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 zt"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #46:**

***Eikha*: Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:5**

**הָאֹֽכְלִים֙ לְמַ֣עֲדַנִּ֔ים**

**נָשַׁ֖מּוּ בַּחוּצ֑וֹת**

**הָאֱמֻנִים֙ עֲלֵ֣י תוֹלָ֔ע**

**חִבְּק֖וּ אַשְׁפַּתּֽוֹת**

**Those who ate delicacies**

**Expire in the streets**

**Those raised in crimson silk**

**Embrace refuse heaps**

This verse directs the reader to look back and forth, contrasting the splendid past with the dismal present, offering a brief glimpse of Jerusalem’s former glory, of a pampered life of comfort and prosperity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jerusalem’s inhabitants once ate delicacies fit for a king,[[2]](#footnote-2) rare and tasty. Raised in bright crimson clothes (*Yeshayahu* 1:18), or perhaps clothes of silken fabric,[[3]](#footnote-3) Jerusalem’s populace once enjoyed royal luxuries.

Interspersing the portrait of Jerusalem’s formerly regal living conditions alongside the terrible poverty currently plaguing the besieged city, accentuates the great calamity. Indeed, Jerusalem has experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune.[[4]](#footnote-4) The two sentences resist parallelism, opting instead to present a more dire reversal. Consider the following sentence:

Those who ate delicacies

Expire in the streets

Instead of delicacies, one would expect the populace to eat basic food. In our verse, however, in place of delicacies, there is nothing, just death in the streets. It appears that there is no food at all in Jerusalem (*II Melakhim* 25:3); people expire in the streets, lacking even the most rudimentary provisions to prevent starvation. The second sentence similarly deviates from direct parallelism:

Those raised in crimson silk

Embrace refuse heaps

Instead of crimson silk, one would expect the verse to describe Jerusalem’s residents clothed in rags. Yet, no garments appear in the second half of the sentence; residents of the city cling to the refuse piles to obtain warmth.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is a public and undignified death — the weak and starving people expire in the streets, lacking shelter or protection. Family structures have apparently disintegrated and no one has the ability or interest to care for their dying relatives. Lack of lodging leaves them cold, huddling in the refuse heaps for warmth. Possibly, these unfortunates are not searching for warmth, but scavenging the garbage in search of food. Ibn Ezra explains that this image refers to the treatment of the corpses: “They embrace the refuse heaps. For they are tossed out like dung, and no one buries [them].” Whatever the exact meaning of the phrase, one thing is certain: Jerusalem’s aristocratic lifestyle is no longer; her surviving inhabitants live in dismal conditions.

***Eikha* 4:6**

**וַיִּגְדַּל֙ עֲוֹ֣ן בַּת־עַמִּ֔י**

**מֵֽחַטַּ֖את סְדֹ֑ם**

**הַֽהֲפוּכָ֣ה כְמוֹ־רָ֔גַע**

**וְלֹא־חָ֥לוּ בָ֖הּ יָדָֽיִם**

**And the sin of the daughter of my nation was greater**

**Than the transgression of Sodom**

**Which was overturned in an instant**

**And no hands lay upon it.[[6]](#footnote-6)**

***Avon*** **and** ***Chatat***

Turning abruptly from the images of horror, the narrator appears to veer toward acknowledgement of sin and confession. In comparison to Sodom, it seems that Jerusalem receives an excessive penalty. It stands to reason, muses the narrator, that Jerusalem’s sins must outweigh those of Sodom. A *midrash* derives this idea based on a literary parallel:

“And the sin of the daughter of my nation was greater” (*Eikha* 4:6) — R. Yehoshua ben Nechemya said in the name of R. Acha: It says with regard to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin something that it does not say with regard to the Sodomites. With regard to the Sodomites it is written, “Their sin was **very** weighty” (*Bereishit* 18:20), but with regard to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin it written, “And he said to me: The iniquity of Israel is **very**, **very**, great” (*Yechezkel* 9:9). (*Eikha* *Rabba* 4:9)

Yechezkel offers a similar idea, castigating Jerusalem for corruptions that exceed those of both Shomeron (the capital of the exiled northern kingdom of Israel) and Sodom:

Your elder sister was Shomeron, who, along with her daughters, settled to the left of you. Your younger sister, who is settled on your right, was Sodom, along with her daughters. You did not go in their ways and practice their abominations. Shortly after,[[7]](#footnote-7) you **exceeded** their corruptions in all of your ways! (*Yechezkel* 16:46-47).

Our verse appears to offer a humble admission of the nation’s egregious sins, yet this submissive posture seems oddly incompatible with this chapter. A litany of horror, saturated with outrage, drives this chapter forward, without pause to consider the cause or assume responsibility for the calamity. Perhaps for this reason, some biblical interpreters understand the words *avon* and *chatat* not as references to sin, but rather as references to punishment:

There is a *chatat* and an *asham* sacrifice, whose explanation is that they **follow** the sin and transgression.[[8]](#footnote-8) And [these words refer to] the unfortunate **consequence** [of sin]… And the meaning is that the evil that came upon Israel was greater than the evil that came upon Sodom… (Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 4:6)[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this schema, this verse contains neither confession nor acknowledgement of culpability. It seeks solely to illustrate the severity of Jerusalem’s punishment, which eclipses even that of Sodom, often referred to as the archetype of a punished society.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, even without reinterpreting the words *avon* and *chatat*,[[11]](#footnote-11) the tenor of the verse does not appear to be confessional. The tone suggests grievance, and the main point of the verse is certainly Jerusalem’s harsh punishment.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Sodom and Jerusalem**

The comparison to Sodom draws our attention to Jerusalem’s heinous crimes. After all, Sodom emerges as the Bible’s most pervasive example of how not to construct a society. Sodom is depicted as a city devoid of justice, a place where an entire town surrounds the house of Lot, demanding to rape his guests (*Bereishit* 19:4-5). When Lot attempts to deflect them, their response indicates their disdain for justice (*mishpat*): “Has one come here to live and he dares to judge (*va-yishpot* *shafot*)?” Less than ten righteous people dwell in Sodom; this dearth of virtuous residents seals its fate (*Bereishit* 18:20-33). Later, the prophet Yechezkel recalls Sodom’s societal iniquities:

Behold this was the sin of Sodom, your sister: She and her sisters had the arrogance of satiation of bread and untroubled tranquility. But she did not support the hand of the poor and needy. (*Yechezkel* 16:49)

Sodom’s prosperity and security does not foster generosity or consideration for the less fortunate. God decides to eradicate this entire society (Sodom and the surrounding communities), sprinkling the ruins with salt so that nothing can grow there.[[13]](#footnote-13) As far as the Bible is concerned, Sodom can produce nothing of value for the world.

Established as the antithesis of Sodom, God designates Jerusalem as a city of righteousness and justice (*Yeshayahu* 33:5). God Himself fills the city with justice and righteousness (*Yeshayahu* 1:21) and Jerusalem is positioned to disseminate God’s teachings to the world (*Yeshayahu* 2:2-3). For this reason, biblical commentators suggest that early kings of Jerusalem maintained the word Tzedek (meaning righteousness) as part of their royal name:[[14]](#footnote-14)

“And Malki-Tzedek, the king of Shalem” (*Bereishit* 14:18) — [Shalem] is Jerusalem, as it is written, “And His shelter was in Shalem” (*Tehillim* 76:3). And all kings of Jerusalem are kings of *tzedek*, such as Adoni-Tzedek, as it is written in the Book of *Yehoshua*: “Adoni-Tzedek, the king of Jerusalem” (10:1). Because Jerusalem is a place of righteousness and peace, and it cannot tolerate injustice and violence and abominable acts for a lengthy period; therefore it spits out the transgressors who dwell there. (Radak, *Bereishit* 14:18).[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the passage cited above, Malki-Tzedek, the king of Shalem, brings food and blessings to greet Avraham on his victorious return from war (*Bereishit* 14:18). Avraham graciously accepts Malki-Tzedek’s greetings. In the same passage, however, the king of Sodom also comes to greet Avraham, who harshly rebuffs him (*Bereishit* 14:22-24). However we understand these exchanges, it is clear that this chapter draws a sharp distinction between the manners in which Avraham regards these two cities. Avraham favors the king of Shalem (identified as Jerusalem by biblical commentators) and rebuffs the king of Sodom.[[16]](#footnote-16) This incident serves to set up the contrast between Sodom (the city of injustice, slated for annihilation) and Jerusalem (the city of justice, slated to perpetuate God’s eternal instructions).

Unfortunately, the city of Jerusalem does not live up to these lofty expectations. Prophets frequently compare Jerusalem’s sins to those of Sodom, issuing dire warnings against its inhabitants’ Sodom-like behavior.[[17]](#footnote-17) Significantly, these verses tend to highlight Israel’s moral and social corruptions, in keeping with Sodom’s social depravity. By failing to maintain a just society, Jerusalem fails to live up to her purpose, thereby condemning the city to the fate of Sodom: annihilation.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**The Advantage of Sodom**

According to the verse, Jerusalem’s punishment dwarfs Sodom’s punishment in two respects. First, Sodom’s destruction is instantaneous; they do not have to suffer the prolonged agony of starvation. Second, divine hands administer Sodom’s punishment, which means that no human enemy invades her city. No military force raises its bloodstained hands against Sodom, crushing and despoiling her populace. Brutish human hands[[19]](#footnote-19) lay waste to Jerusalem, which sustains the dishonorable misfortune of destruction by a mortal enemy.

How indeed can Jerusalem’s fate be worse than that of Sodom, arguably the Bible’s most infamously immoral society? Perhaps, we should question the premise of the verse. Although no human hands destroy Sodom, God’s direct intervention indicates His immutable response to their sins. Moreover, while a slow death is certainly more agonizing than an instantaneous one, ultimately, the nation of Israel survives and revives. In biblical passages, Sodom becomes the symbol of a calamitous national fate, utter annihilation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The assumption of the verse (that Jerusalem’s punishment is worse than Sodom’s punishment) remains correct only if this catastrophe leads to Israel’s annihilation. If so, then a quick death would be preferable to a slow one. This does indeed appear to be the assumption of the doom-filled chapter, which assumes that the nation’s end steadily approaches, and that the conclusion of this story will be similar to that of Sodom. It turns out, of course, that this assumption is not correct. A remnant of Israel survives; there is yet a possibility for national revival. It transpires, then, that the contrast drawn between Sodom’s instantaneous death and Jerusalem’s slow demise illustrates God’s mercies toward His nation, not His excessive severity. This battered nation will eventually be rejuvenated, get back on its feet and return to its holy city.

1. This nostalgic recollection of the past appears in *Eikha* 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bereishit* 49:20 employs the word for delicacies found in our verse alongside the word king, *ma’adanei melekh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The word *tola* means a worm (see *Shemot* 16:20). When applied to clothing, it is not clear whether it refers to a worm used as a dye to produce a scarlet color (BDB, *Lexicon*, pp. 1068-1069, suggests that the *tola* is the insect *coccus* *ilicis*), as suggested by *Yeshayahu* 1:18 (and see Rashi on 4:5) or a silkworm (*Bombyx* *mori*) that produces silk. It is not possible to determine the correct reading, which in both cases points to regal, luxurious clothing. My translation (“crimson silk”) preserves both possibilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chana’s song in *I Shemuel* 2 catalogs God’s ability to reverse people’s fortunes in an abrupt and dramatic fashion, both for better and for worse. In *I Shemuel* 2:8, Chana describes God extracting the impoverished from the refuse heap (***mei-ashpot*** *yarim* *evyon*). This is the opposite image of the one in our chapter in which the prosperous end up hugging the refuse heap (*chibeku* ***ashpatot***). See also *Tehillim* 113:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 4:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a similar use of the word *chalu*, see *Hosea* 11:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Radak, *Yechezkel* 16:47 for the translation of the obscure phrase “*ki-mat* *kat*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibn Ezra brings several biblical passages to support his contention: *Bereishit* 15:16; *I Shemuel* 28:10 and *Bereishit* 4:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also Ibn Ezra on *Yeshayahu* 53:6. Gordis, *Lamentations*, pp. 147, 189, explains similarly. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g. *Devarim* 29:22; *Yeshayahu* 1:9; 13:19; *Yirmeyahu* 49:18; *Amos* 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rashi (*Eikha* 4:6), for example, interprets the words *avon* and *chatat* as sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Daniel* 9:12 similarly claims that God punished Jerusalem more than any other nation (though he maintains that God’s punishment is justified). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Devarim* 29:22; *Tzefanya* 2:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. While this practice did not continue with the Judean kings of Jerusalem, some kings do maintain names that recall this ideal state of Jerusalem. Shelomo evokes peace (*shalom*), Yehoshafat evokes justice (*mishpat*), and the final king of Judah is renamed Tzidkiyahu by the Babylonians, recalling the earlier kings whose names contained the word *tzedek*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See similarly, *Bereishit* *Rabba* 43:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For more on this encounter, see R. Yitzchak Levy’s article on the Virtual Beit Midrash: https://etzion.org.il/en/jerusalem-torah-ii-avrams-encounter-king-sodom-and-malki-tzedek. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 1:10, 3:9; *Yirmeyahu* 23:14; *Yechezkel* 16:2, 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In our chapter, Jerusalem’s material circumstances are unlike that of Sodom. No one is satiated, and the siege of the city has caused terrible hunger. Nevertheless, Chapter 4 contains a description that evokes the societal malfunction of Sodom, whose citizenry fail to care for the helpless among them. *Eikha* 4:4 describes the young children of Jerusalem who plead for bread, eliciting only a deafening silence. It seems that a Sodom-like attitude infiltrates Jerusalem’s populace, who fail to respond to the cries of the helpless children. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Eikha* focuses several times on the hands of the enemy (e.g. 2:7, 5:8). However, the book also features God’s hands, which likewise act to punish Jerusalem (e.g. 1:14, 2:8, 3:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 1:13; *Yirmeyahu* 49:17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)