YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

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**In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l**

**הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ​**

**Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise**

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**Shiur #45**

***Eikha*: Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:2**

**בְּנֵ֤י צִיּוֹן֙ הַיְקָרִ֔ים**

 **הַמְסֻלָּאִ֖ים בַּפָּ֑ז**

 **אֵיכָ֤ה נֶחְשְׁבוּ֙ לְנִבְלֵי־חֶ֔רֶשׂ**

**מַעֲשֵׂ֖ה יְדֵ֥י יוֹצֵֽר**

**Precious children of Zion**

**Who were valued as gold**

**How have they been considered as earthenware jars**

**The work of the hands of a craftsman?**

A second cry of “*eikha*” appears in this verse, intensifying the lament. Indulging in a second cry of pain, its final one in the book, the doubling of the word prepares the reader for a particularly difficult chapter, a grim portrait of the city’s collapse.

This verse elucidates the meaning of the previous verse, which described the valuable and holy jewels of Jerusalem.[[1]](#footnote-1) The sullied gold and the holy stones tossed aside like worthless trash turn out to be a metaphor for the once-precious and dazzling[[2]](#footnote-2) children of Zion, who were valued like gold.[[3]](#footnote-3) The children are now regarded as earthenware pots, commonplace and disposable. While initially the chapter appears concerned with objects, this chapter actually focuses upon people, upon the human suffering that prevails in the city.

The worth of children does not exactly mirror that of gold. The value of gold vanishes when society lacks nourishment for survival,[[4]](#footnote-4) while humans have inherent value. To safeguard its future and maintain its morality, a society should especially care for its children, whose value cannot be measured in currency. The callous treatment of the priceless children suggests the collapse of hope alongside basic societal responsibility and morality.

Why have these children been demoted, their value depreciated such that they are no longer comparable to gold, but rather to objects of little value, to earthenware jars? The passage does not name the perpetrator of this atrocity. Who is it that actually regards the children of Zion as common earthenware vessels? Possibly, it is the city herself who metaphorically abandons her inhabitants, withdrawing her protection and allowing the enemies to do as they please. However, the chapter later describes mothers’ desertion of their children during the famine (4:3-4, 10). Possibly, then, this verse refers to the parents, who repudiate the value of their own children, allowing them to languish in the gutter, where they suffer from hunger (verse 4) and cold (verse 5).

This situation results from the horrors of famine, which deplete people of their physical and moral vigor; indeed, their very humanity suffers in its wake. Hunger demoralizes and dehumanizes. As the food dwindles and Jerusalem’s residents suffer the slow and agonizing effects of the famine, hope for the future fades, alongside any interest or ability to sustain the children.[[5]](#footnote-5) The value of human life erodes and diminishes, resulting in children who starve in the streets, languishing without nourishment.

**The Work of the Hands of the Craftsman**

*Eikha* 4:2 does not describe the earthenware jars as easily breakable, but rather, as the work of the hands of a human craftsman (*yedei yotzer*). In comparison to God’s creative skills, the product of human hands is inferior, of lesser value.[[6]](#footnote-6) Unlike earthenware vessels, which do not appear to require great prowess in their manufacture, humans can only be fashioned by God, Who is described as the Divine Craftsman of the human being.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is therefore, a surprising and terrible demotion to compare the children of Zion to the material work of a human craftsman. This demotes humans both in terms of their estimable worth and in terms of their divine origins.

Moreover, biblical passages often hint to the breakability of manufactured vessels, which obtained meager value in biblical times (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 30:14, *Tehillim* 2:9). Because clay vessels were considered to be disposable items, people treated them carelessly, like refuse, unceremoniously tossing them away when their usefulness ceased.[[8]](#footnote-8) This recalls a passage from Yirmeyahu, who recoils from this attitude toward humans:

Is this man, Kanyahu,[[9]](#footnote-9) like a broken and despised pot? Is he a vessel that no one desires?[[10]](#footnote-10) Why were he and his descendants picked up and thrown in a land that they knew not? (*Yirmeyahu* 22:28)

In another passage, Yirmeyahu use a similar metaphor to warn Israel of the consequence of their sins:

The word that came to Yirmeyahu from God, saying, “Arise and go down to the house of the craftsman (*beit* *ha-yotzer*) and there I will let you hear my words.”

And I went down to the house of the craftsman and there he was doing work upon the stones.[[11]](#footnote-11) And the vessel that he was making from clay was ruined in the hands of the craftsman, and he began again and made another vessel, one that was good in the eyes of the craftsman. And God said to me, “Like this craftsman, can I not do this to you, house of Israel?” says God. “Like clay in the hands of the craftsman, so you are in My hands, house of Israel.” (*Yirmeyahu* 18:1-6)

As the divine manufacturer of the human being, God warns that He has free rein to do what He wishes with His creations. Like the artisan of clay pots, who can throw away the vessel that dissatisfies him, God may choose to destroy the people who do not live up to the purpose of their creation. Yirmeyahu’s prophecy resonates frighteningly against the backdrop of this verse. God’s warning has been implemented; the value of humans reduced to earthenware vessels, the work of the Divine Craftsman who is no longer satisfied with His creation.

***Eikha* 4:3-4**

**גַּם־תַּנִּים֙ חָ֣לְצוּ שַׁ֔ד**

 **הֵינִ֖יקוּ גּוּרֵיהֶ֑ן**

 **בַּת־עַמִּ֣י לְאַכְזָ֔ר**

**כַּיְעֵנִ֖ים בַּמִּדְבָּֽר**

**דָּבַ֨ק לְשׁ֥וֹן יוֹנֵ֛ק אֶל־חִכּ֖וֹ**

 **בַּצָּמָ֑א**

 **עֽוֹלָלִים֙ שָׁ֣אֲלוּ לֶ֔חֶם**

 **פֹּרֵ֖שׂ אֵ֥ין לָהֶֽם**

**Even jackals[[12]](#footnote-12) draw out a breast**

**And nurse their young.**

**The Daughter of my Nation is cruel,**

**Like the ostriches in the desert.**

**The tongue of the suckling cleaves to his palate**

**In thirst.**

**Children ask for bread,**

**They have no provider.**

These verses indirectly accuse the mothers of cruelty, without actually identifying them by name or explicitly depicting their refusal to nurse their suckling children. Instead of naming the mothers, the verse accuses an elliptical “Daughter of my Nation,” “*bat ammi*,” of cruelty. The phrase *bat* *ammi* refers generally to the nation, appearing five times in the book, and three times in the first section of Chapter 4 (4:3, 6, 10). On three occasions, the reference appears in a longer sentence that describes the people’s terrible brokenness, “*al shever bat ammi*,” in the context of famine, anguish, and the disintegration of the moral fabric of the nation (2:12; 3:48; 4:10).

The possessive form and paternal tone that accompanies the moniker *bat ammi* suggests affection and empathy. Indeed, in Chapters 2 and 3, the appellation is accompanied by tears and weeping. Chapter 4, in contrast, employs the term *bat* *ammi* three times in rapid succession, climaxing in the full phrase, *al shever bat ammi*.

Despite the emotional resonance of the appellation, Chapter 4 employs it in a dry, unemotional tone, devoid of tears or pathos. This surprising tone is compounded by the awful contexts in which the appellation appears: first to describe the cruel mothers who refuse to nurse their infants, then to describe their terrible punishment,[[13]](#footnote-13) worse than that of Sodom, and finally in a description of the most horrific event of all: the mothers who consume their children for sustenance. The dissonance between the term and the absence of emotion indicates the drastic detachment of Chapter 4. This chapter offers a subdued and dry narration of the horrific events, the depiction of a traumatized nation, numbed by suffering and resigned to despair.

**The Refusal to Nurse their Young**

Breastfeeding is a nutritional drain on the mothers, whose refusal to nurse their children indicates that they have chosen to sustain themselves rather than their offspring.[[14]](#footnote-14) As a result, the suckling babes remain parched, with no one to alleviate their terrible thirst.

The final sentence of this description (“children ask for bread, they have no provider”) indicates that the neglect of the children is not limited to the mothers who refuse to nurse their infants. Adults have stopped caring for their children, leaving them to fend for themselves. The children’s plaintive request for food hangs heavily in the air, as no response is forthcoming. Perhaps there is no bread left in the city, leaving the parent helpless.[[15]](#footnote-15) Perhaps the parent feels that silence is better than refusal. Once again, however, the context suggests otherwise. Their morality undermined by starvation, the mothers’ instinct to nurture their children recedes and dissipates. In the agony and terror of famine, parents appear to abandon their children and lose their capacity for benevolence.

The chapter focuses on the disappearance of the maternal instinct, an especially egregious occurrence, given its foundational role in human compassion.[[16]](#footnote-16) As we will examine later in the chapter, traits cultivated by the experience of childrearing may be designed to foster human willingness to sacrifice one’s own self-centered needs and offer kindness to a fellow human. The disappearance of parental compassion endangers empathetic human interactions.

The maternal instinct is so strong and so natural that it prevails in the animal kingdom as well as the human one, edging out even the innate need for self-preservation. Mammals reliably nurse their young, though it requires extra resources and nutrition and renders the mothers vulnerable to predators. Nevertheless, the Judean human mothers refuse to suckle their young, allowing their primal, maternal instinct to atrophy and decay and leaving a shell of a human, one no longer interested in cultivating their moral character. The contrast between the callousness of the Judean mothers and the loyalty of the females in the animal kingdom exacerbates the failure of the Judean mothers.[[17]](#footnote-17) Worse than the beasts of the field, Israel has lost not only its humanness, but also its primal generosity, which it shared with the animals.

**Like the Ostriches in the Desert**

Not all animals behave as nobly as mammals, and this verse draws a sharp distinction between animals who suckle their young (jackals) and those who do not (ostriches). It does not, however appear, that the jackal is a paradigm of compassion. Rashi explains that despite its willingness to suckle its young, the jackal is a cruel animal. This is suggested by the word *gam* (“**even** jackals draw out a breast and nurse their young”), which indicates that this behavior might not be expected. This of course highlights the callousness of the Judean mothers, who are crueler than the unkind jackals.

 Following the scathing contrast between the human mothers and the jackals, the verse compares them to the ostriches (*ye’einim*) of the desert.[[18]](#footnote-18) What do we know about these desert birds that can help us to understand this comparison? Some scholars identify the bird in *Iyov* 39 (*renanim*) as an ostrich.[[19]](#footnote-19) Iyov depicts a cruel and neglectful mother-bird, who abandons her offspring without compunctions:

The wing of the ostrich (*renanim*) is joyous… but she abandons her eggs on the ground and they are warmed in the dirt.[[20]](#footnote-20) And she forgot that a foot could crush them and a beast of the field could trample them. She is indifferent to her children as though they are not hers. (*Iyov* 39:13-16)

Though the verse contrasts the jackal and the ostrich, these animals frequently appear together in biblical passages, a gloomy pair whose natural setting is amongst the detritus of destruction.[[21]](#footnote-21) Jackals and ostriches frequent ruins, preferring to settle in the overgrown nettles and grass of deserted habitations (*Yeshayahu* 13:21-22; 34:13).[[22]](#footnote-22) The sounds that they utter evoke mourning (*Mikha* 1:8), and (perhaps for that reason) they are natural company for those who are miserable (*Iyov* 30:27-30). Despite the contrast between them in *Eikha* 4:3, their coupled appearance in this verse conjures a backdrop of destruction; their presence suggests the impending destruction of the city.

1. See R. Yosef Kara on 4:1. Nevertheless, *Eikha* constructs these verses so that the reader first encounters verse 1 on its own merit, and only afterward reads verse 2, which offers new meaning to the first verse. This indicates that verse 1 retains its literal meaning as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi (and Targum) on 4:2 highlights the parallel between the physical appearance of the *benei* *Tziyon* and the appearance of the gold. (See also Rashi’s comment on 4:1, s.v. *Avnei* *kodesh*.) Similarly, R. Yosef Kara (4:2), focuses on the manner in which this metaphor describes the dulled appearance of the people, rather than their diminished value. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “*Benei* *Tziyon*” can of course refer to the general population, and not only to the children (see e.g. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 106). Nevertheless, the next verses (3-4) focus upon the children, suggesting that this verse refers specifically to the children of the city. See, similarly, Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p.131. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Unlike money, the value of gemstones may also lie in their beauty, their rarity, and their luminous appearance. *Shir* *Ha-shirim* 5:11-15 describes the magnificence of the *dod* (the male figure in *Shir* *Ha-shirim*), whose physical body is overlaid with gold and studded with jewels. The *dod*’s golden head is described with two synonyms for gold (*ketem* and *paz*) found in our passage. This similarity suggests that precious jewels are a good metaphor for describing an ideal image of human singularity and radiance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It may be supposed that not everyone behaved in an identical fashion at this time. It is certainly probable that there were exceptions to this description (and the ones that will follow). However, in painting this harsh and incomprehensible picture of the loss of morality during a famine, this chapter portrays a general failing of the populace, a horrifying result of hunger, despair, and defeat. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Several prophets use this argument to denigrate idols, which are fashioned by human hands, the work of a mortal artisan (*Yeshayahu* 40:19, 44:9-12; *Chavakuk* 2:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See e.g. *Bereishit* 2:7-8; *Yeshayahu* 64:7; *Zekharya* 12:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ancient sites filled with clay shards seem to constitute evidence that society treated clay objects as being of little worth. Dobbs-Allsopp (*Lamentations*, p. 131) draws a parallel between the image of these broken and scattered potsherds and the dead bodies of children scattered across Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is a reference to the penultimate king of Judea, Yehoyakhin. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The phrase “a vessel that no one desired” is sometimes used to depict a particularly harsh treatment of humans in biblical prophecies (e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 48:38; *Hoshea* 8:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The word for stones here is *ovnayim*, which appears in only one other place, describing a birthing stone for humans (*Shemot* 1:16). The birth analogy is significant inasmuch as the human craftsman cannot fashion a human being, but the Divine Craftsman certainly can! This strengthens the metaphor that God uses to compare Himself to this craftsman, who is willing to destroy his own creation if it is marred or ruined. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The word *tanim* is generally considered to be the plural form for the jackal (see BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 1072.) Nevertheless, the *keri* reads *tanin*, which variously refers to a serpent (e.g. *Shemot* 7:9, 10, 12, 15) or a mythological sea-monster (e.g. *Tehillim* 74:13). Thus, the Septuagint translates this word as serpent (see also Rasag), while the Vulgate translates it as sea-monsters. Because serpents do not nurse their young, the identification of this creature with the serpent is unlikely. The presumed cruelty of the venomous serpent (e.g. *Devarim* 32:33, where the same word *akhzar* appears with regard to the poisonous serpent) probably fuels this identification (see *Eikha* *Rabba* 4:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. When we examine *Eikha* 4:6, we will discuss whether the word *avon* refers to the nation’s iniquity or punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Though it is possible that her milk has dried up as a result of her own lack of nutrients (see e.g. Moskowitz, *Eikha*, p. 32), the context of the verse suggests that this decision is a result of cruelty, a decision taken that negates the maternal instinct.

Rashi (4:3) elucidates this choice: “They see their children crying out for bread but there is no one who will give to them, because their lives precede that of their children’s lives due to the famine.”

The Targum on 4:3, presumably distressed by the scathing portrayal of the mothers, interprets the verse differently: “Even the indulged daughters of Israel drew out their breasts to children of the nations, who are similar to asps, while the great members of my nation were given over to cruel ones, and their mothers mourn over them like ostriches in the desert.” In this reading, the cruel ones are the enemies, whose children are breastfed by the Judean women. It is not clear whether the enemy forces the Judean women to breastfeed their children or if this is a description of the great compassion of the Judean women. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. During the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem, the city does in fact run out of bread. See *II* *Melakhim* 25:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note the etymological connection between the word for womb (*rechem*) and the word for compassion (*rachamim*). See BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 938. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Other biblical passages similarly criticize Israel by contrasting them unfavorably with animals. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 1:3; *Yirmeyahu* 8:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For this identification, see BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 419, which conflates the *ye’einim* of our verse and the more frequently mentioned *bat ha-ya’ana* (e.g. *Vayikra* 11:16; *Devarim* 14:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See e.g. BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 943 who suggests that the words *ye’einim* and *renanim* sound similar. The word *renanim* may be related to the word *ranan*, which means to give a ringing cry, such that BDB explains that the ostrich is a “bird of piercing cries.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Possibly, nature compensates for the neglectful tendencies of the female ostrich, who leaves the nest unattended, by making the ostrich eggs thick-shelled and not easily broken open by predators. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Yeshayahu* 43:20 describes this pair as animals who live in the desert, like the *ye’einim* of the desert in our verse. Life in the desert (like life during a siege) encourages selfish behavior because conditions for survival (especially obtaining food and water) are so harsh. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I have only referenced verses in which the jackal and the ostrich appear together. Many biblical verses confirm that jackals are associated with wreckage, preferring to live amongst ruins (see e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 9:1, 10:22, 49:33, 51:37; *Malakhi* 1:3.) *Yirmeyahu* 50:39 mentions that the ostrich frequents ruins. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)