Lamentations
Faith in a Turbulent World

Yeshivat Har Etzion ישיבת הר עציון
מגיד
MAGGID
MATAN

Yael Ziegler

LAMENTATIONS

איכה

FAITH IN A TURBULENT WORLD

Matan
Yeshivat Har Etzion
Maggid Books

Lamentations
Faith in a Turbulent World

First Edition, 2021

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

© Yael Ziegler, 2021

Cover Image: *The Starry Night*, by Vincent van Gogh (1889)
Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA/Bridgeman Images

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-555-8, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

In loving memory of our parents

Samuel and Yvette Levene
Dr Joss Leigh and Sheila

This exemplary new work on Eikha
by distinguished Torah scholar

DR. YAEL ZIEGLER

is dedicated by

MATAN

In honor of

INGE and IRA RENNERT and FAMILY

Founders and pillars of Matan

In appreciation for their magnanimous devotion to bringing about the renaissance of Jerusalem and to strengthening the Jewish people. Every year on Tisha Be'Av the Rennerts hear Eikha in Jerusalem and they lament the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and Jerusalem and pray for its renewal. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts for their everlasting contribution to Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael and for the role they have played in building Jerusalem for us and for future generations.

THE MATAN FAMILY

Rabbanit Malke Bina

כִּי יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת בָּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו
וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה׳ לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט

לעילוי נשמות

יצחק בן חיים צבי שווארץ ז״ל
Nicholas Schwartz

נלב״ע י״ג שבט תשע״א

שבע שיינדל בת דוד שווארץ ז״ל
Sondra Schwartz

נלב״ע י״ג שבט תשע״ח

נסים יפרח בן רחל ז״ל
Nisim Yifrach

נלב״ע י״ד טבת תשנ״ט

שרה גודמן-טוורסקי בת מאיר הכהן ז״ל
Sarah Goodman-Twersky

נלב״ע י״ז טבת תשנ״ג

Dedicated by the ones who loved them … and always will.

In memory of
Dr. Avigail Rock *z"l*

אביגיל מלכה פופקו ראק ז"ל

חברת תועלת
חברת נחת
ומעל הכול
חברת מעלה.

(על פי הרמב"ם, פירוש המשניות, אבות פ"א מ"ו)

Contents

Introduction to Eikha 1
Historical Background 11
Theology and Suffering 31
Biblical Poetry and the Book of Eikha 45

Eikha: Chapter One *A Desolate City*

Introduction 63
Structure 64
Part 1 (Eikha 1:1–11b): The Narrator's Account 66
Part 2 (Eikha 1:11c–22): Jerusalem's Account 118
Chapter One: In Summation 147
    Chapter One, Appendix 1: A Chiastic Structure 151
    Chapter One, Appendix 2: The Word "Eikha" 155

Eikha: Chapter Two *Destruction and Anger*

Introduction 159
Structure 162
Part 1 (Eikha 2:1–10): The Narrator's Account 164

Part 2 (Eikha 2:11–22): Jerusalem's Account 204
Chapter Two: In Summation 246
Chapter Two, Appendix 1: A Chiastic Structure 251
Chapter Two, Appendix 2: The Reversed Order of the Ayin and the Peh 253

Eikha: Chapter Three *The Suffering of the Individual*

Introduction 257
Structure 259
Part 1 (Eikha 3:1–20): An Account of Personal Suffering 261
Part 2 (Eikha 3:21–39): Theological Reflections 286
Part 3 (Eikha 3:40–66): A First-Person Account of Suffering 308
Chapter Three: In Summation 329
Chapter Three, Appendix: Psalms 37 and Eikha 2 and 3 331

Eikha: Chapter Four *A Chapter of Numb Pain*

Introduction 341
Structure 342
Part 1 (Eikha 4: 1–10): The Famine 344
Part 2 (Eikha 4:11–20): Destruction and Exile 377
Part 3 (Eikha 4:21–22): Epilogue – Hope and Justice 409
Chapter Four: In Summation 416

Eikha: Chapter Five *A Communal Petition and Lament*

Introduction 425
Structure 428
Part 1 (Eikha 5:1–7): Grievances Without Culpability 431
Part 2 (Eikha 5:8–16): Grievances and Recognition of Sinfulness 448

Part 3 (Eikha 5:17–22): Epilogue – Concluding Reflections 456
Chapter Five: In Summation 471

Eikha and the Prophecies of Consolation in Isaiah 475

Eikha Rabba: Filling Eikha's Void 491

The Structure of Eikha: Faith in a Turbulent World 515

Acknowledgments 529

Bibliography 533

Introduction to Eikha

GOALS AND FOCUS

Writing a commentary on Eikha, the book of Lamentations, involves a completely different set of challenges than writing a commentary on Ruth.[1] In Ruth, I focused on the themes that emerged from an examination of the plot and characters. Eikha, how ever, lacks plot and characters. Thus, this commentary focuses instead on the themes and ideas that arise from the poetic language so intrinsic to Eikha. With masterful use of language, Eikha grapples with profound grief and theological inquiry.

I will examine the book's broad themes, such as theodicy, Israel's relationship with God, the fall of Jerusalem, and the effects of human suffering, but I will also engage in a close reading of the text. This presents a particular challenge, inasmuch as I must first contend with the difficult words, the ellipses, and the deliberate ambiguities strewn throughout biblical poetry. Interpreting Hebrew poetry in translation presents another difficulty. In spite of the technical challenges, I hope that this reading will yield a profound understanding of the book itself and, more generally, that it will illustrate the depths of biblical poetry and how it works to shape textual meaning.

This book employs an intertextual approach, examining the relationship between Eikha and other books of Tanakh. Eikha's relationship with various prophetic books is of particular interest and significance. Prophecies of rebuke and warning offer important background to the punitive and calamitous events, explaining the nature of the sins that led to Jerusalem's fall. Of no less interest are the prophecies of consolation that offer relief for Eikha's misery. Prophets often transmute language from Eikha, inverting its message from despair to hope.

---

[1] *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015).

While drawing on academic sources and methodology (to which I am indebted and appreciative), in this commentary I remain chiefly devoted to the religious quest. My interpretative framework is rooted in the world of Torah learning, in both its resources and goals. In the final analysis, I hope and pray that this encounter with Eikha moves people to strengthen and deepen their religious experience.

In the following introduction, I will discuss the technical questions that arise with respect to the book of Eikha. The book's title, its author, its cohesion, and its date of composition are all subject to discussion. After presenting a brief overview of various approaches to each of these issues, I will explain the approach that I adopt in this book.

TITLE OF THE BOOK

For the sake of consistency with the Maggid Studies in Tanakh series, this volume is entitled *Lamentations*, but throughout the commentary I will refer to the biblical book by its evocative Hebrew name, Eikha. The word "*Eikha*" opens the book (as well as chapters 2 and 4) with a rhetorical question, an elongated form of the word *eikh*, meaning "How?" This form seems to affix a sigh to the terse query, powerfully conveying the nation's bewildered pain.

Although the biblical book is popularly knowns as Eikha, this is not its official title. *Ḥazal* refer to it by the name *Kinot*, which parallels the English title Lamentations.[2] A *kina* is a lament used for the public mourning of an individual (II Sam. 1:17–27; 3:33–34). As a rhetorical device, prophets sometimes utter a *kina* for the nation,[3] or for the city that represents the nation.[4] Jeremiah (9:9–10), for example, declares that he will engage in mourning rituals, including a *kina*, in advance of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. By calling this book *Kinot*, *Ḥazal* note that Eikha expresses grief for Judah's apparent demise, a seemingly irrevocable tragedy that threatens the continued spiritual and physical existence of the nation.

---

[2] See, for example, Ḥagiga 5b; Bava Batra 14b; Y. Shabbat 16. The Greek and Latin names for the book, *Threnoi* or *Threni*, are a translation of the rabbinic title, *Kinot*.

[3] See Ezekiel 19:1; Amos 5:1–2.

Fortunately, the Tanakh does not conclude with the exile and its ensuing lamentations. Several biblical books describe the return from the Babylonian exile to the land of Israel, illustrating the continuation of Israel's story and the nation's ability to rebuild following calamity.

AUTHORSHIP

While the book does not identify its author, there is a strong tradition that the prophet Jeremiah composed Eikha. The Talmud (Bava Batra 15a) states this as fact, and midrashim tend to cite verses from Eikha in Jeremiah's name.[5] Various translations (Greek Septuagint, Syriac Peshitta, Aramaic *Targum*, Latin Vulgate) open the book with an additional verse or a superscription that attributes authorship to Jeremiah.[6] Moreover, the Septuagint's placement of Eikha immediately after the book of Jeremiah (with some traditions regarding them as one continuous book) lends further support to this tradition.

Jeremiah prophesies before, during, and after the calamitous events that give rise to Eikha. Unsurprisingly, shared themes link Jeremiah's book to Eikha. These include the destruction of Jerusalem

---

4. A *kina* for the destruction of a city is a literary trope, in which the text likens the loss of a city to the death of an individual.
5. For a sampling of this prevalent practice, see Eikha Rabba 1:23, 51; 2:23; 4:18.
6. For example, the Greek translation (the Septuagint) prefixes this verse to the first chapter: "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said." An Aramaic *Targum*'s ascription is more concise and is affixed to the first verse of the book: "Jeremiah, the prophet and high priest, said." Although Jeremiah 1:1 does ascribe priesthood to Jeremiah, according to this targumic tradition Jeremiah was the high priest, a tradition not found elsewhere. This tradition may derive from the notion that Jeremiah's father, Ḥilkiya, should be identified as the high priest who functioned during the time of Josiah (see, e.g., Radak, Jer. 1:1, citing his father; and Malbim ad loc.).

and the Temple, the direct connection between sins and suffering, God's relationship to the events, the accountability of the false prophets, the futility of reliance upon political alliances, the terrible famine that causes maternal cannibalism, and the ultimate defeat of the enemies.

Similar phrases, shared vocabulary, and stylistic similarities further cement the connection between Jeremiah and Eikha.[7] Prophetic laments scattered throughout Jeremiah invoke a style and spirit similar to Eikha's laments. Compare Jeremiah's plaintive cry to those expressed in Eikha:

> How I wish my head were water and my eye a spring of tears; I would cry day and night for the fallen of the daughter of my nation! (Jer. 8:23)
>
> Their hearts cried out to the Lord, wall of the daughter of Zion. Let your tears flow like a stream day and night! Do not let yourself cease! Do not stop up your eyes! Get up! Cry out in the night at the top of each watch. Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord! (Eikha 2:18–19)
>
> Streams of water flow from my eye over the brokenness of the daughter of my nation. My eye flows and does not stop, refusing to cease. (Eikha 3:47–48)

Several biblical narratives associated with Jeremiah lend support to his authorship of Eikha. In II Chronicles 35:25, Jeremiah composes (or chants) lamentations on the occasion of Josiah's death, which are then inscribed in a "*sefer hakinot,*" or book of lamentations. Some biblical interpreters adduce this verse as support for Jeremiah's authorship of

---

[7] Some notable examples include the phrases "*betulat bat Zion*" and "*megurai misaviv.*" Language strongly evocative of Eikha appears in Jeremiah 13:17, 22, 26; 14:17; 15:17; 20:7; 48:43. This partial list proffers some striking examples. For more on this, see G. H. Cohn, *Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016), 217–29, and his references on p. 223, footnote 5.

Eikha, maintaining that some of these lamentations appear in Eikha, especially in chapter 4.[8] At the very least, this verse establishes Jeremiah's inclination and ability to compose lamentations.

In another biblical episode associated with Jeremiah's authorship of Eikha, he sends a scroll to the sinful Judean king, Jehoakim (Jer. 36). The scroll (referred to as "*megillat sefer*") contains "all of the words that [God] said to [Jeremiah] regarding Israel, Judah, and all the nations from the day that [God] spoke to [Jeremiah], from the days of Josiah until today" (Jer. 36:2). Intended to galvanize the nation to repent, the scroll describes the catastrophic punishment that God plans to dispense (Jer. 36:3). Moreover, it testifies to the imminent arrival of the Babylonian king and the impending destruction of the land (Jer. 36:29).

This scroll frightens the king's officers (Jer. 36:16), but the king himself remains impassive (Jer. 36:24). Jehoakim feeds Jeremiah's scroll into the fireplace, a brash display of the king's disdain for prophetic counsel (Jer. 36:22–23). Following this episode, God instructs Jeremiah to rewrite the destroyed scroll, which Jeremiah does, supplementing it with new details (Jer. 36:32).

Some rabbinic sources identify the burnt scroll as the book of Eikha.[9] Ibn Ezra (in the introduction to his commentary on Eikha) disagrees, noting that Eikha contains none of Jeremiah's prophecies of doom and mentions neither specific events nor people from Jehoakim's time. Still, for some sources, the incident with the scroll lends credence to the idea that Jeremiah wrote Eikha.

Some modern scholars assert that Jeremiah did not write this book. They provide a variety of reasons, one of which is that Eikha does not name

---

[8] See Eikha Rabba 4:1; Rashi, Eikha 4:1. In particular, Eikha 4:20 may allude to Josiah's death (see *Targum* on Eikha 1:18 and 4:20).

[9] See *Midrash Tanḥuma, Parashat Shemini* 9; *Moed Katan* 26a; Rashi, Jeremiah 36:23, 32; Rashi, Eikha 1:1; Rashbam, Introduction to Eikha. There is some debate as to which parts of Eikha the king burned and what exactly Jeremiah added later (in accordance with Jer. 36:32). Rashi (Eikha 1:1; Jer. 36:32) maintains that chapters 1, 2, and 4 were written at God's initial command (Jer. 36:1), while chapter 3 was added later. A midrash (Eikha Rabba *Petiḥta* 28) discusses the issue, suggesting that only chapter 1 was in the original scroll. See also Radak, Jeremiah 36:30, who cites the debate.

Jeremiah, a known figure in Jerusalem.[10] However, this does not establish that Jeremiah is not the author; it only indicates that the author chose to remain anonymous. There could be a very good reason for Jeremiah to write Eikha without attaching his name. After all, he was a well-known prophet of rebuke. Coming from Jeremiah, the book would sound like a reprimand; worse, it could appear to be a justification of his prophetic exhortations. As we will see, this book is neither reproof nor vindication of prophetic reliability. Its tone is not that of an irate or pacified prophet, but rather of an anguished witness, a suffering member of a downtrodden nation.

In any case, Eikha deliberately obscures the identity of its author, deeming him non-essential and perhaps distracting. Moreover, the absence of an author is a statement in its own right. Anonymity enables the author to identify with his subject and share in the nation's grief. This intimacy would be difficult to achieve if the book attributed authorship to a renowned castigator. By choosing not to name its author, the book remains the story of Everyman, a human tale of catastrophe that blurs any distinction among individuals.

---

[10] Some scholars maintain that there are theological and ideological differences between the books. Among several examples, S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, reprinted 1914), 463, doubts that the author of Jeremiah would state that prophetic vision has ceased (Eikha 2:10) or would promote a favorable view of King Zedekiah (whom Driver assumes is the subject of Eikha 4:20). R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations* (New York: Ktav, reprinted 1974), 125, observes that Jeremiah's negative view of Israel's behavior in the Temple (which he describes as a den of thieves in Jer. 7:10) does not match the obvious regard for the Temple in the book of Eikha (e.g., 2:1, 6). D. R. Hillers, *Lamentations* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), xxi–xxii, opines that some of the first-person content of the book contradicts Jeremiah's own prophecies (as an example, he cites Eikha 4:17 and Jer. 2:18). Hillers further argues (p. xxii) that Eikha suggests an author "more closely identified with the common hopes and fears of the people than it was possible for Jeremiah to be."

Many of these arguments are dependent upon interpretation of the text. Moreover, these arguments tend to adopt a rather one-dimensional view of the prophet; they assume that Jeremiah could not hold more than one opinion or approach in his lifetime, notwithstanding changing circumstances. This type of evidence is at best inconclusive, and at worst unconvincing; it offers a poor assessment of the diversity of human character and the complexity of the positions people can hold. Furthermore, these arguments are compelling only if we assume that Jeremiah wrote this book from a personal, rather than a national (or religious-prophetic) perspective. In fact, Eikha and Jeremiah have very different aims, such that even if they have the same author, one expects to find different viewpoints in each.

While the question of authorship will not impact this book greatly, I will pay attention to the way Eikha intersects with the two additional books that *Ḥazal* attribute to Jeremiah in Bava Batra 15a, namely Kings and Jeremiah. According to rabbinic tradition, Jeremiah wrote three books, each of which expresses a different viewpoint on the catastrophic exile and destruction. The book of Kings provides the history of Jerusalem's fall and the book of Jeremiah the theological perspective, while Eikha supplies the emotional response.

We will not limit ourselves to understanding the book only within the context of Jeremiah's authorship. I intend to examine this book at face value – as the work of an anonymous representative of the nation. I will also search for interactions between Eikha and books not ascribed to Jeremiah. Indeed, we will see that several biblical books maintain strong linguistic connections with Eikha. The intersection between Eikha and the prophecies of consolation in Isaiah will prove to be especially rewarding, and I have devoted a separate chapter to this topic.

COHESION OF THE BOOK

Does the book of Eikha have a consistent narrative flow and progression, or is it an anthology of five independent laments? Some scholars assert that there is an absence of logical development in the book, and they therefore attempt to establish that the chapters are made up of distinct poems.[11] The absence of a plot that moves forward or characters that develop makes it difficult to establish that Eikha has a conscious or cohesive construction. Nevertheless, some scholars adduce the unity of form (such as alphabetic construction), thematic and verbal correspondences, and the lyric style as evidence of narrative cohesiveness.[12] Others have noted the way in which the book as a whole progresses and weaves together themes, ideas, and theological considerations.[13]

---

[11] For example, A. Berlin, *Lamentations* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6, maintains that Eikha originally consisted of five separate poems. Gordis, 117, supports this view with the claim that each chapter sustains a different literary genre. (Since many of the studies cited in this book are best abbreviated as *Lamentations*, henceforth they will be cited by author name alone, e.g., Gordis, 117.)

It seems evident that each chapter constitutes its own singular poetic composition. After all, each chapter (aside from the last) has its own complete acrostic form. For this reason, I will examine each chapter as a distinctive unit. At the conclusion of each chapter, I will summarize its themes, tone, structure, and trajectory. Nevertheless, I will also strongly advocate a reading of the book of Eikha as a unified construct, rather than as an anthology of separate lamentations. Only by viewing Eikha as a unified book can we discern the way it subtly, but magnificently, weaves its themes into a meaningful poetic arrangement. I will illustrate this in the final chapter of this book, where I seek to extract the book's theological approach from its structure.

DATE OF COMPOSITION

Although Eikha offers no specific date of composition, it presents itself as an eyewitness account of the events of 586 BCE. The book intertwines the siege, destruction, and exile of Jerusalem along with the nation's emotional and theological response. Many modern scholars accept the book's date at face value,[14] while some adduce linguistic evidence to support a date close to the destruction.[15] The book's lack of hope in the future and the rawness of the suffering may suggest the author's proximity to the events. Nevertheless, as Berlin points out, a skilled author would have little trouble conjuring up the depth of feeling for these events, even if he lived long after.[16]

---

[12] See, for example, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 5, 23; D. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry* (SBL Monograph Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 83–104.

[13] Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot HaEmuna HaYisraelit*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), 584–90, sees a poetic unity in the five chapters of the book. See also Grossberg, *Centripetal*, 95; J. Middlemas, "The Violent Storm in Lamentations," *JSOT* 29 (2004), 12.

[14] See Hillers, xviii-xix; Dobbs-Allsopp, 4–5; J. Renkema, *Lamentations: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. B. Doyle (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 54; Berlin, 33. Gordis, 126, accepts this dating with regard to chapters 2 and 4, which graphically describe Jerusalem's fall. For a brief overview of the range of dates that scholars have proposed, see I. Provan, *Lamentations* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 10–11.

[15] See Dobbs-Allsopp, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Lamentations," *Journal of the Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 26 (1998), 8–9. Provan, 12.

As I have noted, some rabbinic sources regard the composition of parts of Eikha as a response to several events that took place quite a bit earlier than Jerusalem's fall in 586 BCE (such as Josiah's death in 609 BCE). In my view, the question of when exactly the book was written remains less important than its ongoing relevance. The events leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE constitute Eikha's historical context. Nevertheless, interpretive tradition does not limit Eikha's significance to its historical context. Instead, Eikha functions as a paradigm of national catastrophe; it is a blueprint for contending with suffering and all manner of analogous human experience. Rabbinic commentary tends to interpret Eikha in relation to its own contemporary national tragedies (including, but not limited to, the destruction of the Second Temple).[17] Thus, Eikha conveys a meaning that stretches beyond the events of 586 BCE. Rabbinic interpretation transforms Eikha into a book that transcends its calamitous era, enabling this catastrophe to offer meaning to other periods in Jewish history.

The answers to the questions raised in this chapter (title, authorship, cohesion, and date) remain inconclusive. I have attempted to offer the reasons for my approach to each of these issues. In the upcoming introductory chapters, I will examine the book's historical background, its theology, and its poetic features.

---

[16] Berlin, 33.

[17] I will examine this further in the chapter "Eikha Rabba: Filling Eikha's Void."