YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #37: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

**Eikha 3:16**

וַיַּגְרֵ֤ס בֶּֽחָצָץ֙ שִׁנָּ֔י

 הִכְפִּישַׁ֖נִי בָּאֵֽפֶר

**He has broken my teeth with gravel**

**He has made me cower in ashes**

God breaks the *gever’s* teeth with gravel, either by smashing him on the mouth, or, less violently, by forcing him to eat food that he finds on the ground, food filled with sand and pebbles that grinds down his teeth and splinters them.[[1]](#footnote-1) This act of violence harms the *gever’s* mouth, silencing him, at least temporarily. Cowering[[2]](#footnote-2) in ashes (see also *Iyov* 2:8) contains associations with mourning,[[3]](#footnote-3) humiliation,[[4]](#footnote-4) and human insignificance and mortality.[[5]](#footnote-5)

***Eikha* 3:1-16: A Portrait of Suffering in Summation**

Verse 16 concludes the lengthy description of the *gever’s* suffering (1-16). Utilizing multiple metaphors, the *gever* paints an agonizing and diverse portrait of human suffering. Beaten, poisoned, mangled, devoured, broken, entombed, imprisoned, chained, pierced, and scorned, the *gever* endures an assortment of horrors. One torment follows the other in rapid succession, bringing to mind the prophecy of Amos:

When a man flees from the lion, and the bear confronts him, and he enters the house and rests his hand on the wall, and the snake bites him. (*Amos* 5:19)

Even if he manages to emerge alive from one torment, another affliction awaits; there is no escape from misfortune.

As we have noted, this individual account does not necessarily portray the specific tale of one person’s personal suffering. Figurative language and a broad variety of experiences paint a general portrait of pain. Designed to convey the universal experience of woe, this account can apply to a wide array of situations and individuals. The *gever* represents the prototypical sufferer.

**Darkness, Twisted Paths, Encirclement, and Wild Beasts**

Several images recur in this section and deserve special attention. God leads the *gever* into darkness (verses 2, 6), a frightening and ominous blackness reminiscent of death (e.g. *Tehillim* 88:11-13; *Iyov* 10:21-22; *Kohelet* 6:4). Darkness evokes other biblical associations as well: severe distress (*Isaiah* 8:22), imprisonment (*Tehillim* 107:10), and divine punishment (*Shemot* 10; *Ezekiel* 32:7-8). The day of God’s judgment, in which He judges and sentences humankind, often invokes darkness (see *Joel* 2:1-2; 4:14, *Amos* 5:18; *Zephaniah* 1:15). Darkness also represents the absence of divine light,[[6]](#footnote-6) which indicates the absence of righteousness (*Isaiah* 59:9) and of God’s beneficial presence (*Isaiah* 60:1-3; *Micah* 7:8). Partially for this reason, darkness obscures understanding (*Tehillim* 82:5; *Kohelet* 2:14), blinding people to justice.

Images of darkness correspond to the theme of the *gever*’s twisted and obstructed path (verses 9, 11). Darkness diverts people from their intended path and causes them to stumble and fall. Danger, moreover, lurks ominously on the *gever*’s paths. These depictions merge and intertwine; the *gever* describes a frightening journey, a murky confusion characterized by befuddlement and fear. The above descriptions are both literal and metaphoric. Without God as a guide and a support, the *gever* walks in figurative darkness, along twists and turns that take him in no particular direction, toward no real destination. This describes the *gever’s* general instability, but also his actual journey into exile, a convoluted path that reverses the theological and national goals of every member of the nation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

God detains the *gever* upon a roundabout route; he cannot exit its twisted and obstructed trail. To compound this repressive picture, encirclement prevails as a predominant image of this section. God’s hand circles around the hapless *gever*, returning repeatedly to strike him (verse 3). God surrounds him with poison and hardship (verse 5) and builds a wall around him, enclosing him in a pen from which there is no exit (verse 7). Literal experience once again merges with the figurative, alluding to the frame of mind of the victim.[[8]](#footnote-8) He is restrained and caged, surrounded on all sides. There is no escape, not even by prayer (verse 8). The *gever* describes ineluctable, encroaching doom; the inexorable end draws near.

This encirclement coheres with the prowling movement of the animal that stalks its prey, circling round him in rings until he pounces and tears him apart. Animal imagery abounds in this section. Portrayed as a wild animal who lies in ambush to pounce on His prey (verse 10), God assaults the *gever* with particular ferocity. Scraping at his flesh and skin and breaking his bones, God mangles him, leaving him physically deformed (verses 4, 11). An unnerving depiction, the *gever* portrays God as brutal and inconceivably arbitrary. In this schema, God operates without a plan, tackling his prey for no apparent reason and with no obvious goal. As the description progresses, the *gever* gropes his way toward a different perception of God’s role in his misfortune. Once God positions him as a target, singling him out for deliberate abuse, the divine image shifts and comes into focus. Indeed, God has attacked him, but this was no arbitrary occurrence. It becomes clear that God selected the *gever* consciously, targeting him for punishment. This new realization will accompany the *gever* on his ruminations in the next section, which will end with a pronouncement of human accountability.

**Iyov and the *Gever***

Unsurprisingly, our *gever* emerges as an Iyov-like figure, whose trials often evoke those of that classic sufferer of biblical literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) In fact, Iyov refers to himself as a *gever* (*Iyov* 3:3), perhaps to indicate that he must heroically overcome the challenges that God gives him. Although Iyov’s personal narrative is considerably longer than the *gever*’s account, which is concentrated into 16 verses, the *gever*’s language often evokes Iyov’s. According to Iyov, God encircles him (19:6), builds a wall on his path, and submerges his pathways in darkness (19:8). God satiates Iyov with bitterness (9:18) and positions Iyov as a target (16:12). Iyov feels God’s rod (9:34), suffers animal-like attacks (10:16), and describes the shriveling of his “skin and flesh” (19:20). Iyov wallows in dust (2:8) and pleads and cries with no divine response (20:7). Iyov feels alienated from God and his fellows, who mock him in a strikingly similar way that they taunt the *gever* (compare *Iyov* 30:9 to *Eikha* 3:14). As we progress, we will see the extent to which the *gever*’s trajectory parallels that of Iyov. The suffering of the religious man obtains a universal character; these similarities can help us to isolate aspects of suffering that are common to all humans, particularly within a religious framework.

**Eikha 3:17-18**

וַתִּזְנַ֧ח מִשָּׁל֛וֹם נַפְשִׁ֖י

נָשִׁ֥יתִי טוֹבָֽה

וָאֹמַר֙ אָבַ֣ד נִצְחִ֔י

וְתוֹחַלְתִּ֖י מֵיְקֹוָֽק

**And my soul rejected peace**

**I forgot goodness**

**And I said, “My endurance is lost,**

**And my hope in God.”**

**The *Gever*’s Emotional Collapse**

A cry of helpless despair follows on the heels of the *gever*’s horror-filled account. Self-reflectively referring to his essence or his soul, the *gever* declares that he has abandoned any notion of peace. The quest for “*shalom*” represents the focal point of biblical aspirations, both for individuals[[10]](#footnote-10) and for the nation.[[11]](#footnote-11) It connotes more than just physical peace; the word *shalom* also alludes to inner tranquility, a sense of wholeness and calm serenity. All of this eludes the persecuted *gever*, who cannot conceive of obtaining *shalom* ever again.

Moreover, the *gever* proclaims that he has forgotten goodness. This suggests that he has lost a basic sense of well-being, of a good and satisfactory existence.[[12]](#footnote-12) No longer does the *gever* entertain even this minimal aspiration. He has forgotten that goodness is a possibility; he lives without hope, joy, or vitality. A conclusive utterance of despair follows this proclamation of his loss of peace and goodness (3:18): “And I said, ‘My endurance is lost, and my hope in God!’” Depleted of energy and lacking hope, this testimonial seems on the verge of bringing this chapter and the *gever*’s life to a miserable close.[[13]](#footnote-13) There is nothing more to say, no more strength, and no more faith in a positive outcome. The word *avad*, used here to express the loss of strength and hope, contains intimations of death.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Having reached a low point, the *gever* despairs of peace and good, quickly spiraling into hopeless despondency. Jeremiah seems determined to reverse this despair in one of his uncommon hope-filled prophecies:

And I will return the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel and I will build them as of old… And they will be for Me a name, joy, glory and splendor more than all of the nations of the earth, who will hear of all of the **good** that I will do for them and will be fearful and agitated because of all of the **goodness** and all of the **peace** that I will bring for her. (*Jeremiah* 33:7, 9)

Moreover, a self-reflective utterance often anticipates a turning point, a renewal, which indeed occurs quite dramatically in the upcoming verses.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Naming God**

As an expression of his profound despondency, in verse 18 the *gever* names God for the first time. In the first seventeen verses of the chapter, the *gever* only references God in the hidden third person. God is omnipresent but nameless in the *gever*’s narrative. By refusing to name God explicitly, even as His presence is so obvious, the *gever* illustrates how profoundly he experiences God’s absence. On this backdrop of alienation, the *gever* pronounces his gloomy final assertion, grimly dismissing the possibility that he could retain any hope in God.

Nevertheless, in expressing his loss of hope in God, the *gever* actually utters God’s name. This precipitates a stunning transformation.[[16]](#footnote-16) The self-absorbed *gever* begins to emerge from his self-imposed shell, seeing outside of himself for the first time. With the name of God upon his lips, the *gever* launches upon an interior monologue, in which he ponders God’s ways and explores the relationship between God and humans.

**Eikha 3:19-20**

זְכָר־עָנְיִ֥י וּמְרוּדִ֖י

לַעֲנָ֥ה וָרֹֽאשׁ

זָכ֣וֹר תִּזְכּ֔וֹר

וְתָשׁ֥וֹחַ עָלַ֖י נַפְשִֽׁי:

**When I remember my afflictions and wanderings[[17]](#footnote-17)**

**It is like poison and wormwood**

**When I truly remember**

**My soul sinks down within me**

Two obscure verses transition the *gever* from his despondent loss of hope (verse 18) to renewed hope in God (verse 21).[[18]](#footnote-18) The transformation itself is remarkable. The same soul (*nefesh*) that rejected any possibility of peace in verse 17 begins to change in verse 20 as he describes his soul (*nefesh*) sinking down within him.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nonetheless, the precise meaning of these transition verses remains murky, as biblical interpreters have translated them in radically different ways. The reading that I adopted in my translation above has the *gever* speaking to himself, reflecting pensively on his recollections.[[20]](#footnote-20) Another common interpretation portrays the *gever* directing these words toward God.[[21]](#footnote-21) We will explore each of these possibilities, considering how each one contributes to the forward movement of the *gever* at this critical turning point of the chapter.

In the above translation, the *gever* is self-consciously ruminative, sharing his remembrances with the reader. Opening with the word “*zechor*,” his initial thoughts lead him directly to his bitterness and pain. Nevertheless, the *gever* does not remain confined to these virulent feelings. He digs deeper in his contemplations, arriving at a truly spectacular conclusion: suffering begets humility.[[22]](#footnote-22) In what sense is this so? Why do his profound reflections humble him? The *gever* does not clarify this point. Possibly, the very experience of suffering reminds humans of their essential weakness and mortality and the lack of control that they maintain over their fleeting existence. More compellingly, the *gever* is beginning to acknowledge that which he will specify only at the conclusion of his ruminations: Each person is accountable for his own sinfulness (v. 39). Suffering that is linked to sin arouses humility, inducing people to consider their responsibility for the situation.

An alternative reading has the *gever* turning to God and demanding that *God* remember the *gever’s* pain.[[23]](#footnote-23) In this scenario, misery begets petition. This is the final recourse; if the *gever* does not turn to God, he has no option other than to abandon hope completely.[[24]](#footnote-24) In this reading, the *gever* undergoes a more abrupt transformation, refusing to relinquish all hope in God, despite his words in verse 18. Instead, he musters up his last bit of strength and beseeches God, “Remember my pain and hardship, like poison and wormwood! You must surely remember that my soul sinks down within me!”[[25]](#footnote-25) By enlisting God to remember him and his misery, the *gever* begins his turnaround. Addressing God in desperate prayer effects transformation.

Instead of choosing between these two readings, I prefer to assume that *Eikha* intentionally weaves multiple meaningful interpretations into these verses.[[26]](#footnote-26) Each reading offers an important understanding of how one can transition from hopelessness to renewal, from alienation to reconciliation with God.

No matter how we understand these verses, we must again observe the pivotal role played by the word *zachar* in this book.[[27]](#footnote-27) Appearing a key seven times throughout the book, the word *zachar* appears three times in these two transitional sentences. The *gever*’s recollections (or his request that God recollect) launch the turning point of the chapter, spinning the *gever*’s thoughts in a new direction. This swivel indicates the important role that memory plays in one’s relationship with God. Even when a person feels most alienated from God and even after he asserts that he has utterly abandoned hope in God, he can utilize this to remedy his misconceptions, reminding him of God’s eternal covenant and obligations to Israel.[[28]](#footnote-28) On the flip side, remembering also evokes his own obligations and his promises to God that he will maintain loyalty and commitment. This sobering thought humbles him and compels the *gever* to begin his exploration of his own responsibilities toward God.

1. Rashi cites a *midrash* (*Eikha* *Rabba* 1:22) that maintains a similar understanding of this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For this translation of this hapax legomenon, see R. Yosef Kara. Rashi offers a different translation, in which God muzzles the *gever* with ashes, presumably by stuffing them into his mouth (see also Ibn Ezra). This is an apt continuation of the first part of the verse, where God’s neutralizes his mouth, rendering it ineffective. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. *Isaiah* 61:3; *Jeremiah* 6:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. *Ezekiel* 28:18; *Tehillim* 102:9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g. *Bereishit* 18:27; Iyov 30:19. Both of these verses use the phrase “*afar* *ve-eifer*,” which seems to connote human mortality as well as insignificance. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Tehillim* 27:1 describes God as “my light and my savior.” See also *Micah* 7:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In his prophecies of consolation, Isaiah also refers quite frequently to roads and paths (e.g. *Isaiah* 40:3; 42:15; 49:9-10). As is often the case, *Isaiah*’s usage represents the reversal of *Eikha*’s usage. While *Eikha* describes the twisted and obstructed path of exile and confusion, *Isaiah* depicts Israel’s return from exile on light-filled paths that lead directly to the promised destination. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The circular movement with no escape reminds us of the structure of chapters 1 ad 2, which is circular and chiastic. Nevertheless, as we will see, this chapter will turn out to be linear in structure and will allow the *gever* to exit his experience of continuous suffering and hopelessness. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, at the conclusion of *Shir Ha-Shirim*, the *Re’aya* finally “finds *shalom*” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:10), a climactic moment that represents the apex of the book. The word *shalom* also represents the goal of several idyllic psalms, designed to create a picture of an ultimate state of existence (see e.g. *Tehillim* 128:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Note, for example, the description of Solomon’s ideal reign in *I Kings* 5:4. Solomon’s name is, of course, Shelomo. In *Shir* *Ha-Shirim*, Shelomo has a relationship with the Shulamit (*Shir* *Ha-Shirim* 7:1), and they are situated in Yerushalayim. All of these key words (Shelomo, Shulamit, and Yerushayim) relate to the word *shalom*, indicates its supreme importance for constructing an ideal nation. See also e.g. *Tehillim* 122:4, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The word *tov* in *Bereishit* 1 appears a key 7 times, suggesting that this is a primary goal of creation. In the book of *Eikha*, the word *tov* also appears 7 times, indicating its central importance for the book. Five of these appearances appear in chapter 3, as we will shortly discuss. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Yosef Kara (*Eikha* 3:18-19) explains the loss of hope in an evocative passage: My hope in God is lost. What hope can man have if he is imprisoned in a dark place? And if the prison is constructed by hewn stones that are walled around him? And he is incarcerated in heavy chains and the prison is closed around him from all directions so that his voice cannot be heard from outside, when he shouts? And outside of the prison, his pathways are twisted so that even if he breaks through a wall of the prison, he cannot return to the path that he walked on. And not only that, but “He is a bear lying in ambush for me” and from now my hope to escape has been lost. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See e.g. *Bamidbar* 17:27; *Jonah* 1:6; *Esther* 4:14, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 69, maintains that when a person introduces his lament with self-reflective words, “I said,” it signifies a turning point. See e.g. *Tehillim* 31:23; 94:18; 139:11; *Isaiah* 6:5; 38:11; 49:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In one of his essays on repentance (“Thou Shouldst Enter the Covenant of the Lord,” in *On Repentance*, P.I. Peli [trans.] [Jerusalem: Oroth, 1980], pp. 205-245), Rav Soloveitchik discusses two different processes that lead people to repentance. Sometimes repentance begins as a rational process, wherein man gradually arrives at the logical conclusion that he should repair his relationship with God. Often, however, repentance begins as an emotional process, in which humans are struck by a sudden, desperate need to reconcile with God. Our chapter appears to contain the latter process. Having uttered the name of God, the *gever* abruptly and unexpectedly seeks a relationship with God, setting into motion a series of ruminations that lead to a total transformation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The phrase “afflictions and wandering,” appears in one other place in *Eikha* (1:7), where Jerusalem speaks of her miseries. In this way, the experience of the *gever* again merges with the city’s hardships. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The obscurity of these verses is compounded by the fact that some interpreters identify verse 20 as a verse that contains a *tikkun* *soferim*, an alteration of the original text designed to preserve God’s honor. Not all sources identify a *tikkun* *soferim* here, and no source that does records the original reading or identifies the words that contain the problem. This makes it incredibly difficult even to speculate about restoring the original verse. For more on the *tikkun* *soferim* in this verse, see C.D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Masoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London, 1897), p. 361. For more on *tikkunei* *soferim* in general, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950), pp. 28-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As we will note, this sinking down of his soul may also be understood in radically different ways. I prefer to see this as the beginning of the humbling of the narcissistic *gever*. His self-absorbed misery precludes his ability to see a broader picture, which he only begins to see when he mentions God and begins to ponder His ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rashi (*Eikha* 3:20) views this as the *pshat*, the simple reading of the verse. See also Rasag on verse 20. The Septuagint translates in the first person, “I remember…” Scholars who adopt this general approach include Hillers, *Lamentations*, pp. 50, 69-70; O’Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 47; Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p.117. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 3:20, who understands verse 20 not as an imperative, but as a statement of fact: “You will surely remember [my sufferings], but until that time comes, my soul sinks down within me.” See also *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:7 and Rashi’s citation of it as the aggadic explanation of verse 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The soul sinking down can render a different interpretation. Perhaps this is a description of the crushing weight of the *gever*’s troubles that press down on him (O’ Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 48), or a depiction of the *gever*’s inner despondency (Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 117; Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 82-83). Note that *Tehillim* 42:5-6, describes a person’s memories that lead to his soul sinking down – namely, his misery. These readings, however, would simply circle back to the description of the *gever*’s suffering. In light of the transitional role played by these verses, I prefer the reading above, in which recollections of his misery lead him forward toward humility. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, e.g. House, *Lamentations*, p. 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. R. Yosef Kara explains *Eikha* 3:19 as follows: “Even though I could have said, ‘I have lost my strength and hope in God’… I will not be silent from crying out and beseeching Him and petitioning him, saying: ‘Remember my afflictions and poverty that were like poison and wormwood.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Further complicating matters, some interpreters separate these transition verses, explaining either that the *gever* addresses God in verse 19 and himself in verse 20 (e.g. Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 141, and see the above footnotes on the commentary of R. Yosef Kara on *Eikha* 3:19-20), or the opposite: the *gever* addresses himself in verse 19 and God in verse 20 (Westermann, *Lamentations*, pp. 161, 172). Multiple readings of these transition verses make it impossible to conclude with any certainty the simple meaning of these verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. As we saw, Rashi cites an explanation that he calls the simple meaning, followed by the homiletic explanation, which he also deems legitimate. Similarly, Ibn Ezra (in his *dikduk* *ha-milot*) brings both possible readings of the word *zachar* in verse 19 (either a description of his own recollections or an imperative addressed to God). However, in his explanation of the verse, he prefers the reading in which the *gever* describes his own recollections, as I have translated above. Similarly, in his explanation to verse 20, although he alludes to two interpretations, Ibn Ezra prefers the interpretation in which the *gever* is thinking pensive remembrances. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. We discussed this word at greater length in the commentary on *Eikha* 1:7, where the word first appears in the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Note the threefold appearance of the word *zachar* in *Vayikra* 26:42, in which God’s assurance that He will remember His nation echoes promisingly after a terrible litany of divine punishment. Similarly, see *Vayikra* 26:43-45 and the word *zachar* in verse 45. See also *Shemot* 2:24, where God “remembers” His covenant and saves Israel from their oppression in Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)