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*EIKHA*: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

**Shiur #41: Eikha: Chapter 3** (continued)

***Eikha* 3:40-66**

Having paused to introspect and consider God’s ways, human accountability, and how humans should respond to suffering, the third section of this chapter returns to the account of misfortune. Initially, the *gever* speaks in first person plural, unexpectedly appearing in the role of leader amongst a community of sufferers.[[1]](#footnote-1) In verse 48, the *gever* returns to the first person singular for the duration of the chapter. Themes resurface from the first section of the chapter; prayer remains blocked and the sufferer is still entrapped, overwhelmed by the misfortunes and tribulations that prevail. Yet, the progression of the *gever* is remarkable. Utterly altered by his ruminations, the *gever* reconstructs his relationship with God and community, acquiring at the same time a new perception of himself.

**Structure of the Final Section (Verses 40-66)**

I am inclined to divide the final section of this chapter into three subsections, based on both speaker and substance. The first person plural speaker demarcates the first subsection (verses 40-47), casting the *gever* in the role of a member of a community. Verses 48-66 return to the familiar first person account of the individual speaker. I have subdivided these first person verses on thematic grounds. When the first person speaker initially re-emerges, he does not focus upon his own personal tragedy, concentrating instead on the suffering of the nation (verses 48-51). In verse 52, the individual resumes his own personal account. However, as we will see, he is a changed man, even if the miserable circumstances that swirl around him have not substantially changed. Comparing the individual’s final account of his suffering to the initial account at the beginning of the chapter illuminates the dramatic transformation that this individual undergoes during the course of this chapter.

A: Verses 40-47: *The Communal Speaker: Repentance, Prayer*, *and Complaint*

B: Verses 48-51: *The Individual Speaker: Advocating for the Community*

C: Verses 52-66: *The Individual Speaker: A Return to the Account of Suffering*

***Eikha* 3:40-47**

**נַחְפְּשָׂ֤ה דְרָכֵ֙ינוּ֙ וְֽנַחְקֹ֔רָה**

**וְנָשׁ֖וּבָה עַד־יְקֹוָֽק**

**נִשָּׂ֤א לְבָבֵ֙נוּ֙ אֶל־כַּפָּ֔יִם**

**אֶל־אֵ֖ל בַּשָּׁמָֽיִם**

**נַ֤חְנוּ פָשַׁ֙עְנוּ֙ וּמָרִ֔ינוּ**

**אַתָּ֖ה לֹ֥א סָלָֽחְתָּ**

**סַכֹּ֤תָה בָאַף֙ וַֽתִּרְדְּפֵ֔נוּ**

**הָרַ֖גְתָּ לֹ֥א חָמָֽלְתָּ**

**סַכּ֤וֹתָה בֶֽעָנָן֙ לָ֔ךְ**

**מֵעֲב֖וֹר תְּפִלָּֽה**

**סְחִ֧י וּמָא֛וֹס תְּשִׂימֵ֖נוּ
בְּקֶ֥רֶב הָעַמִּֽים**

**פָּצ֥וּ עָלֵ֛ינוּ פִּיהֶ֖ם**

**כָּל־אֹיְבֵֽינוּ**

**פַּ֧חַד וָפַ֛חַת הָ֥יָה לָ֖נוּ**

**הַשֵּׁ֥את וְהַשָּֽׁבֶר**

**Let us search out our ways and examine them**

**And we will return to God**

**Let us lift up our hearts in our hands**

**To God in the heavens**

**We have sinned and rebelled**

**You did not forgive**

**You covered Yourself in anger and You pursued us**

**You killed and You did not pity**

**You covered Yourself with a cloud**

**From allowing prayer to pass through**

**You placed us in filth and refuse**

**In the midst of the nations**

**They opened their mouths at us**

**All of our enemies**

**Fear and pitfall are our lot**

**Horror and brokenness**

The word *chata’av* (verse 39) remains suspended in mid-air, as we eagerly wait to see how the *gever* will proceed following his vivid realization. What is the nature of the *gever*’s constructive response to his situation? Confession produces introspection and repentance,[[2]](#footnote-2) followed promptly by prayer and more confession.

The key to understanding the *gever*’s constructive response is his striking (and unprecedented) shift from a first person singular voice to a first person plural. The *gever* now speaks as part of a community. He has abandoned the posture of the forlorn individual, whose isolation from his community is an additional item in the litany of his personal woes. One cannot forget his plaintive description from verse 14: “I was a laughingstock of my nation, their plaything all of the day.” The *gever* never explains the cause of this alienation; it remains simply one of his many trials, another reason for self-pity and despair.

The *gever*’s sense of isolation from his nation links up with his sense of alienation from God (indicated primarily by the fact that he does not mention God by name for seventeen verses.) His estrangement from God may necessarily produce his forfeiture of the covenantal community, whose definition and essence derives from shared worship and common religious practices and values. Moreover, the *gever*’s crushing misery produces a narcissistic obsession with his woes, the inability to see beyond his own grisly experiences. Therefore, he sees neither God nor his fellow humans; utter alienation overwhelms him.

How, then, has the *gever* recovered a relationship both with God and with his estranged community? First, as the chapter progresses, the *gever*’s intense inward focus begins to wane. As the *gever* regains his equilibrium, his gaze moves from a self-absorbed fixation on his own suffering to a newfound awareness of his surroundings. Others come into focus, and he observes that they too suffer. The dissipation of his self-centered misery also allows him to see God, who was absent from his initial description of his woes.

Comparison of verses 8 and 44 – two substantively similar verses, in which the speaker bemoans the failure of his prayer to reach God – throws the *gever*’s transformation into sharp relief. In verse 8, the *gever*’s prayer was so self-centered that he did not even acknowledge the recipient of his pleas. Verse 8 lacks an address, a “thou,” instead focusing exclusively on the individual who bemoans the futility of his prayers: “Even when *I* cry out and when *I* plead, *my* prayer is shut out.” In content, verse 44 is not substantially different from verse 8; the communal voice again laments his perception that prayer fails to reach its destination. However, there is no remnant left of the self-absorbed victim of the first section. Instead, verse 44 obscures the “I” who prays, referencing the divine addressee twice in the second person: “*You* covered *Yourself* with a cloud from allowing prayer to pass through.” The contrast between these verses illustrates well the shift that has taken place. No longer consumed by his own misery, the *gever* reacquires the ability to see outside of his own self-absorbed reality.

A second reason that the *gever* reacquires his community relates to his recent reconciliation with God. Just as the loss of God entailed the loss of membership in the covenantal nation, reconciliation with God facilitates the *gever*’s recovery of his affiliation with the covenantal community. It is not shared culture, history, land, or language that primarily binds the covenantal community of Israel, but, first and foremost, their shared relationship with God. When an individual member of the nation of Israel breaks off his relationship with God by sinning, this negatively affects his relationship with the community. The converse is true as well; by reconvening his relationship with God, the *gever* finds himself once again a part of the covenantal community of Israel.

Why, though, does the *gever* choose to speak in the plural form? Why veer sharply away from the intensely personal narrative to link up to the national tragedy? It is now that the *gever* transforms his tragedy into a constructive affair, making his own suffering meaningful and useful. Inspired to share his revelations with others, the *gever* commissions his community to join him in introspection and repentance, endeavoring to elicit their devotion, faithfulness, and passion. In a gesture of humble petition, the *gever* recruits others to lift their hearts and hands upwards along with him in a quest to find God. Thus, the *gever* joins his community, not simply to associate with them, but to motivate, guide, and lead them in his newfound transformative journey.

Contrition is fleeting. In a surprising turnaround, the *gever* sharply alters his conciliatory tone. “We have sinned and rebelled, [but] **You** did not forgive!” Anger and complaint supplant the remorseful call to repentance and prayer.[[3]](#footnote-3) The second person accusation (“*You* did not forgive!”) replaces the first person plural of confession (“*We* have sinned and rebelled”), establishing an adversarial relationship between the community and God.[[4]](#footnote-4) Each side has betrayed the other; both parties assume a measure of culpability. Casting off sorrowful confession, the community indulges instead in delineating its grievances, which snowball and grow in intensity. Flinging accusations at God in a series of rapid-fire second person verbs, the community’s anger at God is both personal and direct: “*You* did not forgive, *You* covered *Yourself* in anger, *You* pursued us, *You* killed, *You* did not pity, *You* covered *Yourself* with a cloud… *You* placed us in filth and refuse in the midst of the nations!”

In a jarring reversal, the *gever* who has finally discovered sin and launched repentance, now has the audacity to renew his complaints and reproach God, treated Him as an adversary. How has this occurred?[[5]](#footnote-5)

Possibly, regaining his community actually empowers the *gever*; speaking in the plural form enables humans to direct accusations against God that an individual could never dare utter. Once the *gever* joins the covenantal community, he can expect different assurances and commitments from God. God seems more inclined to forgive His collective nation than individual sinners. The covenant that God made with the forefathers obligates Him to maintain fidelity to the national entity,[[6]](#footnote-6) though not necessarily to individuals. In a similar vein, a *gemara* accords special powers to collective prayer, noting that God pays special attention to the pleas of the community:

What is the meaning of the verse: “And my prayer will be to You God at an acceptable time”? When is an acceptable time? At the time that the congregation is praying… R. Natan says: From where do we know that God does not reject the prayers of the many? As it says (*Iyov* 36:5), “Behold, God does not reject the mighty.”[[7]](#footnote-7) (*Berakhot* 8a)

Moreover, the community has different privileges than the individual when addressing God. The very act of addressing God directly in a series of second person verbs illustrates the bold manner in which the community approaches God. Instead of a single mortal approaching God with a plea or petition, when the covenantal community reaches out to God, it has the right to speak directly to God and to harbor the expectation that God will heed, forgive, and acquiesce to his petition.

In addition, the communal voice tempers the aggrieved words spoken by the sufferers. Protests, objections, and grievances become supplication and prayer in the communal mouth. Defined by its shared commitment to serving God, the nation’s anger at God is muted by the certain knowledge that the community has not rejected the authority of God, but rather simply claims that which God has promised the community.

Substantively, the miserable reality described by the collective entity is familiar from other depictions in the book. Enemies prevail, opening their mouths in gloating mockery, just as they did in *Eikha* 2:16. Steeped in fear and pitfall, the community’s final words express their horror and brokenness (see *Eikha* 2:13). The highly alliterative word-pairs “*pachad* *va-phachat*” and *ha-shet* *ve-ha-shever*”[[8]](#footnote-8) suggest that these words work in tandem, cooperating to entrap the victim, who cannot escape his terrible fate.[[9]](#footnote-9) Exiting the *pachad*, he falls in the *pachat*; even if he can manage to extract himself from the horror (*shet*), he is certain to be overwhelmed by brokenness (*shever*).

Yet, the *gever* undergoes a significant personal transformation, as indicated by the shift to a communal voice. Speaking as part of a congregation, as a communal “we,” the *gever* rises above his lonely, self-absorbed victimhood. He has become an advocate and leader of his nation, employing his personal tragedy to rally others to return to God. Addressing the community’s grievances directly to God, the *gever* expresses his confidence in the community’s ability to approach God straightforwardly and confrontationally, with the hope and belief that God will respond to the community’s needs.

1. The plural voice appears in *Eikha* only here, 4:17-20, and throughout chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Yosef Kara notes the connection between verses 39 and 40, maintaining that after the *gever* recognizes the connection between sins and suffering (verse 39), he searches his ways for the specific sins that he has committed (verse 40). See Rambam, *Hilkhot* *Aveilut* 13:12, where the Rambam advocates a constructive response to tragedy (one should examine his deeds), without necessarily maintaining the existence of a causal relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Targum mitigates the fierce indictment of this verse by adding a phrase to his translation: “We have sinned and rebelled, *and because we did not return to You*, You did not forgive.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, p. 123, points out that aside from the “I” in verses 1 and 63, this is the only place in the chapter that independent pronouns are used. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Berlin, *Lamentations*, p. 96, opines that the *gever* concludes, disturbingly, that there is no actual relationship between repentance and divine forgiveness. But why should he expect there to be? Has God promised an immediate connection between repentance and divine forgiveness? Even if God allows for a causal connection between penitence and forgiveness, He does not promise it as an immediate, automatic response. The expression of disappointment in the absence of divine forgiveness seems to be beyond reasonable expectations. For this reason, I have claimed above that it is rooted in the sense of entitlement requisitioned by the communal entity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.g. *Shemot* 32:13; *Vayikra* 26:42; *II* *Kings* 13:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This seems to be the intended translation of the verse according to the *gemara* (see e.g. Rashi in his commentary on *Berakhot* 8a). However, this is not the simple meaning of the verse in *Iyov* 36:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I call these word-pairs “highly alliterative” because each pair share two common consonants at the beginning of the word, deepening the feeling of reiteration. *Pachad* and *pachat* are distinguished only by a *daled* and a *tav*, which are also quite similar sounds. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Note the use of these words in *Isaiah* 24:17-18: “Fear, pitfall, and a snare upon you, inhabitants of the land. And those who run from the sounds of fear will plunge into the pitfall and he who goes up from the pitfall will be caught in the snare…” Based on the similar linguistic usage, Rashi interprets the words “fear and pitfall” in *Eikha* 3:47 as an indication of a hopeless attempt to escape their misfortunes: “When we fled the fear, we plunged into the pitfall.” See also *Jeremiah* 48:43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)