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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #38: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

***Eikha* 3:21-39**

**Theological Reflections**

**A Brief Introduction**

The structural and theological center of this book, this unit lies at the core of the book of *Eikha*. It explores God's nature and the way in which humans grapple with suffering. This brief section is not a well-developed discourse on theology. For that, one would do better to turn to the book of *Iyov*, which is the classic and most elaborate biblical treatment of theodicy. In *Eikha*, the *gever* offers a sketch in just nineteen sentences, laconically illustrating how humans struggle with their understanding of God and their own role in a world filled with human misery.

In spite of its surrounding context, this middle section of the book refuses to lament the miserable fate of humans, embarking instead on a series of reflections that moves back and forth from God to humans. The section progresses steadily, illustrating how human beings can regain equilibrium, and even advance, despite the murky confusion that characterizes human existence. These ruminations are not comprehensive, nor are they prescriptive; they simply offer guidelines to facilitate the endurance of faith in the face of terrible challenges.

*A Technical Note*

Not all scholars regard these verses as an independent unit.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although opinions vary widely, Rashi makes a rare structural comment in his commentary on chapter 3:

And what is the “this” that “I shall place on my heart” [verse 21]? “The kindnesses of God shall not cease” [verse 22] until, “Of what shall a living man complain?” [verse 39]. (Rashi, *Eikha* 3:21-22)

According to Rashi, the *gever* explains and expands upon his confident statement in verse 21 in the eighteen verses that follow (22-39).[[2]](#footnote-2) We will adopt this approach and examine the section in accordance with Rashi’s understanding.

To begin our examination of this middle section of the chapter, we need to make some order and try to understand how these verses fit together and flow from one to the other. We will begin by dividing this section into three subunits (each of which I will examine independently):[[3]](#footnote-3)

A: Verses 21-26: *Regaining Hope by Understanding God’s Compassionate Ways (chesed and rachamim)*

B: Verses 27-30: *The Role of the Suffering Individual*

A’: Verses 31-39: *Further Exploration of God’s Compassionate Ways (chesed and rachamim*)

The concentric structure of this section highlights its middle section. To illustrate this, I have called the first subunit A and its parallel A’. These subunits contain similar subject matter, even describing God’s positive attributes with identical words (*chesed and rachamim*).[[4]](#footnote-4) The central axis of this section, and of the entire book, appears in verses 27-30, a section that I have termed, “The Role of the Suffering Individual.” Its structural centrality draws attention to its pivotal role in the book, and we will explore its theological message alongside the manner in which it resonates outward from the heart of the book.

***Eikha* 3:21-26**

**זֹ֛את אָשִׁ֥יב אֶל־לִבִּ֖י**

**עַל־כֵּ֥ן אוֹחִֽיל**

**חַֽסְדֵ֤י יְקֹוָק֙ כִּ֣י לֹא־תָ֔מְנוּ**

**כִּ֥י לֹא־כָל֖וּ רַחֲמָֽיו**

**חֲדָשִׁים֙ לַבְּקָרִ֔ים**

**רַבָּ֖ה אֱמוּנָתֶֽךָ**

**חֶלְקִ֤י יְקֹוָק֙ אָמְרָ֣ה נַפְשִׁ֔י**

**עַל־כֵּ֖ן אוֹחִ֥יל לֽוֹ**

**ט֤וֹב יְקֹוָק֙ לְקֹוָ֔ו**

**לְנֶ֖פֶשׁ תִּדְרְשֶֽׁנּוּ**

**ט֤וֹב וְיָחִיל֙ וְדוּמָ֔ם**

 **לִתְשׁוּעַ֖ת יְקֹוָֽק**

**This I shall place upon my heart**

**Therefore, I will hope**

**For the kindnesses of God do not cease**

**For His compassion does not end**

**They renew themselves every morning**

**Great is Your trustworthiness!**

**“My portion is in God,” my soul says**

**Therefore, I will hope in Him**

**God is good to those who wait for him**

**To the soul who seeks Him**

**It is good to hope and be silent**

**For the salvation of God!**

**Regaining Hope by Understanding God’s Ways**

The *gever*’s remarkable transformation is primarily a personal introspective metamorphosis, an emotional turnaround in which he hauls himself out of the depths of despair to recover his optimism. Nevertheless, at the same time, the *gever*’s outward perspective changes dramatically during the course of his musings. In this intellectual (rather than emotional) process, the *gever* begins to perceive God differently. Instead of a wrathful God, he detects a benevolent God. In place of a barrage of divine punishments, ceaselessly battering him from all directions, the *gever* acknowledges God’s kindness and loyalty, which never cease, constantly renewing themselves at the dawn of each day. The emotional and intellectual progressions reinforce and fortify one another; as the *gever*’s emotional well-being begins to improve, so does his ability to comprehend God in a more positive way. At the same time, the *gever*’s newfound understanding of God ameliorates his loss of hope, reassuring him that God’s characteristic compassion will surely liberate him from his suffering.

*Regaining Hope: The Inner Emotional Transformation*

The thread that draws this subunit together and defines it as a section is the word *yachal*, meaning to hope. The final words of the *gever* prior to his musing in verses 19-20 assert unequivocally that he has lost hope (*tochalti*) in God (verse 18). Truly, a wretched state, loss of hope in God dooms the individual to apathy and despondency, marking the final, inexorable slide toward an agonizing, meaningless existence.

The first step towards recovery, then, is to restore hope in God. Indeed, as the *gever* progresses through his reflections, his confidence and faith snowballs and gains power, escalating in intensity alongside the progression of his thoughts. Buoyed by the idea that his ponderings can facilitate hope (“*al kein ochil*,” verse 21), his words clash and contradict his avowed loss of hope just three sentences prior! After two sentences in which he briefly ruminates on God’s compassion, kindness, and faithfulness, the *gever*’s optimism strengthens and mounts. This time, his heartening proclamation of hope contains a direct object: “Therefore I will hope *in Him*!” (“*al kein ochil lo*!” verse 24). His newfound confidence further reinforces his hope in God. Using a different word to describe his hope and anticipation in God (*kava*), the *gever* grasps an encouraging truth: “God is good to those who hope in Him!” (verse 25). He, of course, stands to gain from this realization, as he now identifies as one who hopes in God.

In just five sentences, the *gever* has embarked upon an extraordinary internal transformation. The same soul (*nefesh*) that rejected peace and forgot goodness in verse 17, sinking down low in verse 20, has emerged with renewed vigor. The *gever*’s soul speaks assuredly and assertively in verse 24, stating that, “My portion is in God… Therefore I will hope in Him!” In the following verse (25), the soul actively seeks God, anticipating His goodness. This entire process occurs in the *gever*’s own internal experience; nothing external seems to have changed. Finally, in a spectacular conclusion to this stunning turnaround, the *gever* describes a particularly stalwart type of hope (*yachil* *ve-dumam*, verse 26): silent, unwavering, and utterly confident in God’s salvation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The significance of this initial movement in the *gever*’s perceptions cannot be overstated. Having experienced terrible atrocities that he attributes to God, it is astonishing that the *gever* **desires** to reconcile with God. Further noteworthy is the *gever*’s **ability** to reacquire faith in God. The *gever* experienced terrible alienation from God; in this section, his discovery of God grows and increases, indicated by the threefold mention of God’s name and climaxing in the placement of the name of God as the final, decisive word of this section.

The *gever*’s experience in chapter 3 forms the core of a book enveloped by suffering, anger, and bewildered outrage at an incomprehensible world. Mirroring the terror and struggle of human existence, the book illuminates the human tenacity in maintaining belief in God’s goodness. Deep in the recesses of the human core lies a determination to seek and find faith in God. Even as humans grapple with suffering, with the external struggle that defines human existence, they can discover and embrace the internal tranquility that allows for a faith-filled existence.

*God’s Ways: An Outward Cognitive Change*

In an abrupt intellectual reversal, the *gever* quite unexpectedly avows the truth of God’s continued kindness\loyalty (*chesed*)[[6]](#footnote-6) and compassion (*rachamim*). These divine attributes appear frequently in biblical passages to describe God (e.g. *Joel* 2:13; *Jonah* 4:2; *Tehillim* 86:15; 103:8; 145:8).[[7]](#footnote-7) These passages evoke Moshe’s (or God’s) original formulaic description of God’s compassion and kindness in *Shemot* 34:6-7.[[8]](#footnote-8) This programmatic statement follows on the heels of the divine anger and punishment of Israel due to their worship of the Golden Calf. The assertion that God’s anger will assuredly dissipate and be replaced by God’s munificence becomes a fundamental principle of God’s relationship with His nation.[[9]](#footnote-9) In our chapter, the *gever* naturally draws strength and comfort from the paradigmatic event of Israel’s sin and punishment followed by divine forgiveness. If indeed this event represents a fixed pattern of God’s relationship with Israel, then there is good reason for the *gever* to retain hope in God’s benevolence and deliverance.

A powerfully simple notion, God’s unceasing magnanimity and fidelity reassures the *gever* that he may continue to rely on God’s goodness, no matter the present state of affairs. Indeed, God’s kindnesses toward His constituents renew themselves each day, so that even the most downtrodden and despondent can retain hope for rapid recovery. Not even a calamity of the magnitude of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple signifies the termination of God’s kindnesses and loyalty.

The *gever* concludes his initial musings on God by emphatically affirming his faith in God’s trustworthiness. Turning to God directly for the first time (“Great is *Your* trustworthiness!”), the *gever* assumes an easy familiarity that bespeaks both of God’s faithfulness and of human fidelity to God. Strikingly, the *gever* remains certain that God is accessible, if only he can muster up the energy and faith to turn to Him. Reclaiming his portion in God,[[10]](#footnote-10) the *gever* rejects the alienation that had previously characterized his relationship with God. Divine goodness emerges in place of anger, as the *gever* uses the word *tov* (good) to modify God (“God is good”), limiting it somewhat by adding the words “to those who seek Him.” Surprisingly, the *gever* does not constrain God’s benevolence to the pious or righteous, but to those who sincerely yearn for Him, a broader and more easily accessible goal. Because the *gever* has recently become that individual who seeks God, this realization allows the *gever* to anticipate God’s goodness.

1. The vast array of opinions with regard to the division of chapter 3 is overwhelming. House, *Lamentations*, p. 430, continues the first section until verse 24 and regards verses 25-39 as a unit, while Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 189, continues the opening unit until verse 25. Hillers, *Lamentations*, p. 65, prefers to continue the first section of the book until verse 39. Dobbs- Allsopp, *Lamentations*, pp. 116-119, regards verse 19-24 as an independent unit. O’Connor, *Lamentations*, identifies a unit in 3:22-42, which she terms “Divine Mercies,” while Berlin’s division (verses 22-39) is close to the one that I have adopted (Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some biblical interpreters assume that the “this” that the *gever* refers to that gives him hope refers back to his suffering, rather than forward to his reflections on God. See e.g. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 117. I have adopted Rashi’s reading, which I think is both more likely; why, after all, should his suffering cause him to hope? This reading is also more meaningful; hope is born of faith, rather than pain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This division is by no means accepted by biblical scholars. As noted in an above footnote, the very division of the chapter engendered a vast array of different opinions. The division of this section is no less controversial (and, of course, many scholars do not regard this as a “unit” at all). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This may seem unsurprising; after all, when one ponders God’s attributes, a consistent picture should certainly emerge. Nevertheless, this is not the case. Consider, for example, *Tehillim* 77, which states its intention to ruminate on God’s ways (*Tehillim* 77:12-13). Its conclusions, however, are vastly different, concentrated on God’s greatness, His Holiness, His strength and wondrous nature (*Tehillim* 77:14-15). Biblical portraits of God’s nature vary according to the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is not the defeated silence of the conquered elders of Jerusalem that we encountered in *Eikha* 2:10 (*yidemu*). Instead, the *gever* has managed to produce a noble, dignified silence (*ve-dumam*), whose stated goal is to wait patiently, with perfect faith in God’s deliverance. These similar sounding words seem to derive from different roots (*dmm* and *dom*). Nevertheless, they maintain a similar meaning, as is often the case of the weak root, as we examined in chapter 1 (see our discussion on *Eikha* 1:8-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The word *chesed* connotes an array of similar (but not identical) meanings: loyalty, compassion, generosity, goodness, kindness, and steadfast love. Due to its importance and ambiguous precise meaning, several monographs have been written about the meaning of this word in *Tanakh*. See e.g., Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967); Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholars Press for the Harvard Semitic Museum, 1978); Gordon R . Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interestingly, our chapter does not employ the usual word pair of *chanun* *ve-rachum* (gracious and compassionate), but rather *chesed* and *rachamim*. I have no adequate explanation for the absence of the word *chanun* in the chapter. The word will appear once in the negative (*Eikha* 4:16) when describing the absence of graciousness given to the elders of the nation during the destruction of Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There is some exegetical debate as to who actually formulates this classic notion of God’s attributes. The subject of the word “*vayikra*” (*Shemot* 34:6) may be either God (most medieval interpreters, including e.g. Rasag, Ibn Ezra, Seforno) or Moshe (see e.g. Targum Yerushalmi on this verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also *Bamidbar* 14:18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a similar idea, see e.g. *Tehillim* 16:5; 73:26. 16:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)