, swallowing Israel, swallowing her palaces, steadily disposing of them until there are no more. The verb *bila* – appearing twice in rapid succession – depicts the total elimination of Jerusalem's buildings; they are swallowed whole, leaving no trace of their ever having existed.

Many of the words in this verse appeared previously in the first four verses of the chapter: God's enmity, the word *bila* (swallow), the fortresses, and the appellation *Bat Yehuda* make another appearance in our verse. The repeated words suggest that this verse summarizes that which we have seen, perhaps offering a conclusion to the relentless tale of Jerusalem's ruin.

The summary feel of the verse is further indicated by its final words. For the first time in this chapter, we hear Judah's reaction. Wails of mourning indicate that destruction has ceased, allowing the city's inhabitants the respite needed to bemoan their calamities.

Nevertheless, the narrative pause turns out to be just that – a lull in the rampage, not its conclusion. In the next verses, God will turn His attention to His own Temple, the sacred center of Jerusalem and the pivotal center of its catastrophe.

Va-Yerev

From the very beginning, God's promises to humankind included the promise of fertility, of increasing progeny (*Bereishit* 1:28; 9:1). Later, this blessing is bestowed specifically on Abraham's family (*Bereishit* 22:17; 35:11), and then on the nation of Israel (e.g. *Devarim* 6:3; 8:1; 30:16). The verb *va-yerev* (from the

root *rabba*, meaning to increase in numbers or greatness) strongly recalls this divine blessing. In a sharp reversal from the favorable usage of this word, in our verse, God increases Israel's mourning and moaning.

Rashi (*Eikha* 2:5) draws our attention to the verse in *Shemot* 1:20, which contains a verb with identical orthography: "And the nation increased (*va-yirev*) and they became exceedingly powerful."⁶ By drawing our attention to the verse in *Shemot*, Rashi recalls the promising beginnings of Israel's nationhood at the moment of its devastating downfall. This linguistic referencing evinces terrible disappointment, underscoring the loss of blessings and its replacement with calamities. However, this linguistic spin also reminds us that God bestowed those blessings upon the nation on a provisional basis, predicated upon the condition that Israel obeys Him:

For I am commanding you today to love your God, to follow His ways and to observe His commandments, statutes, and laws – and you will live and *you will increase* and God will bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess. (*Devarim* 30:16)⁷

Possession of the land of Israel, in particular, comes with stipulations – namely, the responsibility to maintain sanctity in the land and disseminate God's laws. It comes as no surprise that when the nation of Israel fails to live up to the stated prerequisites, God reverses and withdraws those divine favors.

Actualizing Prophecies of Admonition

The phrase *ta'aniya va-aniya* is commonly translated "mourning and moaning," a translator's flourish that successfully preserves the poetic alliteration of the Hebrew. *Isaiah* 29:2 deploys the same phrase to portray an upcoming calamity for Jerusalem.⁸ Surprisingly, however, Isaiah's scenario does not end in disaster. In spite of the mourning and moaning that anticipates the catastrophe, God decides to deflect disaster and miraculously saves the fortunate city:

...And it will come about with great suddenness. She shall be remembered by the God of hosts, with thunder and quake and a great voice, storm and tempest and a conflagration of consuming flames. And it will be like a dream, a night vision, all of the multitude of nations who are encamped against Ariel⁹ and all those who wage war against her and besiege her and trouble her. Like the hungry person dreams that he is eating and awakens, and his throat is

⁶ Rashi notes that the grammatical form of this verb is different in each of these verses.

⁷ See also e.g. *Devarim* 6:3; 8:1.

⁸ Isaiah appears to describe the averted disaster during Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. See [shiyur # 3](#): "Historical Introduction: Part II".

⁹ Ariel is another name for Jerusalem; see A. Chacham, *Da'at Mikra: Isaiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 288. In *Ezekiel* 43:15, the name Ariel refers specifically to the altar.

empty, and like the thirsty one dreams that he is drinking and awakens, and he is faint [with thirst] and his throat is parched – this shall be [the experience] of the multitude of nations waging war against the Mountain of Zion. (*Isaiah* 29:5-8)

By referencing the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem in *Isaiah*, *Eikha* alludes to the contrast between the two scenarios. Mourning and moaning has once again beset the besieged city – this time, with no reprieve from God. If in previous situations, Jerusalem’s mourning and fear ended in divine salvation, in 586 BCE Jerusalem’s privileged status appears to come to a sorry end. By utilizing a phrase previously associated with God’s miraculous salvation of the city, the verse evokes the nation’s bewilderment alongside its pain. Why does God fail this time to come to the aid of His beleaguered city? This theological quandary coheres with the tenor of the chapter, which resonates with Israel’s bewildered perception of divine injustice.

Despite the contrast between this scenario and the previous one, the linguistic allusion directs the reader to recall a magnificent event of biblical history. *Isaiah*’s account displays God’s magnificent might and vigorous defense of His nation, which results in a dramatic salvation for a desperate nation.¹⁰ A subtle (nearly indiscernible) reference, these reminders allow the reader to grasp at a modicum of hope, buried in the midst of terrible despair.

¹⁰ See *II Kings* 19:3, where Hezekiah describe the hopelessness that prevails within the nation.