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**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l**

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**לע"נ**

**ז"ל יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**Shiur #36: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

***Eikha* 3:4-6**

בִּלָּ֤ה בְשָׂרִי֙ וְעוֹרִ֔י

שִׁבַּ֖ר עַצְמוֹתָֽי

בָּנָ֥ה עָלַ֛י וַיַּקַּ֖ף

רֹ֥אשׁ וּתְלָאָֽה

בְּמַחֲשַׁכִּ֥ים הוֹשִׁיבַ֖נִי

כְּמֵתֵ֥י עוֹלָֽם

**He has worn away my flesh and my skin**

**He has broken my bones**

**He has built against me and encircled [me]**

**[with] poison and hardship**

**He has made me dwell in darkness**

**Like the eternal dead**

Daily beatings take their toll upon the *gever*, wearing away his flesh and skin and shattering his bones.[[1]](#footnote-1) Unable to move and surrounded on all sides by perils, the *gever* feels trapped and immobile; darkness closes in on him as though he is entombed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The *gever* flails in different directions, employing metaphors and figurative language in his bid to convey the breadth and depth of his afflictions. The expression *banah* *alai* evokes a siege (*II* *Kings* 25:1; *Devarim* 20:20),[[3]](#footnote-3) such that the *gever*’s physical afflictions align with the trials of a city. The physical deterioration of his body may also mirror the breakdown of a city, whose internal infrastructure is crushed (like his pulverized bones), and whose external barricades (like his flesh and skin) are peeled away and rendered dysfunctional.

The phrase *shibar* *atzmotai*, “he broke my bones,” clearly indicates that his tormentor inflicts excessive violence upon him. Yet it also may convey a slow demise by debilitating disease, as in the case of Hezekiah, who utilizes this phrase to describe the agonies of his illness (*Isaiah* 38:13).

Darkness can signify imprisonment in biblical passages (e.g. *Tehillim* 107:14), alongside the explicit metaphor of death (“like the eternal dead”).[[4]](#footnote-4) The peeling away of the *gever*’s flesh suggests the post-mortem rotting of his body (*Iyov* 13:28). The *gever*’s torments do not merely threaten him with imminent death, but actually simulate its horror. By employing language that conveys various types of hardships (siege, sickness, imprisonment, death), the *gever* expresses the range, depth, and intensity of his experience. Rich use of figurative language also allows the *gever*’s personal situation to be meaningful and applicable to a broad array of suffering individuals, each of whom can find an aspect of his own experience in the *gever*’s tale.

***Bila Besari Ve-Ori***

At this point in the chapter, the *gever* assumes no responsibility for his misfortunes. He portrays himself as a victim of God’s actions, without considering his own role. This absence is especially glaring when comparing his words to various other usages of similar phrases in *Tanakh*. For example, the words flesh and bones (*besari ve-atzmotai*), used to describe the ruin of his body, recalls a similar word-pair in *Tehillim* 38:4:

There is no perfection in my flesh(*bi-vesari*), because of Your anger; there is no wholeness in my bones (*ba-atzamay*), because of my sin.

Unlike the *gever* of our chapter, the individual of *Tehillim* 38 explicitly recognizes that his physical afflictions stem from his sin.

*Tehillim* 32:3 portrays a sinner, whose silence in lieu of confession caused him such pain that his “bones wore away” (*balu* *atzamai*). The *gever* describes his own pain using identical language (***bila*** *besari*… *shibar* ***atzmotai***). By comparing these expressions, we may conclude that the true source of the *gever*’s pain is not in fact that caused by his tormentor, but rather that which stems from his own resistance to acknowledging his sin. Indeed, *Tehillim* 32:5-6 strongly recommends confessing and admitting transgressions. Only then can a sinner begin his road to reconciliation with God and recovery from his pain. The *gever*, however, does not turn to God in supplication; he does not beseech God to deliver him from his troubles. While this is likely due to his perception that God is the direct cause of his predicament, this omission is striking nonetheless.

We find another stark contrast to the *gever*’s attitude in *Tehillim* 143:3, where the Psalmist describes himself entombed in darkness: “The enemy… made me dwell in darkness like the eternal dead.” In contrast to the *gever*, the individual in *Tehillim* 143 directs his pleas to God, who is the obvious address for his troubles. Once again, in comparison with other biblical passages, the *gever*’s alienation from God alongside his refusal to assume responsibility are evident. Although in the opening verses of this chapter the reader encounters several linguistic allusions that suggest the *gever’s* accountability, the *gever* remains baffled by his wretched situation and does not explicitly assume responsibility until verse 39. As we noted in chapter 1, the movement toward recognition of sin is notoriously difficult and takes time, effort, and religious maturity.

***Eikha* 3:7-9**

גָּדַ֧ר בַּעֲדִ֛י וְלֹ֥א אֵצֵ֖א

הִכְבִּ֥יד נְחָשְׁתִּֽי

גַּ֣ם כִּ֤י אֶזְעַק֙ וַאֲשַׁוֵּ֔עַ

שָׂתַ֖ם תְּפִלָּתִֽי

גָּדַ֤ר דְּרָכַי֙ בְּגָזִ֔ית

 נְתִיבֹתַ֖י עִוָּֽה

**He has built a wall round me and I cannot exit**

**He has weighed down my chains**

**Even when I cry and plead**

**He shuts out my prayer**

**He has built a wall on my roads, of hewn stones[[5]](#footnote-5)**

**He has twisted my pathways**

The *gever* uses images of entrapment and captivity to describe his helplessness. God constructs roadblocks that encircle the *gever*,[[6]](#footnote-6) impeding and immobilizing him. Perhaps this obstructed road is the one that leads the chained *gever* into exile,[[7]](#footnote-7) or perhaps it depicts the streets of destroyed Judean cities, clogged by heaps of rubble from collapsed buildings.

Possibly, we should regard the blocked roads as figurative language that conveys the *gever*’s state of mind, his confusion and existential insecurity. The *gever* plods along on a road that does not take him anywhere. His path is twisted and blocked; he does not know how to arrive at his destination. Moreover, chains weigh down his feet, and his heavy footsteps further impede him.

Structurally, this alphabetic unit (the *gimel* verses) has an interesting feature. Opening with the verb *gadar*, “to construct a fence,”[[8]](#footnote-8) the first and third sentence that begin with *gimel* mirror each other. They surround and highlight the middle verse of the alphabetic unit, which features the *gever*’s first attempt to pray. The endeavor is futile; just as the stones block his path, the *gever*’s prayer is stonewalled, and God does not heed his cries and pleas.

A: *Gadar*: A fence built around the *gever* (verse 7)

B: *Gam ki ez’ak*: The obstruction of the *gever*’s prayer (verse 8)

A’: *Gadar*: A fence built on the *gever*’s path (verse 9)

Unsurprisingly, Iyov, the quintessential sufferer, employs similar imagery to describe his plight:

Know that God has wronged me; He has surrounded me with his fortress. Indeed, I cry violence and I am not answered; I plead and there is no justice. He built a wall (*gadar*) around my route and I cannot pass, and he places darkness upon my pathways. (*Iyov* 19:6-8)

Lamenting his unanswered prayers, Iyov describes the wall that surrounds him as he walks on a path that has been plunged into darkness

Where is God? Why does God rebuff the *gever*’s prayer in 3:8? Is this yet another example of God’s pitiless intransigence? Intriguingly, the *gever*’s description of his entreaties omits an address. The entire verse lacks the second person; the *gever* may cry and plead, but he does not direct his petition to anyone and he does not mention to whom he prays. Instead, the first person appears three times in this verse: “*my* cries,” “*my* pleas,” “*my* prayer.” Submersed in his self-absorbed suffering, this *gever* cannot see outside of himself. Just as the *gever* does not mention God by name, deepening the alienation between himself and God, he cannot find God in prayer because he sees only his own misery. God does not respond to the *gever*’s supplication, because the *gever* neglects to direct his pleas toward God, preferring to wallow in the echoes of his own sorrowful wails.

Encircled by figurative barriers that he has constructed around himself, the *gever*’s self-absorbed speech bounces off the walls and boomerangs back to him. Retreating into his misfortune, the *gever* directs his speech to no one, deepening his impenetrable solitude. Poignant cries echo futilely within the *gever*’s sealed chamber.

**Eikha 3:10-12**

דֹּ֣ב אֹרֵ֥ב הוּא֙ לִ֔י

אֲרִ֖י בְּמִסְתָּרִֽים

דְּרָכַ֥י סוֹרֵ֛ר וַֽיְפַשְּׁחֵ֖נִי

שָׂמַ֥נִי שֹׁמֵֽם

דָּרַ֤ךְ קַשְׁתּוֹ֙ וַיַּצִּיבֵ֔נִי

כַּמַּטָּרָ֖א לַחֵֽץ

**He is a bear lying in ambush for me**

**A lion in secret places.**

**He has diverted[[9]](#footnote-9) my roads and mangled me**

**He has made me desolate**

**He has poised His bow and stood me up**

**As a target for his arrow**

New and disturbing animal imagery emerges, imagery of wild and irrational tormentors. The *gever*’s bestial oppressor lies hidden, waiting to maul him, to tear him apart. As disconcerting as it may seem, Rashi explicitly states that this figurative portrayal refers to God: “God turned into a bear lying in ambush for me.”[[10]](#footnote-10) We have already encountered a bestial portrait of God in chapter 2, when He voraciously swallows Israel and her palaces (2:2, 5). A discomfiting image, the portrayal of God as an animal challenges the notion that God torments the *gever* for a reason, due to his sins. Animals do not act with logic; they simply attack whatever prey crosses their path.

Once again, the *gever* finds himself on a perilous, twisted road. This time, the dangers materialize; his tormentor attacks him, viciously tearing him into pieces, with animal-like savagery.[[11]](#footnote-11) The *gever*’s desolation is complete.[[12]](#footnote-12) No one comes to save him; the roads contain only hostile elements,[[13]](#footnote-13) and he is bereft of deliverance.

The word that depicts God positioning the *gever* as a target is *darakh* (verse 12). A wordplay with the word *derekh*, meaning road (verses 9 and 11), this word links the *gever*’s aimless journey along treacherous, twisted trails to the manner in which God steadies His bow and positions him as a target. In both situations, the *gever* is vulnerable, exposed, and in terrible danger. Nevertheless, the narrative undergoes a distinctive change when the *gever*’s tormentor sets him up as a target for his arrow.[[14]](#footnote-14) No longer an arbitrary act of abuse, the tormentor singles out the *gever* in a deliberate and focused decision. Emotionally, this must be a terrible setback for the *gever*. He realizes that he is not the victim of capricious happenstance or indiscriminate cruelty; rather, God chooses to afflict him. From a theological viewpoint, however, this appears to be a step forward. It is but a small step from the dawn of this realization to the inescapable conclusion that God is meting out punishments for his sins. The *gever*’s realization represents both an emotional regression and a theological development.

**Eikha 3:13-15**

הֵבִיא֙ בְּכִלְיוֹתָ֔י

בְּנֵ֖י אַשְׁפָּתֽוֹ

הָיִ֤יתִי שְּׂחֹק֙ לְכָל־עַמִּ֔י

נְגִינָתָ֖ם כָּל־הַיּֽוֹם

הִשְׂבִּיעַ֥נִי בַמְּרוֹרִ֖ים

הִרְוַ֥נִי לַעֲנָֽה

**He brought into my innards**

**The sons of His quiver**

**I was a laughingstock for all of my nation**

**Their plaything all of the day**

**He satiated me with bitterness**

**Saturated me with poison**

Having situated the *gever* as a target for his arrow, the *gever’s* tormentor releases the taut string, and arrows penetrate the *gever*’s innards.[[15]](#footnote-15) The arrows are poetically termed the sons of His quiver, ironically recalling that manner in which biblical passages refer to Israel as God’s sons (e.g. *Devarim* 14:1).[[16]](#footnote-16)

To compound his isolation, the *gever* endures the mockery of his own people, who ceaselessly taunt him for sport.[[17]](#footnote-17) Atypical within the book, the cruelty of the *gever*’s own nation sets his suffering apart from theirs. It is not that his fellow countrymen are occupied with their own suffering and have no time or energy to commiserate with him; rather, the *gever* delineates a deliberate bid to demean and demoralize him. Why is this tormented *gever* a laughingstock of his nation? Possibly, the scorn of the people derives from the opposite cause; once others see that God singles out the *gever* for punishment, they regard him as deserving of his tribulations. If his penalty is divinely ordained, then he rightly earns their scorn; his torment is a just consequence of his own heinous crimes.

Verse 15 describes a new torment for the *gever*. He is coerced into imbibing bitterness and poison, which penetrate his innards just as the arrows did in verse 13. This time, toxic fare seems to enter his body by way of mouth, corroding his intestines.[[18]](#footnote-18) Possibly, this alludes to the starvation caused by the siege; in his desperate hunger, the *gever* must satiate himself with bitter and unpalatable victuals.[[19]](#footnote-19) Possibly, the language is figurative, an apt way of describing the bitterness that he endures and internalizes.[[20]](#footnote-20) The bitter *merorim* recall the ritual food that we eat to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt (*Shemot* 12:8). Compelled to swallow bitterness without hope for God’s liberation, linguistic allusions to the Exodus represent an ironic allusion to the national narrative of God’s salvation.[[21]](#footnote-21)

1. This interpretation reads verse 4 as a direct continuation of verse 3 (in spite of the alphabetic division); see Ibn Ezra, *Eikha* 3:4. As I previously observed, the alphabetic division does not seem to divide the chapter into separate units. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tehillim* 88 describes death similarly, using images of darkness, impotence, and imprisonment. In contrast to *Eikha* 3, the individual of *Tehillim* 88 beseeches God to save him from this near-death experience. For similar imagery used to describe death, see also *Tehillim* 49:20; *Kohelet* 6:3-4; *Iyov* 10:19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the Targum on *Eikha* 3:5: “He built a siege against me and surrounded the city and he uprooted the leaders and drained them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the Targum on *Eikha* 3:6: “He placed me in a dark prison, like the dead that go to another world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The hewn stones (*gazit*) that obstruct the *gever*’s path may allude to the hewn stones used to construct the Temple (e.g. *I Kings* 5:31; 6:36). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dobbs Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 112, notes the irony of using imagery of construction within a book that commemorates destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rashi (*Eikha* 3:7) explains that the wall that surrounds the chained *gever*, from which he cannot escape, is made up of troops ready to ambush. Rashi’s precise intention is unclear. He may be describing the siege around the city, or perhaps he is describing the troops that accompany the captives into exile, guarding them so that they do not flee. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rashi on *Eikha* 3:7 explains the word *gadar* as follows: “He made a wall opposite me to imprison me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Some commentators on this verse (e.g. Rashi, R. Yosef Kara) explain that the word *sorer* derives from the word *sir*, meaning thorns. Like in *Hosea* 2:8, God paves the *gever’s* path with thorns that render his journey painful and arduous. This reading also alludes to the desolation along the roads that have become overgrown and thorny from lack of maintenance and travelers (see *Isaiah* 34:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Hosea* 13:7-8 portrays God in a similar manner. Nonetheless, *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:4 maintains that the savage animals here refer to Israel’s brutish enemies – namely, Nebuhadnezzar the Babylonian general (who destroyed the First Temple), and Vespasian, the Roman general (who destroyed the Second Temple). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Targum translates the hapax legomenon, *pashach*, with the word *shasah*, which can describe the way in which an animal is ripped apart (e.g. *Vayikra* 1:17; *Shofetim* 14:6) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In using the word *shomem*, which previously described the desolation of Jerusalem, her gates, and her children (*Eikha* 1:4; 13, 16), the *gever* again creates a parallel between his experience and that of the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While the verse does not specifically mention the absence of fellow travelers (as opposed to the explicit description in *Eikha* 1:4), the *gever*’s desolation and his vulnerability suggest his isolation. The *gever* seems entirely unaware of any human being other than himself. His misfortunes loom large; he is completely absorbed in his own experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Biblical interpreters disagree as to whether the *gever* becomes a target for his tormentor (namely, God) to fire at him (Rashi), or if his tormentor places him in a vulnerable position, so that anyone who wishes to fire at him may do so easily (R. Yosef Kara). Similar language in *Eikha* 2:4 suggests that God fires the arrows at him here as well. For further support for Rashi’s reading, see *Iyov* 16:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Once again, an idea continues across the boundaries of the alphabetic unit. The tormentor aims the arrows at the end of the *daled* unit (verses 10-12), but only releases them at the beginning of the *heh* unit (13-15). See R. Yosef Kara’s comment on *Eikha* 3:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. An idyllic psalm, *Tehillim* 127 offers a reversal of this image by describing a contented *gever,* who “fills his quiver” with his sons instead of arrows (*Tehillim* 127:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. To resolve this problem, some biblical commentators read *amim* or *am* instead of *ami* (e.g. Rasag; Ibn Ezra; R. Yosef Kara). In this reading, it is the other nations who jeer at the *gever*, not his own comrades. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For a similar description, see *Jeremiah* 9:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a similar idea, see the Targum’s translation of *Eikha* 4:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See e.g. *Jeremiah* 9:18; *Mishlei* 5:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Books about the Holocaust often relate of the heroic attempt to observe the holidays in the death camps. One survivor’s account reflects conflicted feelings about celebrating a holiday of liberation while experiencing ongoing bitterness and slavery: “There was one sentence in the Haggadah that especially angered us: ‘In every generation our enemies rise to destroy us, but the Almighty always saves us from their hands.’ He certainly was not saving any of us, including the millions of children who were murdered… It was on March 27, 1945, when [the Rebbe] brought the matzahs and declared that the Passover Seder would now begin. ‘Out of the seven ingredients needed to conduct the Seder, we now only have two, *matzohs* and *marror*, but the Almighty will understand.’ ‘Rebbe, where is the *marror* (bitter herb) that you mentioned?’ we asked him. He looked at us. ‘Our lives in this camp is the *marror*; it is bitter enough’” [Testimony of Solly Ganor, Passover in Dachau]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)