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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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**Shiur #33: Eikha: Chapter 3**

**Introduction: The Suffering of the Individual**

The structural center of the book, the uniqueness of chapter 3 is immediately discernable. Its unusual triple acrostic sets it apart from the other chapters in the book.[[1]](#footnote-1) The chapter therefore has 66 verses, as opposed to the 22 verses of the other four chapters.[[2]](#footnote-2) While this technical difference draws our attention, other distinctive elements of the chapter are substantive. The absence of the word “*eikha*” at its opening indicates that this chapter is not composed as a lament. More significantly, a unique first person voice launches the chapter; the speaker introduces himself as a *gever*, a lone individual.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The anonymous *gever* stands at the helm of this central chapter.[[4]](#footnote-4) His personal account enables the reader to focus on the experience of a suffering individual, allowing us to accompany him as he grapples with God’s afflictions – physical, emotional, and religious. By focusing on the wretched, unnamed individual, the chapter obtains meaning for every individual who experiences adversity, who can regard this *gever’s* journey as his own. The chapter subtly offer guidelines for the distressed individual, escorting and instructing him as he navigates these difficult events in the hope that it will steer him toward religious growth.

The connection between this chapter and the others initially seems to be weak. In a book concerned with national calamity, the central chapter focuses upon the calamity of an individual, offering a portrait of how one human being contends with God within the brutal and absurd misery of human suffering. Nevertheless, we will see how this chapter fits into the broader framework of the book, both linguistically and thematically, offering guidelines for the individuals experiencing suffering within the nation.

The *gever’s* experience can rightly be termed a journey, inasmuch as he progresses in a linear fashion (albeit with some twists) during the course of the chapter. The linear progression marks this chapter’s distinctness as surely as the technical differences noted above. Constructed in a chiastic fashion, the previous two chapters maintain a cyclical form that conveys the hopelessness of the ceaseless suffering. This chapter, in contrast, moves from despair to contemplation to hope, in a steady progression forward. The *gever* at the beginning of the chapter is not the same as the *gever* at its conclusion, in spite of the depiction of unchanged external circumstances.

This chapter maintains significant thematic differences, in comparison to the other chapters of the book. It omits the major themes of the previous chapters, including the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the suffering, starvation, and exile of the Judean inhabitants. There are no priests, kings, or leaders, no maidens or young men, no vulnerable, dying children, and no hint of a national tragedy. In fact, very little connects this chapter to the events of 586 BCE.[[5]](#footnote-5) Concerned with piety and theological reflection, this chapter develops several essential topics that are missing from the rest of the book. Uniquely in this book, chapter 3 considers the nature of God and His interactions with humans. It also discusses the lessons that one may draw from suffering and several erroneous conclusions that one should scrupulously avoid. Prayer, repentance, and communal responsibility obtain resonance in this chapter. And in the middle section of the chapter, at the core of this bleak book, the suffering individual seeks and finds hope in God, drawing on his deep inner resources to emerge strengthened and invigorated, despite the grim reality that prevails around him.

**Structure and Form**

Scholars suggest different ways to divide the chapter.[[6]](#footnote-6) I posit a broad threefold division that reflects the general progression of the chapter:

**Section 1**: Verses 1-18: A sustained first person, singular account of personal suffering.

**Section 2**: Verses 21-39: Theological reflections that follow suffering.

**Section 3**: Verses 40-66: A return to the first person account of suffering.

Without doubt, these general sections subdivide further, as we will see when we examine them in greater depth. Section 3, for example, opens with a first person plural voice that calls on the community to repent, confess, and pray (verses 40-42), followed by a detailed description of their collective communal suffering (verses 43-46). Only afterward does the individual voice reemerge to conclude the chapter (47-66). This shift in speakers indicates that the third section is not monochromatic or unvarying; the section itself progresses in a manner that necessitates further subdivision.

I have opted to open with a schematic threefold division in order to draw attention to several significant ideas. First, the central axis around which this chapter (and therefore the entire book) revolves is the theological reflection. Sections 1 and 3 frame the contemplative center with the story of the suffering man. Moreover, a close examination reveals that sections 1 and 3 are distinctly different one from the other due to the theological reflection that has taken place in the interim. Following profound contemplation of God’s ways and having internalized the lessons that he draws from his examination, the sufferer becomes a member of a broader community, using his personal experience to benefit the community at large. His perspective shifts, he begins to reacquire hope and faith, and he petitions God – no longer viewing God as an opponent, but rather as a support upon whom he can depend.

I do not mean to claim that this chapter reverses the overriding grief-stricken timbre of *Eikha*, transforming despair to hope. In fact, chapter 4 once again plunges the reader deep into despondency. The book does not attempt to mask its grisly reality with a superficial veneer of false optimism. Nevertheless, at the core of this book, hope endures, along with a profound realization that theological reflection can transform human suffering into a meaningful part of one’s human experience and relationship with God.

Uniquely positioned as a chapter that has no counterpart, this chapter’s placement as the central axis of the book underscores its ideological, literary, and theological significance. Chapter 3 is the high point of the book and its lynchpin. All events revolve around the contemplative center, mirroring the contemplative center that lies at the core of every human being and represents the secret of human resilience. At the heart of human experience lies conviction, courage, and confidence in God. *Eikha* is not a merely a book that describes human suffering, but rather one that allows humans to find a deep strain of tranquility in spite of the storm that roils around human existence. The theology of *Eikha* ultimately rests upon faith in human beings and their ability to sustain faith in God. More than anything else, this chapter suggests that at the core of human existence lies a kernel of faith, one that humans draw upon from the deep inner recesses of their soul. Humans draw strength from this center, and conversely, the center draws them magnetically toward the centripetal pull of theological reflection.

**Technical Note to the Commentary on Chapter 3**

For the first part of the chapter (verses 1-18), I have divided my commentary into units based on the alphabetic division. I have done so primarily for technical reasons, so that I can discuss this lengthy section in manageable parts. I do not mean to suggest that these three-verse alphabetic segments are in any way independent units in their own right.[[7]](#footnote-7) As we examine the themes in the chapter, I will frequently note the way in which ideas flow as a continuum from one alphabetic unit to the next.  For the remainder of the chapter (verses 19-66), I will divide the section thematically, exploring subunits rather than alphabetic units.

1. The only other biblical composition that has this sort of multiple alphabetic design is psalm 119, which has an eightfold acrostic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Substantively, this chapter is no longer than the previous chapters. Each verse of chapter 3 contains only one sentence, while verses in both chapters 1 and 2 usually contain three. In terms of word count, chapter 3 is nearly identical in length to chapters 1 and 2 (all three of these chapters have between 330 and 350 words). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While both chapters 1 and 2 contain first person accounts, the individual speaker seems to represent a collective “I” of Jerusalem, rather than a lone individual. While some scholars regard the *gever* of chapter 3 similarly, as a collective “I” (see the review of scholarship that holds this position in Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 62), in my view, this reading is less plausible within the context of the chapter. Support for my view can be found in Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 3:1, and Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 64. (Hillers also refers to others scholars who maintain this position). We will develop this idea as we progress in our study of the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As we will see, the individual first person account gives way to the plural first person later in the chapter. Nevertheless, the dominant figure in the chapter remains the individual, whose voice will reassert itself as the chapter moves toward its conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although one could suggest that this chapter was not written specifically about the events of the *churban*, it still maintains linguistic and thematic connections to the book as a whole. We will note the way in which this chapter coheres with the overall schema of the book. In my opinion (as I will try to illustrate throughout our examination of the chapter), this chapter represents the core of the book and its theological centerpiece. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Unlike previous chapters, the change in speaker does not suffice to indicate the structure of the chapter (although it does offer some indication). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. D. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 88, suggests that the book weaves a verbal root within the three lines of each alphabetic segment, unifying it into a stanza. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)