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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #35: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

**Eikha 3:1-3**

אֲנִ֤י הַגֶּ֙בֶר֙ רָאָ֣ה עֳנִ֔י

בְּשֵׁ֖בֶט עֶבְרָתֽוֹ

אוֹתִ֥י נָהַ֛ג וַיֹּלַ֖ךְ

חֹ֥שֶׁךְ וְלֹא־אֽוֹר

אַ֣ךְ בִּ֥י יָשֻׁ֛ב

יַהֲפֹ֥ךְ יָד֖וֹ כָּל־הַיּֽוֹם

**I am the man who has seen affliction**

**by the rod of His anger**

**Me, He has led, and He walked me**

**In darkness and not light**

**Against me He has returned**

**His hand turns**[[1]](#footnote-1) **all day**

The *gever* opens his tale of woe by focusing the reader’s attention upon himself, using the word *ani*, I.[[2]](#footnote-2) This word directs our attention to the central figure of this chapter, the individual. Completely absorbed by his own misery, the *gever* repeatedly employs self-referential words at the inception of the chapter, such as *oti* (which opens verse 2) and *bi* (the second word of verse 3). Rashi observes the *gever’s* self-absorption, suggesting that this individual regards himself as the singular recipient of God’s attention:

**Against me He has returned.** I alone am struck continuously, for all of the cycles of His blows are upon me. (Rashi, *Eikha* 3:1)

Rashi’s reading of the *gever’s* narcissistic attitude may naturally evoke the reader’s criticism; it seems unduly self-centered to focus on one’s unparalleled suffering in a book that dwells at length on the collective suffering of the nation. Perhaps for this reason, R. Yosef Kara reads the *gever’s* complaint as a communal one, relating to the fate of the nation:

**Against me He has returned, His hand turns all day.** All of the nations sin, but you have no nation in the world that God punishes her for sin, except Israel. (R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 3:1)

While R’ Kara’s interpretation alleviates the self-centeredness of the *gever’s* statement, it does not cohere well with the context of the chapter. The *gever* tells a story of personal (not national) adversity; in his tale, he remains fixated upon himself.

**The Identity of the *Gever*: Jerusalem, Jeremiah, or Everyman?**

Who is this *gever*, who recounts his travails with such pathos? Biblical interpreters have suggested several possibilities to identify this central figure of the book. Some suggest that the *gever* represents the nation, the collective “I” (perhaps even the voice of Jerusalem, as we encountered in the first person speaker of both chapters 1 and 2),[[3]](#footnote-3) while others point to a specific historical figure, generally identified as Jeremiah.[[4]](#footnote-4) Some regard the *gever* as an anonymous individual, who could be anyone (Everyman), a sufferer who seeks to extract meaning that could impact others from his personal experience.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Jeremiah, the *Gever***

Rashi maintains that Jeremiah is the *gever* in this chapter, in which he recollects the numerous difficulties and challenges of his prophetic career, as recorded in the book of *Jeremiah*:

**I am the man who has seen affliction.** Jeremiah was bemoaning and saying: I am the man who has seen affliction, who has seen more misfortune than any of the prophets who prophesied about the destruction of the Temple. For in their days the Temple was not destroyed; in my days, it was. (Rashi, *Eikha* 3:1)

Linguistic and thematic parallels between the *gever’s* account and Jeremiah’s personal story support Rashi’s contention. Note, for example, the *gever’s* self-depiction of his alienation from his people:

I was a laughingstock for my nation, their plaything all the day. (*Eikha* 3:14)

In one of Jeremiah’s most evocative laments over his role as prophet, he similarly bemoans his isolation and the misery of his prophetic mantle:

I was a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. (*Jeremiah* 20:7)

Echoes of Jeremiah’s misfortunes arise in the *gever’s* account of his imprisonment in a pit (3:52, 55; see *Jeremiah* 38:6), as well as the beatings he suffered (3:30; see *Jeremiah* 20:2; 37:15).

In identifying the *gever* as Jeremiah, Rashi applies the tradition of Jeremiah’s authorship of *Eikha* to the first person account of chapter 3.[[6]](#footnote-6) It seems logical to assume that the personal account in a book belongs to the personal life of its author, who introduces his own life experiences as they seem relevant.

Nevertheless, the chapter does not indicate anywhere that the *gever* is Jeremiah. More significantly, it is not clear why Jeremiah’s individual story should be relevant to the book of *Eikha*. The prophet stands above the people, outside of them, judging and chastising them; his personal account seems to harbor little similarity to the experience of the common person. Moreover, Jeremiah's suffering takes place at the hands of his Israelite compatriots and not the Babylonian enemy. Are the Israelites the *gever’s* cruel antagonists? And if Jeremiah’s troubles stem from the tensions with his constituents, then the lessons that he draws from his troubles have little resonance for those who cause his misfortune. Why should Jeremiah's personal hardships appear in a book about national calamity and its theological application? How does this cohere with the general tone and message of the book?

**The *Gever* as Everyman**

After raising the possibility that Jeremiah composes this chapter about his life, Ibn Ezra offers an intriguing second suggestion. Perhaps this chapter is written from the perspective of “every person from Israel,” namely, Everyman.[[7]](#footnote-7) Instead of focusing on a specific individual, the chapter spotlights a figure whose experience of suffering is universal and prototypical. The chapter employs figurative language of suffering (as found also in *Iyov* and *Tehillim*) to describe a general experience, designed to apply to all sufferers.

Everyman is also No-one, inasmuch as the details of the account may not apply in a precise sense to any one individual. Indeed, this chapter is about human suffering in general, rather than the specific events of 586 BCE. The national calamity fades in the background, as this chapter allows the reader a recess from the catastrophe of gargantuan proportions and instead encounter one lone individual, whose excruciating suffering typifies many individuals. In tracing the journey of an individual, the chapter encourages the reader to empathize with the sufferer and identify with his pain.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This approach has several additional advantages. If one individual reflects every person, then it underscores the mass suffering that is common to everyone at this time, allowing individuals to discover a shared communal experience. This fosters a sense of community among the sufferers. The *gever* arrives at this realization, as is evident by his shift to a collective plural voice when he addresses his fellow sufferer in verses 41-46. In these verses, the individual briefly merges with the community of sufferers, only to return to the individual once again. Sharing one’s pain with others does not simply alleviate the isolation of grief;[[9]](#footnote-9) it can also provide meaning to the experience. In sharing one’s experience with others, personal pain can become useful and beneficial to others.

Moreover, if all suffering follows a common trajectory, this chapter takes on a proscriptive quality, in which the *gever’s* experience becomes a guidebook that can instruct the suffering individual how to progress on his challenging journey. In this way, the chapter ensures that sufferers do not flounder and stall, paralyzed by despair. The individual’s journey from lonely agony to theological reflection to renewed hope functions as a blueprint for the suffering individual, regardless of the context or circumstances of his suffering. This chapter is both an integrated part of the book and rises above it, functioning as an independent chapter that can offer solace and guidance for any experience of human suffering.

**The Word *Gever***

Perhaps the word *gever* can offer a clue to the identity of the man in the chapter. *Gever* is certainly not the most common word used to refer to an adult male in the Bible. Synonyms for man include *ish* (the most common referent), *enosh*, and *adam*. Synonyms enrich a language mainly because they are not absolutely synonymous one with the other. If they were, languages would likely not develop these synonyms, because there would be little need for them. While often interchangeable within a sentence, synonymous words tend to retain subtle distinctive meanings that necessitate their particular usage.

Etymologically, the word *gever* relates to *gevura*, strength. Thus, the word *gever* may be used to refer to a man who wields his physical or military strength.[[10]](#footnote-10) The *gever* may refer to himself here as a *gever*, ironically or bitterly, to underscore his abuse and defeat, in spite of his ostensible physical might.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The *gever* may be a person who maintains particular spiritual strength,[[12]](#footnote-12) or inner strength, the heroic ability to overcome suffering:

Happy is the *gever* whom You make suffer, God, and You teach Him from Your instructions. (*Tehillim* 94:12)

It is fitting, therefore, that Iyov refers to himself as a *gever* at the opening of his discourse (*Iyov* 3:3). Indeed, the word *gever* appears with unusual frequency in *Iyov*, the book that contends most directly with human suffering.[[13]](#footnote-13) The use of the word *gever* corroborates Ibn Ezra’s suggestion that this chapter tells the story of Everyman – the stereotypical sufferer who serves as a model to instruct others how to cope with suffering.

**Who is the Perpetrator of the *Gever’s* Suffering?**

This chapter describes the ruthless brutality that the *gever* endures in sixteen excruciating verses. He is struck with a rod and led in darkness, swallowed and smashed, encircled with poison and burdened by iron fetters, ambushed and mangled, set up as a target and riddled with arrows. The administrator of these harsh afflictions remains anonymous; the *gever* employs a hidden third person to veil the identity of the perpetrator.

According to Rashi, God is the disciplinarian in these verses:

**By the rod of His anger.** Of the one who dominates and strikes – He is God. (Rashi, *Eikha* 3:1)[[14]](#footnote-14)

In this reading, the divine anger (*evrato*, verse 1), which burned so fiercely in the previous chapter (see the word *evrato* in 2:2), continues unabated in chapter 3.

Several words highlight the absence of God’s benevolence, indicating that He exchanges His previous acts of divine liberation with punitive ones. For example, the divine hand that was once wielded to deliver His people (*Shemot* 14:31; *Tehillim* 74:11) now strikes the *gever* mercilessly (verse 3).[[15]](#footnote-15) Consider also the *gever’s* opening statement that he has seen his own affliction (3:1). God frequently “sees” (and empathizes with) the afflictions of His people in the Bible (*Shemot* 3:7; *Tehillim* 31:8). The *gever’s* description in 3:1 implicitly points to the absence of God’s compassion; because God declines to “see” his afflictions, the *gever* must regard them on his own. God hovers ominously, if obliquely, in the backdrop of the chapter. Withdrawn kindnesses combine with God’s wrathful acts to produce a frightening depiction of divine antagonism to the hapless *gever*.

Despite the *gever’s* decision to exclude any direct mention of God, the *gever* feels God’s absence acutely. By refusing to name God, even though His implicit presence is so central to the narrative, the *gever* consciously diverts attention to himself, focusing the narrative on his suffering. More significantly, the *gever’s* unwillingness to name God indicates the extent of the alienation that prevails between them.

***Tehillim 23***

The rod of God’s anger (*shevet*) that conducts the *gever* through darkness recalls God’s rod (*shivtekha*) that comforts the individual in *Tehillim* 23:4. In that idyllic chapter, God shepherds the vulnerable individual as He would a sheep, ushering him to rest in green pastures and guiding him (*yenahaleini*) to walk along a tranquil watercourse (23:2). God safeguards his circuitous route, steering him justly on its pathways (23:3). “Even when” (*gam* *ki*) he finds himself in a valley of deep darkness, this person does not fear, for he knows that God is with him (23:4).

The initial description of the suffering individual in *Eikha* 3 reverses the idyllic portrait of *Tehillim* 23.[[16]](#footnote-16) God accompanies him on a difficult journey, but this time God drives him into darkness, leading him toward danger and persecution. Afflicting him with the rod (*shevet*) that once comforted (3:1), God deliberately thwarts and impedes the *gever*’s journey, building a stone fence to block him (3:9), twisting his pathway (3:9), and diverting his route (3:11). No one offers food, water, or restful pastures to the *gever* on his perilous perambulations, and God only offers him obstructions and opposition. “Even when” (*gam* *ki*) he calls out in his desperation, his prayer is blocked; no one answers or heeds his cries (3:8).

The description of an arduous journey in *Eikha* 3 evokes the exile following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.[[17]](#footnote-17) Even if the *gever* is describing a personal expedition and not his descent into exile, it is difficult to avoid this association in a chapter placed within this historical context. The reader notes that the miserable individual (the Everyman whose suffering is embedded within a book that recounts the exile from Jerusalem) also endures a grueling trek, fraught with dangers and lacking a clear destination.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Isaiah’s prophecy reverses this image, alongside his promises of the reversal of the period of exile and hardships stemming from the *churban* of 586 BCE.[[19]](#footnote-19) Promising the nation that they will reestablish their land and repossess their desolate inheritances, Isaiah also describes the journey homeward in language that simultaneously recalls *Tehillim* 23 and overturns *Eikha* 3:

Saying to the prisoners, “Exit!” To those who are in darkness, “Reveal yourselves!” They will pasture on the pathways, and on every high place will be their pastures. They will not be hungry and they will not be thirsty, and the heat and sun will not strike them, for the One who has compassion on them will conduct them (*yinahagam*), and he will guide them (*yenahaleim*) along springs of water. (*Isaiah* 49:9-10)

The biblical narrative maintains a continuum of events. Redemption and autonomy may be followed by exile and hardships. Nevertheless, that does not represent the conclusion of Israel’s journey. Just as surely as exile can follow redemption, it can be reversed. During Israel’s period of exile, a new redemption awaits, offering the promise of renewal and hope.

1. The phrase, *yahafokh* *yado*, seems to imply a repeated beating (see e.g. Targum, Ibn Ezra). The word *yahafokh* (to turn) also recalls the destruction of Sodom and Amorah, the Bible’s paradigmatic sinful cities, annihilated and overturned (*vayahafokh*) by God (*Bereishit* 19:25). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This opening word is particularly distinctive, given that chapters 1 and 2 open with the word *eikha*, and chapter 4 will again revert to that inaugural word. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction,* P. Akroyd, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965),pp. 502-503; Albrektson, *Studies in Text and Theology in the Book of Lamentations* (Lund: Gleerup, 1963), pp. 127-129; Gottwald, *Lamentations*, pp. 37-42. Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 171, critiques this approach, noting that it is difficult to reconcile alongside the references that seem to point to an individual in this chapter, particularly in the middle section, which contains reflections on the meaning of suffering (verses 27-29, 35-36). It is especially difficult to identify the *gever* with Jerusalem, given that biblical passages tend to refer to Jerusalem as a woman, while the figure in chapter 3 is male. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a list of the many scholars who conclude that Jeremiah is the speaker (along with a summary of the different positions that scholars hold on this subject), see House, *Lamentations*, pp. 405-406. The obvious weakness of this argument rests on the fact that the chapter does not name Jeremiah (or any known biblical individual) as its subject. An outlying opinion suggests that the figure is Jehoahin, although the evidence for this remains flimsy (see Norman Porteous, “Jerusalem: Zion, The Growth of a Symbol,” in *Verbannung und Geimkehr, Rudolph Festschrift*, W. Randolph, ed. [Tubingen: Mohr, 1961], pp. 244-245). Saebo, “Who is ‘the Man’ in Lamentations 3? A Fresh Approach to the Interpretation of the Book of Lamentations,” in *Understanding Poets and Prophets*, A. G. Auld, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 302-304, similarly suggests that the man is Zedekiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 122; Renkema, *Lamentations*, pp. 348-352; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 106-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We examined this topic at some length in our introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As noted above, this approach is adopted by many scholars. Even if Jeremiah writes this chapter about no one in particular, it is understandable that he would draw upon his personal experience when composing it, without intending to suggest that this chapter is his story. That could account for the correlations between Jeremiah's life and the suffering *gever*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Similarly, in commemorating the Holocaust, museums and memorial ceremonies often focus on the stories of individuals and families, rather than on the collective. This creates an experience of empathy and identification, more than the account of the collective, which can feel too vast and overwhelming to comprehend. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 3:14 alludes to the isolation that initially accompanies the sufferer in his overwhelming, lonely grief. Once the sufferer joins a community, his loneliness dissipates, relieving one aspect of his pain. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See e.g. *Shofetim* 5:30; *Joel* 2:8. See also the rabbinic interpretation of the term *keli* *gever* (*Devarim* 22:5) in *Nazir* 59a. The physical strength of the *gever* may also relate to his fertility (e.g. *Tehillim* 127:3-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The word *gever* recalls its verbal usage in *Eikha* 1:16, describing the enemy overpowering Jerusalem (*gavar* *oyev*). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Jeremiah* 17:5-7; *Tehillim* 40:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is corroborated by ANE literature (Akkadian wisdom literature), in which the anonymous sufferer is called a *gever*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Many translators and interpreters agree with Rashi’s approach. Some translators actually insert the word God or a capitalized “He” into the translation (e.g. NRSV, NJPS). I have committed a similar heavy-handed act of interpretation by capitalizing the He in my translation, thereby indicating God. Scholars who assume that God is the hidden enemy of this chapter include Westermann, *Lamentations*, pp. 170-172, and Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 109-111.

Some commentators do not regard God as the implied perpetrator. Ibn Ezra, for example, acknowledges but rejects this reading, preferring to identify the perpetrator of this chapter’s atrocities as the human adversary. See also O’ Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 47. As noted, I have adopted Rashi’s reading in my translation and commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is not to say that God employs His “hand” only to deliver His people. Many biblical passages describe God punishing His nation with His “hand” (e.g. *Isaiah* 5:25; *Jeremiah* 21:5; *Tehillim* 39:11). Nevertheless, the ideal usage of God’s “hand” appears in the story of the liberation from Egypt, in which Israel witnesses God’s “great hand” that liberates them from slavery. Any opposite use of God’s hand against Israel seems to be a terrible reversal of the desired state. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The word *nahag*, describing God leading the *gever* into darkness (3:2), is used similarly to describe the Assyrians leadings captives into exile in *Isaiah* 20:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Intriguingly, the Aramaic Targum reads *Tehillim* 23 as a description of Israel’s return from the exile in Egypt, recording the journey from exile to redemption. See also *Shemot* *Rabba* 25:7. Radak, *Tehilim* 23:1, suggests that this psalm may be written in order to be sung by the people as they return from exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah’s prophecies of comfort often endeavor to repair the catastrophe of 586 BCE, calling for the return of the nation from the Babylonian exile (48:20) and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the destroyed Judean cities (44:26). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)