YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #40: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

***Eikha* 3:31-39**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Further Exploration of God’s Compassionate Ways**

**כִּ֣י לֹ֥א יִזְנַ֛ח לְעוֹלָ֖ם**

**אֲדֹנָֽי**

**כִּ֣י אִם־הוֹגָ֔ה**

**וְרִחַ֖ם כְּרֹ֥ב חֲסָדָֽיו**

**כִּ֣י לֹ֤א עִנָּה֙ מִלִּבּ֔וֹ**

**וַיַּגֶּ֖ה בְּנֵי־אִֽישׁ**

**For He shall not reject forever,**

**God**

**For even when He causes grief,**

**He will then have compassion, out of His great kindness**

**For He does not torment from His heart [deliberately]**

**To cause people grief**

*The Kaf Verses: A Brief Set of Explanations*

The previous section (verses 27-30) struck a confident tone, advising the sufferer to bear his misfortune in solitude, silence, and submission. Why should the sufferer yield to this advice? Significantly, the three initial verses of this subunit (verses 31-33) are the *kaf* verses, all of which begin with the explanatory *ki*. These sequential verses contain three separate contentions with regard to God’s attributes, each of which appears designated to support the advocated compliance.[[2]](#footnote-2) As we will see, according to these verses, God’s punitive decrees are temporary, ultimately compassionate, and meaningful (that is, not random).

By returning the discussion’s focus to God, this subunit suggests that each suffering individual is in God’s hands and must accept his suffering as God’s decree. Moreover, this section suggests that the sufferer can calmly embrace his burdens, given the certainty that God will renew His compassion when the sentence is complete.

Three brief axiomatic statements about God appear in the *kaf* verses. Presented as manifest truth, there is no attempt to explain or substantiate these ideas. This is not a treatise on theology, but an attempt to offer basic guidelines for the religious sufferer.

**Statement one:**

For He shall not reject forever,

God.

A short, blunt proclamation, this sentence does not easily bifurcate into two parts. The most likely division (as I have noted in my translation above) places undue weight on the sentence’s first half, “For He shall not reject forever.” Its second part consists of one stark word, which focuses our attention upon the renewed subject of the chapter: God. No longer fixated upon the human sufferer, the chapter returns its attention to God. However, by only naming God in its final word, the verse hints to the difficulty of grasping God, even as he avows God’s compassion and trustworthiness. While the book previously admits that suffering derives from divine rejection (see 2:7), *Eikha* here asserts that God’s rejection is not without an end. By employing the same word (*zanach*) that the *gever* had previously used to express his soul’s rejection of peace (3:17), this verse clarifies why there is still no cause for despair. God will not abandon a sufferer forever; there is no reason to lose hope.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Statement Two:**

For even when He causes grief,

He will then have compassion, out of His great kindness.

God’s goodness and compassion remain axiomatic; this is a basic principle of the Bible. Nevertheless, human suffering calls into question the notion of God’s boundless kindness.

While *Eikha* does not offer a programmatic discourse on this topic, it does adopt certain assumptions. First, it does not absolve God of responsibility for human suffering. Explicitly acknowledging that God causes grief (without yet explaining why),[[4]](#footnote-4) this verse continues by promising that God’s compassion will soon push aside that grief. Recalling the opening section of the ruminations (3:22-23), this verse advocates the view that God’s kindnesses will always prevail and rekindle, even when they seem to have been suspended or terminated. Finally, this verse assumes that God’s afflictions are not the norm; they are always a temporary interval, soon to be replaced by God’s natural state, His abiding compassion and kindness.

**Statement Three:**

For He does not torment from His heart [deliberately]

To cause people grief.

Finally, the verse asserts that God does not inflict suffering from His own heart. In other words, God does not desire to cause people grief. He is not capricious, cruel, or vengeful. But this reassuring thought fails to address the critical question: Why, then, does God afflict people? No answer is forthcoming.[[5]](#footnote-5) The individual has yet to state the obvious; the word sin remains noticeably absent from the discussion, as each individual begins to anticipate the impending, inevitable conclusion.

**לְדַכֵּא֙ תַּ֣חַת רַגְלָ֔יו**

**כֹּ֖ל אֲסִ֥ירֵי אָֽרֶץ**

**לְהַטּוֹת֙ מִשְׁפַּט־גָּ֔בֶר**

**נֶ֖גֶד פְּנֵ֥י עֶלְיֽוֹן**

**לְעַוֵּ֤ת אָדָם֙ בְּרִיב֔וֹ**

**אֲדֹנָ֖י לֹ֥א רָאָֽה**

**By crushing under his feet**

**All of the prisoners of the earth**

**By distorting the laws of a man**

**Before the presence of the Most High**

**By corrupting man in his dispute**

**[All of the above] God did not see**

*The Lamed Verses*

An alphabetic unit, verses 34-36 each begin with a *lamed* introducing an infinitive clause describing an injustice: trampling hapless prisoners, distorting justice, corrupting disputes. This section evokes the injustice that prevails among humans.[[6]](#footnote-6) Humans can be cruel and arbitrary, sadistically relishing the torment of others.

According to these verses, God does not behave in a similarly perverse manner as humans (see also *Iyov* 8:3).[[7]](#footnote-7) These verses conclude that God does *not* sanction or condone these injustices.[[8]](#footnote-8) Rashi (3:34-36) explains that the negative *ki lo* at the beginning of verse 33 carries over to all of the portrayed injustices, such that each one represents something that God does not desire and would never wield. Rashi also regards the definitive statement at the conclusion of the final *lamed* verse (“God does not see”)[[9]](#footnote-9) as a statement that reflects on **all** of the previously delineated corrupt behaviors.[[10]](#footnote-10) God does not *see* or identify with any of the immoral deeds cited in the *lamed* verses; He cannot bear or tolerate injustice. God does not crush prisoners under His feet[[11]](#footnote-11) or behave with corruption in His judgment of humans. God remains above the immoral machinations of humans.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus, there must be an explanation for God’s decision to inflict grief.

**מִ֣י זֶ֤ה אָמַר֙ וַתֶּ֔הִי**

**אֲדֹנָ֖י לֹ֥א צִוָּֽה**

**מִפִּ֤י עֶלְיוֹן֙ לֹ֣א תֵצֵ֔א**

**הָרָע֖וֹת וְהַטּֽוֹב**

**מַה־יִּתְאוֹנֵן֙ אָדָ֣ם חָ֔י**

**גֶּ֖בֶר עַל־חטאו חֲטָאָֽיו**

**Who was it that spoke, and it came to be?
Was it not God who commanded?**

**Does not the mouth of the Most High issue**

**Bad and good?**

**Of what can living man complain?**

**Each man of his own sin!**

The *Mem* Verses

At this point in the concise exploration, a conclusion seems in reach; it is perhaps even inescapable. Yet, it remains elusive for just a little longer. For another two verses, the ruminations continue, focusing upon God’s control over the world. Before arriving at the ineluctable finale to these contemplations, the chapter explores one final theological question: God’s omnipotence. While it has invested plenty of efforts in establishing God’s axiomatic goodness and justness, confirming that God is *willing* to prevent evil, the question of God’s omnipotence remains critical. As Epicurus famously asked:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?Then He is not omnipotent.*[[13]](#footnote-13)*

A contradiction arises between God’s inability to tolerate injustice and the injustice that continues to prevail. Perhaps, then, God’s omnipotence is not certain; perhaps there are forces that overwhelm God’s desire for justice and good.

Two brief verses put these uncertainties to rest:

Who was it that spoke, and it came to be?
Was it not God who commanded? [[14]](#footnote-14)

Does not the mouth of the Most High issue

Bad and good?[[15]](#footnote-15)

These rhetorical questions establish God’s control over the world, including over the bad things that occur. By formulating God’s omnipotence as rhetorical questions, the verses draw the reader in, expecting the readers to nod vigorously in acquiescence to these patent truths. Indeed, God created the world with the spoken word. Simply by uttering, “It shall be,” the world emerged into existence. If God created the world, then He has power over it.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, God assumes responsibility for everything – bad as well as good.[[17]](#footnote-17) Everything comes from God, and everything is part of the just divine plan.[[18]](#footnote-18)

If we accept that God is responsible for all evil and that He does not conjure evil on a whim or for His own delight, these contemplations can finally draw to their resounding, dramatic conclusion: Of what then can living man complain? Each *gever* only of his own sins!

As the word “sin” surfaces for the first time in the chapter, its absence from the first thirty-eight verses becomes glaringly apparent. Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear what this vivid finale means to convey. Is it a confession of sin, a blunt recognition that he must certainly have transgressed? Or is it an avowal of human limitations in trying to comprehend God?

Rashi regards this as a recognition of sinfulness, the logical conclusion of this contemplative passage:

And if I come and say, “This evil did not come from His hand, it was a coincidence that it happened to me,” this is not so, for whether bad or good events, who was it that uttered “and it shall be”? Was it not God who commanded, and from His mouth did not both good and bad emerge? And so, of what can living man complain?... Each individual can complain about his sins, *for they bring upon him misfortune.*[[19]](#footnote-19)

According to this approach, no misfortune exists in a vacuum. If someone suffers, he must recognize his own culpability.[[20]](#footnote-20) He certainly should not complain in a manner that suggests rebellion or renunciation of responsibility.[[21]](#footnote-21) The obvious next step occurs in the verse that follows this revelation: “We must search our ways and examine them, so that we can return to God” (*Eikha* 3:40). Confession produces introspection, followed by repentance.

The age-old problem of evil people who prosper and good people who suffer arises in the wake of this unequivocal conclusion. Rather than address this inscrutable question, I will propose another way to understand the conclusive statement: “Of what shall living humans complain? Each man of his own sins!” Philosophical attempts to resolve the mystery of God’s designs inevitably fail. Instead, the sufferer has only one efficacious recourse, and that is to turn inward and consider how these events can produce change. While we can never comprehend God’s designs, we can control our own response. Therefore, the critical question is not a helpless, “Why did this happen?” but rather a practical, “What can each individual do in the wake of suffering?”[[22]](#footnote-22) Each person can view his misfortunes as an opportunity to introspect and improve himself. In this schema, the direct correlation between sins and misfortunes dissipates. Instead, humans choose a constructive response to their travails, one that involves self-introspection and self-improvement.

1. This dense passage defies easy translation or explanation. Statements may be read as questions, and questions may be actual or rhetorical, depending on the interpreter’s inclination. The only verses that should certainly be read as a question are those that open with an interrogative (verses 37 and 39). Other attempts to place a question mark at the conclusion of a sentence involve creative liberties taken by the interpreter. Placing a question mark at the end of a statement completely reverses its meaning, resulting in a radically changed verse.

The array of possible interpretations stymies any clear translation of this passage, making it nearly impossible to offer a conclusive reading. To compound the difficulty of this section, its thematic contiguity remains obscure. How does this section proceed from one idea to the next? What is its overall idea? Perhaps this section consciously endeavors to maintain a measure of obscurity. Indeed, any discussion of theodicy (namely, the bid to defend God’s goodness and omnipotence while evil exists in the world) seems to necessitate a deliberate vagueness, one that reflects the uncertainty that accompanies the attempt to grapple with this topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi (3:31) reads the section in this manner, explaining that the fact that God does not reject humans forever is a good reason to submit silently to God’s decree. R. Yosef Kara (3:31) makes a similar point: “And now he gives a reason for all that was said above. Why is it ‘good for the *gever* that he should bear a burden in his youth’ and there is no greater good for a person than that that ‘he should sit in solitude and silence,’ throughout everything that God places upon him? ‘He should put his mouth in the dust… he should give the one who strikes him his cheek’ - ‘For God will not reject forever!’” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This idea appears often in *Tanakh*. See e.g. *Tehillim* 77:8; 103:8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rashi (3:32) prefers not to sustain this omission in the verse, which leaves a troubling theological void. He therefore adds an explanation for God’s afflictions – namely, that God brings grief because of man’s sins, an idea that will only appear at the conclusion of this section in *Eikha* 3:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Once again, Rashi (3:33) fills the void by explaining that God only afflicts people when they have sinned. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Westermann, *Lamentations*, p. 178, discerns the voice of someone who has suffered unjustly in the background of these verses. I see no particular reason to assume that these verses refer to someone’s specific experience. All of the ruminations in this section seem to be of a general nature, designed to relate to anyone and everyone who has suffered in all sorts of contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The language of these verses evoke biblical laws that instruct uprightness, particularly for the poor and helpless (e.g. *Shemot* 23:6; *Devarim* 24:17; 27:19). Perhaps for this reason, the Targum adds the adjective “*miskein*” (meaning poor or contemptible) to describe the sufferer in verses 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Though it seems apparent throughout that the intention here is *not* to thrust these injustices as accusations at God, but rather to maintain the opposite, we can only actually extrapolate that by the interpretations suggested above – by either applying the final clause of the *lamed* verses (“God did not see”) to all of the earlier statements in verses 34-36 or by applying the first two words of verse 33 (*ki* *lo*) to all of the following verses, which then read in the negative. In their elliptical state, these descriptions preserve the accusing voice of the claimants, indicating that human beings do not easily exonerate God, especially in the wake of terrible misfortune. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Interpreters explain the phrase, “God does not see,” in vastly different ways, emerging with quite different readings of this section. Westermann (*Lamentations*, pp. 162, 166, 178; and Berlin, *Lamentations*, pp. 81, 83) read this as a rhetorical question: “Does not the Lord see it?” This reading indicates that sufferers should take comfort in the fact that God sees all human injustice. O’Connor (*Lamentations*, p. 52) offers a completely different reading, claiming that *Eikha* portrays God as One Who has chosen not to see or respond to human suffering (as indicated in *Eikha* 1:9, 11, 20; 2:20). This reading suggests that these ponderings do include an accusation, or at the very least an uncomfortable theological confusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is as I have offered in my translation above. See also Gordis, *Lamentations*, p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibn Ezra’s explanation of the erroneous view presented in this verse is that the verse raises the possibility that God sits in the heavens, while the unfortunate human beings are prisoners of the earth, locked together in a world that operates in accordance with God’s whim. The idea raised here represents a theology of horror, in which God deliberately traps humans in order to crush them. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. While this point seems self-evident, scholars note that the Bible’s portrayal of God’s morality constitutes one of the great contributions of the Bible. According to N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), pp. 16-18, the fundamental difference between polytheism and monotheism is that a system of many gods “inevitably engendered a multiplicity of ethical values and moral standards.” By introducing one supreme God whose essential nature is ethical, the Bible establishes a universal moral order for the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The following is the full citation of Epicurus, often regarding as the basic formulation of the problem of theodicy: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not omnipotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This verse has generated a wide variety of interpretations. R. Saadia Gaon, for example, explains this verse as follows: “Who has ever said that something will be and it was, if God did not command that it should be.” R. Yosef Kara maintains that it follows from the previous verse: “If someone tells you that this is so, namely that God enjoys corrupting humans in their disputes and crushing under his feet all of the prisoners of the earth, do not believe them, because God did not command this thing.” See also the Targum, who has a completely different interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This verse also has widely disparate interpretations, which produce opposite meanings. Gordis (*Lamentations*, pp. 143, 175, 182-183), for example, does not regard this as a rhetorical question, but rather as a statement, firmly declaring that God is *not* the source of evil in the world. This view is similar to Eliphaz’s view in *Iyov* 5:6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Many biblical passages assume this. See e.g. *Isaiah* 40:22-23; 42:5; *Tehillim* 33:6-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This reading broadly follows Rashi’s first interpretation of verse 38. However, Rashi’s second interpretation (along with the interpretations of R. Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra, and R. Yosef Kara) does not regard this as a rhetorical question, but rather as a definitive statement: It is *not* from God’s mouth that human evil and good emerge! Read in this way, it actually means quite the opposite. God does not cause evil; humans alone are responsible for evil in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For a similar idea, see e.g. *Amos* 3:6, *Isaiah* 45:7, *Iyov* 2:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See also *Eikha* *Rabba* 3:40 and R. Yosef Kara’s commentary on *Eikha* 3:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A *gemara* (*Berakhot* 5a) offers a more complex approach, explaining that there are various reasons why a person may suffer:

Raba (some say R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: “Let us search and examine our ways and return to God.” If he examines and finds nothing, he should attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: “Happy is the man who You cause to suffer, God, and from Your Torah You teach.”  If he did attribute it to this and still did not find [this to be the cause], it is certain that these are suffering from love. For it is said: “For whom the Lord loves He rebukes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Note that the only other use of the word *yitonen* appears in *Bamidbar* 11:1, where the word illustrates Israel’s rebellious complaint against God in the desert. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This is R. Soloveitchik’s general approach at the opening of his important essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek*. See *Kol Dodi Dofek*, D. Z. Gordon, trans. (New York: Yeshiva University, reprinted 2006), pp. 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)