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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

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

**Eikha 3:27-30**

**The Epicenter of the Book:**

**The Role of the Suffering Individual**

**ט֣וֹב לַגֶּ֔בֶר**

**כִּֽי־יִשָּׂ֥א עֹ֖ל בִּנְעוּרָֽיו**

**יֵשֵׁ֤ב בָּדָד֙ וְיִדֹּ֔ם**

**כִּ֥י נָטַ֖ל עָלָֽיו**

**יִתֵּ֤ן בֶּֽעָפָר֙ פִּ֔יהוּ**

**אוּלַ֖י יֵ֥שׁ תִּקְוָֽה**

**יִתֵּ֧ן לְמַכֵּ֛הוּ לֶ֖חִי**

**יִשְׂבַּ֥ע בְּחֶרְפָּֽה**

**It is good for a *gever***

**To bear a burden in his youth**

**He should sit in solitude and be silent**

**When it is placed upon him**

**He should place his mouth in the dust**

**Perhaps there will be hope**

**He should give his cheek to the one who strikes him**

**He should suffer it in shame**

This is the most centrally located passage in the book, and its central position indicates its importance.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to the division that I have delineated, this passage is the middle section of the *gever*’s ruminations, which comprises the middle unit of the middle chapter of the book. Its subject is different from the surrounding contemplative subunits, which reflect on God’s compassionate ways and their impact on human behavior and conceptions. The *gever* appears at the center of his own musings; God does not appear at all at the apex of the book. In his reverie, the *gever* considers the lessons that he may draw from his suffering and that which he may gain from his experiences. The epicenter of the book focuses on the individual, offering humans an appropriate (and perhaps ennobling) response to hardship. Thus, at the core of *Eikha*’s tale of human suffering stands a person and his reflections.

This focus on the individual is crucial, but God’s absence in this section leaves the reader flailing. Who imposes the “burden” on the sufferer in this section? To which abuser should the sufferer submit his cheek? Rashi (3:28) assumes that God has afflicted the hapless *gever*. Indeed, the continuation of these theological reflections suggests as much.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet, by not naming God in this central section, the book highlights the human being. *Eikha* focuses upon the human condition; at its deepest point, this book seeks the individual’s inner resources and the secret of the human ability to continue to survive in a world filled with suffering.

**“It is good for a *gever* to bear a burden in his youth” (3:27)**

The word *tov* (good) opens this section, the third sentence of the alphabetic *tet* unit, all of which open with the word *tov*.[[3]](#footnote-3) The word marks a smooth continuity from one subunit to the next, as well as a striking progression in the *gever*’s thought. As the *gever* ruminates on what is good, he transitions from his contemplation about God (who is *good* to those who seek Him, verse 25), to ruminations about how it is *good* for man to behave (hoping in silence for God’s salvations, verse 26.) The culmination of his introspective discourse on defining what is good occurs when the *gever* concludes that it is *good* for an individual to bear a burden in his formative years (verse 27). Suffering begets good; the *gever*’s ordeal has value. The *gever* proceeds from an outward glance (toward God) toward himself (his own behavior), resting finally on a general description of what is “good” for all human beings.

The central section is didactic in nature, opening with a statement that recalls instructive statements found often in the book of *Mishlei*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The *gever* offers general advice meant to be applicable to all human beings, opening with the expansive (but not personal) statement that bearing a burden in one’s youth is good for the individual.

Why is it good to bear a burden in one’s youth? Perhaps this statement seeks to limit the duration of the travails, emphasizing that it would be good *only* to suffer in one’s youth, when one has the stamina and resilience to tolerate suffering. However, it seems that the statement maintains a positive outlook toward suffering in one’s youth. Some commentators suggest that the yoke refers not to abstract suffering, but to punishment for sins. In this reading, those who are punished for their sins in their youth will not receive punishment later in life.[[5]](#footnote-5) Others regard this suffering in the youth as a formative experience, one that is instrumental in constructing the human persona. In this schema, it may be good for people to experience suffering in their youth to prepare them to face life’s inevitable suffering in later years, when their strength has waned. If they suffer in their youth, they will have acquired the tools to bear misery, so that they do not despair when they experience hardships later in life.[[6]](#footnote-6) Possibly, the statement means to say that individuals who encounter difficulties in their youth acquire courage and build a robust character. They can learn to rely on God and on their own inner resources, accruing strength to survive and endure whatever hardships may come their way.

The burden (*ol*) may hint not to suffering or even punishment for sin, but rather to the encumbrance of sin itself (see the use of the word *ol* in *Eikha* 1:14), which stymies the *gever* in his ongoing quest for a relationship with God. Bearing this burden teaches the *gever* the agony of living without God and the terrible consequences of sin.[[7]](#footnote-7) From this experience, the *gever* acquires the desire to maintain an ongoing relationship with God.

Alternatively, the yoke can be a metaphor for God’s commandments, which every individual must eventually shoulder and which he should begin experiencing in his youth.[[8]](#footnote-8) I find this approach less compelling, as it disregards the suffering of the *gever*, focusing instead on the positive onus of God’s commands. While this is a nice idea, it does not cohere well with the broader context of the chapter.

**The Significance of Words: *gever, ol, badad, lechi, afar, yiddom, pihu, herpah***

Several words that appear at the apex of the book echo earlier words or point forward to later words, offering clues as to the critical idea that lies at the core of this book. The word *gever* appeared at the opening of the chapter (*ani* *ha-gever*, 3:1), drawing our attention to the fact that the *gever* who discovers good in his suffering (*tov* *la-gever*, 3:27) is the same wretched figure who launched the chapter with the account of his misfortunes. If we identify that *gever* as Everyman, then this central section strives to educate every suffering individual to find good in his travails.

Words that appear only twice in the entire book (one of which is in the epicenter) may be especially of value for understanding its essence. The word *ol*, yoke or burden, appears only one other time in the book. In 1:14, the word portrays Jerusalem’s transgressions, woven together by God to form a suffocating yoke around Jerusalem’s neck. There, the word *ol* appears as part of Jerusalem’s complaint, her protracted description of the manner in which God brings His wrath to bear upon her. In the center of the book, however ,the word *ol* is linked with the *gever*’s good, suggesting that sins, or any heavy yoke, do not have to suffocate the individual, but can be beneficial and can lead to good (as we noted in our discussion above). In chapter 3, the *gever* expresses gratitude for the yoke, recognizing that he must bear it with purpose. The book uses this word to engage in an internal dialogue, shifting from one approach to a quite different one.

Can we determine a “correct” and an “incorrect” perception? Perhaps, the anguished view of the yoke (in chapter 1) is appropriate to its context, in which Jerusalem describes her torment and questions God’s treatment of her. The beneficial approach (in chapter 3) lies at the core of the human experience, accessible only after humans have the time and the ability to reflect deeply about God’s ways.

The word *badad* also appears only twice in the book: once, at its opening (1:1), to describe Jerusalem’s unbearable lonesomeness, and once here (3:28), to encourage the experience of solitude. In this case, as well, the center of *Eikha* transforms misery into a constructive experience, in which loneliness transmutes into confidence, patience, and stalwart faith, rather than agonizing isolation. The *gever*’s solitude is another opportunity for introspection[[9]](#footnote-9) and a reminder that he can only truly rely on God.

Another word that appears twice in the book is the word cheek (*lechi*). The cheeks (*lecheya*) that are wet with undried tears in *Eikha* 1:2 reappear here as part of the sufferer’s bold and courageous embrace of his own suffering: “He should give his cheek to the one who strikes him.” Finally, the word *afar* (dust) also appears only twice in the book. It first describes the mourning rituals of the elders, who, having witnessed the devastation of Jerusalem, despondently rub dust on their heads (2:10). This act evokes the lowly origins and tragic fate of humans, who emerged from dust (*afar*) and will inevitably return to dust (*afar*) (*Bereishit* 3:19). Here, however, the sufferer embraces his mortality and his humble pedigree, noting that it can bring hope: “He should place his mouth in the dust (*afar*); perhaps there will be hope.”[[10]](#footnote-10) It seems that the proper conduct for a suffering individual is to embrace his travails and welcome God’s designs with patience, submission, and acceptance. Since God is good and compassionate, there is hope for the future, if God should choose to bring about salvation.

Other words in this central section appear more than twice in the book, but in a significantly changed manner from their other appearances in the book. Unlike the wretched elders who dejectedly sit on the ground, mourning silently (*yidemu*) in agonized helplessness (2:10), the word *yidom* appears in 3:28 as a positive act (he *should* sit in solitude and be silent, *ve-yidom*).[[11]](#footnote-11) In the critical center of the book, the *gever*’s silence is positive, suggesting faith in God and submission to His plans.[[12]](#footnote-12) The apex of the book highlights the tranquil and unwavering silence of the suffering individual, whose inner ruminations have led him to discover serenity, along with patient acceptance of his lot.

The use of the word mouth also obtains significance in relation to its usage elsewhere in the book. In 3:29, placing one’s mouth (*pihu*) in the dust seems to be an expression of subservience and obedience, in which one deliberately silences himself, allowing no words to issue forth from his mouth.[[13]](#footnote-13) While the word mouth appears several times in *Eikha*,[[14]](#footnote-14) this exact form of the word – *pihu* – appears only elsewhere in 1:18 at a revelatory moment in the trajectory of the chapter. There, Jerusalem concedes that she has rebelled against God’s mouth (*pihu*), thereby bringing upon herself all of God’s just punishments. The two appearances of the word *pihu* clash and then merge; that which issues from God’s mouth is quite different from whatever may emerge from the human’s mouth. God’s authoritative instructions ring truthfully and righteously, while the suffering individual should place his mouth in the dust, not daring to issue forth words of complaint or protest. To do so would be to fail to recognize the supremacy of God’s *pihu*, of His just design.

The final word of this section, *herpah*, means shame, and it concludes the section with a curious endorsement of the experience of degradation: “he should suffer it in shame.” One can surmise several reasons why the *gever* concludes that humans should embrace their own dishonor. First, it seems to be a character building experience. Second, it puts human beings in their proper place, reminding them that they must combat their natural inclination toward conceit and hubris. Human arrogance inevitably produces sin, and the experience of disgrace may be a much-needed reminder of the dangers and erroneous nature of human vanity and pride. Finally, the *gever* twice thrusts his humiliation (*herpah*) at God later in the book (*Eikha* 3:61; 5:1), with the assumption that it will prod God to act on His nation’s behalf. This may be because God pities those who have been shamed, or perhaps because God’s honor or dishonor is woven deeply into that of His nation.[[15]](#footnote-15) In any case, the *gever*’s experience of shame can inspire God to deliverance, concluding this ruminative section with a positive act that the *gever* can embrace to precipitate God’s intervention in His affairs.

In summary, this central section of the book advocates the proper conduct for a suffering individual, having accepted axiomatically that bearing a burden is good. Strikingly, the book does not actually explain how it arrives at these startling conclusions.[[16]](#footnote-16) The *gever* merely states, rather unequivocally, that it is good for man to bear a yoke, to sit in silence and solitude, to place his mouth deferentially in the dust and wait for the possibility of hope, and to seek out beatings and dishonor. Why is any of this good? The book leaves it to each individual to determine how suffering can be constructive, the manner in which it can build his character and his relationship with God. In any case, an individual should accept his hardships with equanimity and humility and regard suffering as beneficial and ennobling, formative in constructing his persona.

1. Unlike the previous chapters, this chapter does not appear to have a chiastic structure, progressing instead in a linear fashion. In the previous circular chapters (1 and 2), the quantifiable midpoint of the alphabetic chapters are the *kaf* and *lamed* verses (verses 11 and 12), which appeared as the hinge around which the concentric chapters revolved. In this non-circular chapter, I have taken the liberty to define its midpoint elsewhere (in the *tet* and *yud* verses) based on the substance and themes of the chapter. Moreover, I have assigned the first two *tet* verses to the previous sub-section (based on the word *yachal*, as noted above). All structural divisions of this chapter remain uncertain; the one that I have presented seems to me to have the most substantive significance, as I will try to illustrate. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also R. Yosef Kara, *Eikha* 3:28. These exegetes do not comment on the identity of the one who strikes the *gever*, although their comment on 3:28 seems to suggest that God is the perpetrator of all of the *gever*’s woes in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is not typical of the alphabetic units in this chapter, which generally vary its opening words. The only other example in which the alphabetic unit employs the identical word at its inception is the *kaf* unit, in which all three verses open with the word *ki*. The eightfold *tet* unit in Psalm 119 employs the word tov as its opening word in five out of the eight verses, suggesting that this is a commonplace word in alphabetic compositions (see also e.g. *Psalms* 37:16; 112:6; 145:9; *Eikha* 4:9), although there remain other possible options (*Psalms* 34:9; 111:5; *Mishlei* 31:18; *Eikha* 1:9; 2:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many statements in *Mishlei* begin with the word *tov*, in a bid to counsel a general audience as to what is “good.” See e.g. *Mishlei* 8:19; 12:2; 13:22; 16:8. Moreover, the youth (*na’ar*) is a prominent figure in the book of *Mishlei*, whose hortatory content includes often specific advice about how to educate the young to the proper path. See e.g. *Mishlei* 22:15; 23:13-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g. R. Yosef Kara. A Targum of *Eikha* 3:28 suggests that one who suffers punishment for his sins in this world will arrive in a perfect state to the next world. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See House, *Lamentations*, p. 416, extrapolating from C. F. Keil, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*,J. Martin, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1872, reprinted, 1980), p. 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Soloveitchik develops the idea that sin causes human suffering; see *On Repentance,* P. Peli, trans. (Jerusalem: Oroth, 1980), pp. 210-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the Targum’s translation of *Eikha* 3:27. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 94, cites this approach, recalling Jewish tradition that regards the commandments as a yoke (see e.g. Mishna *Berakhot* 2:2; Sifra *Shemini* 10:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See the Mishna in *Avot* 3:2, which sees this verse as a description of the individual who learns Torah in his solitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While some regard the word *ulai*, “*maybe* there is hope,” in a negative way, as though the *gever*’s hope falters and fades (e.g. O’Connor, *Lamentations*, p. 51), I would regard it as a reflection of humility before God. Biblical passages often mitigate their descriptions of what God will do with the word *ulai*, “maybe” (see e.g. *Joshua* 14:12; *I* *Samuel* 14:6; *II* *Kings* 19:4.) This word indicates that God’s ways are not predictable and humans cannot command God to act at their behest. With appropriate humility, humans approach God with uncertainty, hoping that He will see fit to do that which we require. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This word appears elsewhere in the book as well. *Eikha* 2:18 has a similar word, *tidom*, from the root *dmm*. There, the narrator implores Jerusalem not to allow her eyes to remain silent. As I noted in the commentary to 3:26, the word here may not be identical with the similar words in 2:10, 18, and 3:28. They may share only a two-letter root (*dm*), rather than a full three-letter root, one of which is *dom* and the other is *dmm*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rashi (3:28) explains that he *should* fall silent because of his understanding that God has decreed this against him. Rashi reads the word *ki* as “because,” rather than “when,” unlike the manner in which I have translated it above. Note also that Rashi explains the word *yidom* here as waiting, not as silence, disagreeing with the Targum on this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibn Ezra suggests that it denotes prostration, in which the individual bows low to the earth in recognition of God’s decree, until dust enters his mouth. See also Targum on 3:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The word *peh* appears three more times in the book: twice, the enemies’ mouth spews vitriol against the suffering Jerusalem (2:16; 3:46), and once the word *peh* describes God’s just instructions (3:38). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The word *herpah* is often used in conjunction with Israel’s enemy, whose bid to shame Israel is also an attempt to dishonor God (e.g. *I Samuel* 17:10, 26, 45; *II Kings* 19:4). See also *Ezekiel* 36:22-36, in which God declares that He will deliver Israel in order to consecrate His name, which has been desecrated by Israel’s shameful situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is unlike *Job* 5:17-18, where Elifaz explains that the man who God punishes should be happy because God will surely restore and rehabilitate him. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)