

## International Day of Study

### *Lamentations: Introduction for Leader*

The book of *Lamentations* (in Hebrew, *Eikhab* because three of its five chapters start with this word) was written after 586 BCE, following the destruction of Jerusalem and the first Temple by the Babylonians.

Traditionally it was thought that the prophet Jeremiah wrote the book of *Lamentations* because the Bible says that he recited laments. However, his laments were at the death of King Josiah 20 years before the destruction and *Eikhab* probably was written between 15 and 50 years after the destruction.

The title means “why” or “how!”—bitterly and despairingly questioning how such a catastrophe could have happened.

Four of the book’s chapters are acrostic poems, the first letters of each verse follow the alphabet. The middle chapter is a triple acrostic: each letter starts three verses in a row. Why does this book have an alphabetical structure?

- Maybe to symbolize the extent of suffering endured by Jerusalem (by going from *aleph* to *taf*).
- Perhaps alphabetical poems are easier to memorize.
- Maybe to highlight the poet’s skill.
- Or perhaps the alphabet provided a comforting structure for survivors to reduce the sense of chaos and uncertainty that pervaded their disrupted lives.

#### **Resources:**

Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*

Todd Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*

Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and The Tears of the World*

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## LEADER'S GUIDE

**Discussion question:** *Think of a time when you needed comforting. Who comforted you? What did you find comforting? Whom have you comforted? What does it mean to give comfort?*

### Lamentations Chapters 1 and 2

**Leader:** *The first two chapters of the book present two speakers: the narrator and the personified city of Jerusalem (Zion). Since the city of Jerusalem does not speak again in the book, these two chapters can be seen as a unit and we will study just them. To begin, we are going to read the first chapter of Eikhab out loud.*

**Note to leader:** Have two readers share the reading. See the handout where the narrator's words are in plain font and Jerusalem's words are in **bold**. In the first chapter, the narrator does most of the speaking in the first half, but we hear Zion speaking to God as if a camera's focus shifts briefly from the narrator to her. In the second half of the chapter, she does all the talking except for one verse in which the narrator interjects an aside to us, the audience.

### Chapter 1, verses 1-11

**Leader:** *What does the narrator see and how does the current condition of the city compare to her past state?*

Possible answers include:

- A city emptied of her once great throngs of people (1:1) now exiled (1:3, 5)
- Pilgrims no longer enter through her gates to rejoice on festivals (1:4)
- There is forced labor (1:1)
- Famine prevails (1:11)
- Other nations mock and despise Zion, once a respected ally (1:1-2, 7-8)
- The city's splendor is now gone (1:6 either her riches or her leaders, and she is worthless (1:8), covered with impurity (1:9), and fallen in stature (1:9)
- Great sadness (1:2, 4) and oppression (1:3, 7, 9) exist throughout the capital and the previously sovereign region (Judah)
- The Temple has been invaded by enemies and its treasures stolen (1:10)

**Leader:** *What are some of the varied metaphors the narrator uses to describe the city and her condition?*

Possible answers include:

- Powerless widow with neither husband nor friends to protect her (1:1)
- Mother with neither infant nor children/population, now in exile (1:5)

- Princess among nations (1:1) but now her princes/court have fled like hunted stags (1:6)
- Respected in her former splendid status (1:6-7), she had the power to choose and she chose wrong and is now a worthless, impure whore (1:8-9) who groans in self-disgust (1:8)
- Powerless victim of rape (1:10)

**Leader:** *How might you explain the use of these discordant metaphors together?*

Possible answers [for these divergent metaphors] include:

1. No one metaphor is adequate.
  - The narrator explains the change in the city took place because she was an unfaithful wife to her husband, God, and so she sits alone and in grief (like a widow).
  - As the narrator blames Jerusalem for her condition, he switches images portraying her as a whore (1:8-9) who had sought the company of other friends (1:2 allies or idols).
  - Her husband punished her (1:5) for her transgressions of infidelity (1:9 “uncleanness of skirts” evokes whoring) with a measure-for-measure punishment of molestation (1:10 foes pillage her treasures) and rape (1:10 nations entered her Temple).
2. As the narrator gathers information, his viewpoint changes.
  - Perhaps the narrator starts with the metaphor of a widow because at first he sees her from a distance: a widow may be a non-judgmental image conveying mourning, loneliness, and vulnerability.
  - However, as the narrator comes closer he realizes she is not a widow, but she has been abandoned by her husband, betrayed by her friends and bereft of her children.
  - On further inspection, the narrator concludes she acted the whore. The metaphors change as the narrator gathers information and formulates opinions.

**Leader:** *Does the narrator express emotions?*

1. Maybe
  - His first word “how” may express astonishment at what he sees; his imagery evokes loneliness and pity, but...
2. No
  - He begins by giving a mostly descriptive report then he turns to judgments rather than sympathy

- He even appears sympathetic to God who may have had justification for punishing his unfaithful wife
- He does not talk to her
- He does not talk about the effect of the scenes of suffering on him

**Leader:** *The only thing she says in part 1 is: “God, look at me” (1:9c, 11c). Why do you think she wants God to look at her?*

Possible answers:

- She wants God to notice her and see the misery God caused her
- She wants God to feel her loneliness, to comfort and help her
- She wants to revive their past relationship

### Chapter 1, verses 11-22

**Leader:** *In the second half of the first chapter, verses 12-22, Jerusalem describes how God violently waged war against her. Identify the war metaphors in her account.*

- God sent fire to burn the city (1:13)
- God used a net to trap warriors (1:13)
- God, the victor, placed a yoke on her, the defeated (1:14)
- God trampled her men as if they were grapes with juice flowing (1:15)

**Leader:** *The narrator interrupts Jerusalem in verse 17 to tell us that she “spread out her hands,” in effect begging for someone to comfort her. There is poignancy in her words because earlier in verse 10 the narrator had used the same Hebrew words to describe the enemy “spreading out his hand” to touch her precious things, molesting her and stealing her treasures.*

**Leader:** *In this half of the chapter, in what other ways is her isolation conveyed?*

Possible answers:

- She asks passersby and all people to look at her (1:12, 18)
- Her isolation is magnified by her pain, unmatched by others (1:12)
- She is like a *niddah* (1:17 menstruating woman), ritually impure and her lover may not approach her (see Leviticus 18:19)
- She is alone with no one to comfort her (1:16, 17, 21)
- Her allies have turned on her (1:19)
- Her priests and elders have died of famine (1:19)
- Her foes exult on hearing her complaints (1:21)

- Although she agrees with the narrator that God was right to punish her, she objects to the unfair punishment; all the nations have sinned but she alone of the nations was singled out for punishment, adding to her sense of isolation
- She concludes by asking God to punish them, too (1:22)

### Introduction to Chapter 2

Modern scholars sometimes use a literary approach comparing this book to the modern genre of “survivor literature.” From analysis of survivor literature (see Todd Linafelt), we learn that survivors of war and war-time atrocities may share certain goals in their writings, including:

- To provide a record of events that the world will not forget (the narrator in chapter 1 begins with a description recording the condition of the war-torn city)
- To honor publicly the dead (notice the details given: priests, elders, children, and royalty are all dead or in exile, often equated with death)
- To present pain and suffering without offering apology (notice the narrator in the first chapter *did* make excuses for the city’s suffering)
- To express dreams of revenge (in 1:21-22 she asks God to punish the enemy nations who carried out the attacks, boasted, and mocked her)
- To persuade readers to abandon neutrality and adopt the concerns of the survivor (the narrator did not sympathize with her in chapter 1)

### Chapter 2

**Note to Leader:** As you read chapter 2, which is almost entirely the words of the narrator, notice that the narrator transitions from being a judgmental observer of what has happened to Zion to one who suffers with her. Listen for signs of his transition and consider how the narrator seems to have been persuaded by her speech in the second half of chapter 1.

**Leader:** *One commentator defines the act of comforting as “assuming the state of mourning alongside the mourner.” What evidence can you find in chapter 2 that suggests the narrator has tried to take on the role of comforter?*

- The narrator changes from focusing on Zion’s current condition to detailing the war atrocities God perpetrated against her.
- The narrator’s description of God’s actions against the city echoes Zion’s earlier description of God attacking her.

Some of the echoes include:

- In chapter 1, Zion briefly describes God waging war against her (1:13-15) but in chapter 2, the narrator presents a lengthy description of all God’s hostile actions: destroyed, brought down, chopped off, burned, bent his bow, killed, consumed (2:1-8), etc.

●The narrator may have seemed emotionally detached and judgmental in the first chapter, but now he shares her physical and emotional state:

- her eyes wept (1:16) and his eyes are worn out from tears (2:11)
- her bowels churn (1:20) and his bowels churn (2:11)
- her children are now his people (2:11).

●She had said that no one has suffered like she has (1:12) and now he shares her assessment saying that he cannot compare her to anything because her pain is unimaginably great, like the sea is without bounds (2:13).

●He didn't talk to her in the first chapter, but now the narrator talks directly to Jerusalem (2:13-19), encouraging and empowering her to cry out in protest (2:18-19).

**Leader:** *Her speech in chapter 1 caused the narrator to abandon his apologetic explanations for why she deserved her fate and to see things from her viewpoint. How did his speech in chapter 2 affect her?*

●After he encourages her to cry out, she calls out to God accusing God of mercilessly cruel behavior (2:21).

●She has been empowered to blame God for allowing His anger to be out of control (2:21-22).

●She no longer castigates herself about her own wrong-doing as in chapter 1, but emphasizes her caring, loving, protective nature (2:22) in stark contrast to God's cruel nature.

●The dialogue of chapter 1 is evenly divided as she offsets the narrator's descriptions and conclusions with her own account of what transpired. But in chapter 2, the narrator does most of the talking, perhaps because he has adopted her concerns and she is no longer her own sole advocate.

●Chapter 1 begins with her sobbing alone at night, presumably no one was there to hear her; now she cries aloud to God in angry protest. Although God never answers her, she has been encouraged to express her pain without denial and without private, lonely self-recriminating sobbing in the night.

●Steps have been taken to find hope and comfort.

## Projects and Study Topics

1. Collect toiletries for a women's shelter.
2. Compare the narrator's description of the city in the opening of chapter 1 to the description of Israel's situation in Egypt before the Exodus (The book of Exodus chapters 1 and 2). Notice the parallels in language including: forced labor (Lam.1:2) and taskmasters (Ex 1:11); misery (Lam. 1:3, 7, 9), servitude (Lam. 1:3), oppression (Ex. 1:11-14), labor (Ex. 1:11-14), and narrow straits (Lam. 1:3); priests groan (Lam. 1:4), and the Israelites groan (Ex. 2:23); life is bitter (Lam. 1:4) and life was made bitter in Egypt (Ex. 1:14); Jerusalem remembers the past (Lam. 1:7) and God forgets (Lam. 2:6) but in the Exodus story God remembers (Ex. 2:24).

Especially compare Ex 2:23-25 in which the Israelites groan about their bitter bondage and God hears their cries, remembers the covenant and looks upon them. How does this text affect your understanding of her crying out to God at the end of chapter two and of God not answering?

3. What themes of Zion's pain as a survivor might we also hear in African-Americans' experiences as survivors of slavery and ongoing racial prejudice? Hold an inter-faith and inter-racial day of storytelling and share each other's survival stories.
4. Chaplains find that people are comforted by being able to tell their stories to a non-judgmental listener who pays full attention to them and acknowledges their suffering by echoing their words back to them. Were you ever such a comforter? Set up a *bikkur cholim* committee that will visit your local hospital weekly and offer comfort to patients.

