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 #47:**

***Eikha*: Chapter Four**

***Eikha* 4:7-8**

**זַכּ֤וּ נְזִירֶ֙יהָ֙ מִשֶּׁ֔לֶג**

**צַח֖וּ מֵחָלָ֑ב**

 **אָ֤דְמוּ עֶ֙צֶם֙ מִפְּנִינִ֔ים**

 **סַפִּ֖יר גִּזְרָתָֽם**

**חָשַׁ֤ךְ מִשְּׁחוֹר֙ תָּֽאֳרָ֔ם**

 **לֹ֥א נִכְּר֖וּ בַּחוּצ֑וֹת**

**צָפַ֤ד עוֹרָם֙ עַל־עַצְמָ֔ם**

 **יָבֵ֖שׁ הָיָ֥ה כָעֵֽץ**

**[Once] her Nazirites were brighter than snow,**

**Shinier than milk.**

**Their body [bone][[1]](#footnote-1) was ruddier than pearls,[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**Their limbs[[3]](#footnote-3) like sapphires.**

**[Now] their appearance is darker than black;**

**They are not recognized in the streets.**

**Their skin has wrinkled on their bones,**

**Dry like wood.**

A remarkably vivid portrait, these verses employ vibrant color and highly descriptive language to draw an unforgettable contrast between the radiance of satiation and the sallow effects of hunger.[[4]](#footnote-4) A snapshot of health and vigor, verse seven draws a sparkling portrait of the “Nazirites” of Jerusalem.[[5]](#footnote-5) Verse eight presents a portrait in contrast; marked by shadowed tones, the scene drained of its colorful vibrancy, portraying desiccated bodies wrung of moisture, sustenance, and robustness.

The height of the drama appears to be the curt statement: “They are not recognized in the streets” (4:8). Malnutrition has erased any familiar features from the shrunken faces. The physical deterioration of these beleaguered human figures renders them unrecognizable and therefore anonymous.[[6]](#footnote-6) Acquaintances, colleagues, friends, family, and intimates vanish; recognition is gone, anonymity prevails. Nameless and faceless humans wander the city, fostering alienation and the unravelling of social ties; in this situation, human fellowship dissipates along with compassion. The populace of Jerusalem blends and merges in a mass of visceral, ravenous hunger.

**Nazirites: Nobility or Religious Elite?**

These verses focus upon the appearance of the Nazirites, whose downfall seems to represent a particularly dramatic reversal of fortune. Who are these Nazirites, and why do they elicit so much attention?

Many scholars maintain that the Nazirites of this verse refer to the nobility, who are adorned with a *nezer* (crown) upon their head.[[7]](#footnote-7) At first, we recall the Nazirites’ regal, glittering countenance as they stride through the city, brimming with confidence, the very picture of health and vitality. Crimson and shiny white tones swirl around them; they are plump and robust due to their satiation and prosperity. The collapse of these figures in the next verse is abrupt and dramatic. Lacking a transition to soften the blow, the next verse tenders a gruesome portrait of the demotion of these starving nobles — now shriveled, unrecognizable shells of their former selves.

Possibly, the focus on the reduction of these noble figures suggests that they are especially deserving of this severe treatment. Often, the higher classes do not distribute wealth in a charitable fashion, using their position in society to benefit only themselves and even subvert justice for the poor.[[8]](#footnote-8) If this is the case, then the famine is a fitting end for a city steeped in social injustice; in the absence of food, the rich suffer alongside the poor, erasing the social inequity between them. Nevertheless, this verse is less an indictment than a litany of horror; it contains no accusation or hint of culpability. Instead, these aristocrats appear to function as a mirror for the city’s splendor. They shimmer due to the city’s brilliance, and the city is ever the more glorious because of the grandeur of its aristocracy. The decay of the sparkling elite reflects the erosion of the city’s magnificence.

Another approach identifies these Nazirites as the voluntarily ascetics from *Bamidbar* 6:1-21. Their vow to abstain from cutting their hair positions them as the conspicuous spiritual elite of the society. Indeed, the initial word used to describe them is *zaku*, a word that sometimes describes physical luminescence (e.g. *Iyov* 25:5), but more often refers to religious and moral purity (e.g. *Mishlei* 21:8; *Tehillim* 73:13; *Iyov* 11:4). Despite their ascetic habits (such as not drinking wine), these Nazirites maintain a fair appearance. The verse may suggest that **even** the Nazirites retain their robustness in God’s bounteous city; how much more so the general populace, which drinks wine.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the current situation, all of that has changed. In spite of their snow-white purity (implied by the word *zaku*), the Nazirites have been degraded, suffering from a miscarriage of divine justice.[[10]](#footnote-10) Unmitigated by any suggestion of culpability or wrongdoing, the appalling fate of the Nazirites remains an incomprehensible tragedy, a theological quandary.

Like the death of innocent children, the deterioration and suffering of these religious role models turn our attention to the central theological issue in this chapter.[[11]](#footnote-11) Chapter 4 features humans who suffer inexplicably: children, Nazirites, and the unfortunate parents, who are driven to inhuman behavior due to the ravages of hunger. The desiccated image of the elite Nazirites leaves us aghast and confused, contributing to the overall tenor of the chapter.

However we understand the precise identity of the Nazirites, it is significant that this verse focuses on the leaders. In contrast to the vulnerability of the children, the power and status of the leaders generally mean that they are the last people affected by the ravages of famine. Their gauntness illustrates well the unravelling of the situation, the sense of impending doom. The demise of Jerusalem’s remaining residents is imminent; no one is spared, all of Jerusalem’s populace has been transfigured by the devastation.

***Shir******Ha-shirim***

The health and beauty of the former residents of Jerusalem evokes an intriguing passage in *Shir* *Ha-shirim* in which the *raya* describes the physique of her beloved *dod* in splendorous metaphoric detail:

My Beloved is dazzling and ruddy (*tzach* *ve-adom*)… his head is of fine gold (*ketem* *paz*)… his eyes are like doves on streams of water that wash in milk (*be-chalav*)… his hands are rolls of gold (*zahav*) … his stomach is a tablet of ivory, inlaid with sapphires (*sapirim*). (*Shir* *Ha-shirim* 5:10-14)

Remarkable linguistic overlap connects the idyllic image of the desirable *dod* with the noble former inhabitants of Jerusalem in *Eikha* 4. Both passages use three synonymous terms for gold (*zahav*, *ketem,* and *paz*), and both passages refer to precious stones, including sapphires. The radiance of these figures is indicated by the word *tzach* (which I translate above as dazzling)[[12]](#footnote-12) and identical words are deployed to indicate their red and shiny white hues (*adom* and *chalav*). The correlation indicates that these passages maintain similar perceptions of vigor and health, using familiar tropes to depict the ideal.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rabbinic commentaries often interpret *Shir* *Ha-shirim* not as a human love story, but rather, as one that develops between God and His nation. According to this reading, *Shir* *Ha-shirim* 5:10-16 describes God’s radiance and glittering splendor.[[14]](#footnote-14) Intriguingly, this schema suggests that the magnificent appearance of the residents of Jerusalem prior to the crisis mirrors God’s splendor.[[15]](#footnote-15) The comparison suggests that Jerusalem’s noble residents once reflected God’s glory; they were the representatives of God’s majesty.[[16]](#footnote-16) This privileged role has its perils; when Jerusalem’s residents cease to properly represent God, they are deemed unfit to fulfill this enviable role. In this scenario, the splendor of Jerusalem’s citizens dissipates, their glory disappears and their glimmering presence fades into shadows, replaced by a hollowed-out image of dulled, shriveled grandeur.

***Eikha* 4:9**

**טוֹבִ֤ים הָיוּ֙ חַלְלֵי־חֶ֔רֶב**

**מֵֽחַלְלֵ֖י רָעָ֑ב**

**שֶׁ֣הֵ֤ם יָז֙וּבוּ֙ מְדֻקָּרִ֔ים**

**מִתְּנוּבֹ֖ת שָׂדָֽי**

**Better were the corpses [who died] from the sword**

**Than the corpses [who died] from famine,**

**For they flowed from punctures**

**From the produce in the field.[[17]](#footnote-17)**

The word “better” (literally, “good”) is an ironic opening for a verse that presents the fortunate ones as those who died by the sword. In praising a violent but instantaneous death, the verse’s assertion reiterates the main point of verse six. This chapter continuously reiterates that any death is better than the prolonged suffering of starvation, even the chaotic and sudden annihilation of Sodom.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Translating the second half of the verse remains difficult. The context suggests that it describes death by famine, although the description of the corpses “flowing from punctures” suggests a wound made by a sword. The sentence appears to contain an ellipsis, an omitted word. Though typically one can discern the missing word from the context, in this sentence, identifying the missing word presents a challenge. Thus, various biblical commentaries offer different possible readings for this sentence.

According to Rasag, the sentence focuses solely on the agonizing death by famine. Rasag explains that the flow refers to some sort of discharge produced by their body due to the absence of food. The puncture described in the verse functions as a simile, which Rasag would read: “They flow *as* **if** they had been pierced by the sword.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, Rashi explains that as the people starved, the smell of the enemies’ roasting meat rose from the fields outside the besieged city. The smell would cause their bodies to respond (and produce gastric juices), and their stomachs would distend and rupture.[[20]](#footnote-20)

R. Yosef Kara also reads this as a description of the ghastly death of those who die by starvation. His explanation of the verse is that the starved populace ate copious amounts **from** the produce of the field, causing their shrunken stomach to burst. R. Yeshayahu di Trani also assumes that the produce of the field led to their deaths. In this reading, their desperate need for food caused the starved population to eat roots and burrs that punctured their innards, causing them to flow with internal bleeding.[[21]](#footnote-21) In both of these readings, the verse is not elliptical, and reads: “Those who died by sword were better off than those who died by famine, for they flowed from punctures caused by the produce in the field.”

Ibn Ezra reads the second part of the sentence as a description of death by the sword: “Those who died by sword were better off than those who died by famine, for [those who died by the sword] flowed from punctures [but satiated] by produce of the field.” In this elliptical reading, those killed by the sword still went to their deaths with a full stomach, a far preferable situation than death by starvation.

Finally, we might divide the second sentence into two; the first part describes death by sword (parallel to the first part of sentence one) and the second describes death by famine (parallel to the second part of sentence one). This would produce the following translation: “Those who died by sword were better off than those who died by famine, for **they** flowed from punctures, while **they** died from lack of produce of the field.”

Multiple readings offers various ways to explain the specifics of this verse. All agree, however, on its basic message: a quick death is preferable to death by starvation. To illustrate this point, the next verse will present its most appalling image, offering a scenario whose horror looms large in a book that overflows with human tragedy.

1. The word *etzem* literally means bone (see our translation in the next verse.) Nevertheless, it seems evident that the general sense here is body, as in *Mishlei* 16:24. See e.g. Rashi 4:8. I have maintained the word bone in brackets in order to draw attention to the contrast between its appearance here (where the *etzem* links to a healthy ruddy appearance) and in the following verse (where the same word indicates a wizened, shrunken appearance.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is not possible to identify the precise stone denoted by *peninim* (Rasag explains rather vaguely that it is a precious stone). While modern Hebrew uses this word to mean pearls, many scholars suggest a stone with a redder hue, such as coral. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Gizra* probably means something chiseled. I have adopted the meaning of “limbs,” as they form the distinctive outline of the human body. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 103-104, notes that color is used very effectively in these verses. The switch from the vivid colors of verse seven to the dull, sepia tones of verse eight compares to a movie in color that suddenly fades into black and white. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The word *ademu*, describing the ruddy hue of the former populace, recalls a description of a ruddy and vigorous David, (*admoni*), who is described in the same verse as maintaining a “fine appearance” (*I Shemuel* 16:12; 17:42). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Iyov’s suffering also makes him unrecognizable to his friends (*Iyov* 2:12). Similar to my explanation of our verses, this description of Iyov appears to be a metaphoric depiction of the alienation that characterizes the encounter between him and his so-called “friends.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rashi says that *nezireha* means *sareha*, her rulers, because the ruler wears a *nezer*. Alternatively, this could refer to the priests, especially the high priest, who has a *nezer* placed upon his head (e.g. *Shemot* 29:6, 39:30*;* *Vayikra* 8:9; 21:12). Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 101, refers to *Bereishit* 49:26 and *Devarim* 33:16 to adduce evidence for this reading. Moshkovitz, *Lamentations*, adds *Nachum* 3:17 as a proof text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 5:26-28. In 22:13-17, Yirmeyahu accuses the king, Yehoyakim, of especially egregious acts of injustice toward the common people. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Tehillim* 104:15, which acknowledges that wine-drinking enhances one’s radiance and appearance. Rashi maintains the opposite reading, claiming that the Nazirites’ long hair augmented their beauty, constituting the reason that they feature as the emblem of Jerusalem’s former glory. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Amos* 2:11-12 accuses the Nazirites of participating in Israel’s iniquities along with the prophets. Nevertheless, there is little indication in *Eikha* 4:7-8 that the Nazirites acted wrongly; in fact, the description of their snow-white purity suggests otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I drew a similar conclusion with regard to the theological approach of Chapter 2. It seems to me that Chapters 2 and 4 constitute parallel chapters, mirroring each other in tone, substance, and theological approach. We will develop this idea at the end of this chapter, and we will refer to it again when we discuss the overall structure of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See BDB, *Lexicon*, p. 850. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Similarly, *Shir* *Ha-shirim* 1:4-5 depicts blackened skin in a negative manner, paralleling the attitude in *Eikha* 4:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Note how many of these descriptions of the *dod* make their way into the medieval poem known as *Anim* *Zemirot* (*Shir* *Ha-kavod*), which is a sustained praise of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The word *sapir* (4:7) appears in several contexts that seem to describe God. See *Shemot* 24:10; *Yechezkel* 1:26. The metaphoric description of God in *Daniel* 7:9 also seems to contain parallels to *Eikha* 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One indication that this in fact is one of the primary goals of kingship appears in *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:23, which presents Shelomo as sitting on the throne of God. Shelomo becomes the physical manifestation of God’s divine reign, and represents God’s majesty. For similar ideas, see also *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 17:14, 28:5; *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 9:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As we will see, this verse is extremely difficult to translate. The above translation reflects R. Yosef Kara’s and R. Yeshayahu di Trani’s approaches. While it offers a close translation of the words, it does not adequately convey the terrible starvation featured in this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See *Bava* *Batra* 8b, which refers to this verse in explaining why death by famine is worse than death by sword. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In Rasag’s reading, the missing word is *kemo*, expressing similarity. His reading does not reflect well the traditional punctuation, which places a comma between the word “pierced” and “the produce of the field.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See *Eikha* *Rabba* 4:14. This approach does not require the addition of any word and does not adopt Rasag’s explanation that the puncture is a simile. In this explanation, the word *medukarim* means the actual rupture of the stomach. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See also Targum on this verse and the gloss in Rashi, presumably added by one of his students. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)