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MEGILLAT EICHA

The Text of Lamentations,
with an Interpretive Reflection

By Rabbi David Fohrman



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LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 1

1 How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!

2 She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; she hath none to comfort her among all her lovers; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.

3 Judah is gone into exile because of affliction, and because of great servitude; she dwelleth among the nations, she findeth no rest; all her pursuers overtook her within the straits.

4 The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn assembly; all her gates are desolate, her priests sigh; her virgins are afflicted, and she herself is in bitterness.

5 Her adversaries are become the head, her enemies are at ease; for the LORD hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her young children are gone into captivity before the adversary.

6 And gone is from the daughter of Zion all her splendour; her princes are become like harts that find no pasture, and they are gone without strength before the pursuer.

7 Jerusalem remembereth in the days of her affliction and of her anguish all her treasures that she had from the days of old; now that her people fall by the hand of the adversary, and none doth help her, the adversaries have seen her, they have mocked at her desolations.

8 Jerusalem hath grievously sinned, therefore she is become as one unclean; all that honoured her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness; she herself also sigheth, and turneth backward.

9 Her filthiness was in her skirts, she was not mindful of her end; therefore is she come down wonderfully, she hath no comforter. 'Behold, O LORD, my affliction, for the enemy hath magnified himself.'

10 The adversary hath spread out his hand upon all her treasures; for she hath seen that the heathen are entered into her sanctuary, concerning whom Thou didst command that they should not enter into Thy congregation.

11 All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for food to refresh the soul. 'See, O LORD, and behold, how object I am become.'

12 'Let it not come unto you, all ye that pass by! Behold, and see if there be any pain like unto my pain, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of His fierce anger.'

13 From on high hath He sent fire into my bones, and it prevaileth against them; He hath spread a net for my feet, He hath turned me back; He hath made me desolate and faint all the day.

א אֵיכָה יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד, הָעִיר רַבַּתִּי עִם--הֵיטָה, בְּאַלְמָנָה; רַבַּתִּי בְּגוֹיִם, שְׂרָתִי בְּמַדִּינוֹת--הֵיטָה, לְמַס':

ב בָּבו תִּבְכֶּה בַּלַּיְלָה, וְדַמְעָתָה עַל לַחְיָה--אֵין-לָהּ מִנְחָם, מִכָּל-אֹהֲבֶיהָ: כָּל-רַעֲיָהּ בְּגָדוּ בָּהּ, הִי הִיא לְאֹיְבִים:

ג גָּלְתָה יְהוּדָה מִעֲנִי, וּמִרֹב עֲבָדָה--הִיא יֹשֶׁבֶת בְּגוֹיִם, לֹא מִצָּאָה מְנוּחַ; כָּל-רֹדְפֶיהָ הִשְׁיִגוּהָ, בֵּין הַמִּצְרִים:

ד דְּרָכֵי צִיּוֹן אֲבֹלוֹת, מִבְּלִי בְּאֵי מוֹעֵד--כָּל-שְׁעָרֶיהָ שׁוּמִמִּין, כְּהִנֵּיהָ נֶאֱחָחִים; בְּתוֹלְתֶיהָ נֹגוֹת, וְהִיא מִרְלָה:

ה הִי צָרָה לְרֹאשׁ אֹיְבֶיהָ שָׁלֹה, כִּי-יִקּוֹק הוֹגָה עַל רֶב-פִּשְׁעֶיהָ; עוֹלָלֶיהָ הִלְכוּ שָׁבִי, לַפְּנֵי-צָר:

ו וַיֵּצֵא מִן בֵּת- (מִבֵּת-) צִיּוֹן, כָּל-הַדָּרָה; הִי שְׂרָהּ, בְּאֵילִים לֹא-מִצָּאָה מִרְעָה, וַיִּלְכוּ בְּלֹא-כֹחַ, לִפְנֵי רוֹדְף:

ז זָכְרָה יְרוּשָׁלַם, יְמֵי עֲנִיָּהּ וּמִרְדִּיָּה--כָּל מִחְמַדֶּיהָ, אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ יְמִימֵי קָדֶם; בְּנִפְלַע עֲמָה בְּיַד-צָר, וַאֲיִן עוֹזֵר לָהּ--רְאוּהָ צָרִים, שָׁחֲקוּ עַל מִשְׁבֶּתָּה:

ח חֲטָא חֲטָאָה יְרוּשָׁלַם, עַל-כֵּן לִנְדָה הֵיטָה; כָּל-מִכְבַּדֶּיהָ הִזְלִיחָה כִּי-רְאוּ עֲרוֹתָהּ, גַּם-הִיא נֶאֱחָחָה וַתִּשָּׁב אַחֲוִיר:

ט טָמְאָתָה בְּשׁוּלֶיהָ, לֹא זָכְרָה אַחֲרִיתָהּ, וַתֵּרֵד פְּלִאִים, אֵין מִנְחָם לָהּ; רָאָה יְקוֹק אֶת-עֲנִיָּי, כִּי הִגְדִּיל אוֹיֵב:

י יָדוּ פֶרֶשׁ צָר, עַל כָּל-מִחְמַדֶּיהָ: כִּי-רָאָתָהּ גּוֹיִם, בָּאוּ מִקְדָּשָׁה--אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָהּ, לֹא-יָבֹאוּ בְּקֶהֱלָךְ:

יא כָּל-עֲמָה נֶאֱחָחִים מִבְּקָשִׁים לָחֶם, נִתְּנוּ מִחֲמוּדֵיהֶם (מִחְמַדֵּיהֶם) בְּאֶמְלַל הָרֹשֵׁיב נֶפֶשׁ; רָאָה יְקוֹק וַהֲבִיטָהּ, כִּי הֵיטֵי זֹלָלָהּ:

יב לֹא אֵלֵיכֶם, כָּל-עֲבָרֵי דֶרֶךְ--הֵבִיטוּ וַרְאוּ, אִם-יִשׁ מִכְאוּב בְּמִכְאָבִי אֲשֶׁר עוֹלָל לִי: אֲשֶׁר הוֹגָה יְקוֹק, בְּיוֹם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ:

יג מִמְרוֹם שָׁלַח אֵשׁ בְּעֶצְמֹתַי, וַיְרַדְנָה; פֶּרֶשׁ רֶשֶׁת נֶה: סְדוֹמָם מֵה, כָּל-הַיָּר-נִתְּנִי שִׁבְגָּה וְאֶחָלָרְגָלִי, הִשָּׁה:

Jeremiah, Between First and Third

By Rabbi David Fohrman

Years ago, I went to see an exhibition of photographs that had won the Pulitzer Prize for best news reporting. I was struck by how, one after another, the photos were all suffused with the same themes: Visceral loss and suffering. A particular photo caught my eye. It was of a Cambodian refugee, a woman, clutching a child, forging her way through a rushing river. She was surrounded by a torrent of water that was nearly neck high. With what seemed like every ounce of strength, she struggled, with one arm, to keep her daughter's head above the murderous waves. Her arm was wrapped around her child, and the limb of a tree, hanging over the river from the embankment. With the other arm, she reached out, desperately, in the direction of the camera.

I stood there in the museum, and here was this woman, gazing at me – through the lens of this camera, across the stretch of time. When you looked at the photo, it almost felt as if you could reach out with your own hand and grab her arm, and pull her and her child to safety.

As I stood there, looking at the desperate mother and child – a sudden sense of shock and outrage shook me out of my reverie. It suddenly occurred to me:

What was this photographer doing taking this picture? Why didn't he throw his camera aside and instead reach out to pull this woman to shore?

Reporters are there as third-party narrators of the news. But they are also human beings. So the choice to be a third-party observer, is, on some level, an arbitrary one. When you are witnessing great suffering, history may laud you for reporting the suffering – but as a human being, what integrity do you really have left if you choose to stand apart from it? The third-person offers the benefit of dispassionate reporting; but sometimes, you can't afford to be the 'third person'. Sometimes, you are part of the story, whether you like it or not.



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14 The yoke of my transgressions is impressed by His hand; they are knit together, they are come up upon my neck; He hath made my strength to fail; the Lord hath delivered me into their hands, against whom I am not able to stand.

15 The Lord hath set at nought all my mighty men in the midst of me; He hath called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord hath trodden as in a winepress the virgin the daughter of Judah.'

16 'For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water; because the comforter is far from me, even he that should refresh my soul; my children are desolate, because the enemy hath prevailed.'

17 Zion spreadeth forth her hands; there is none to comfort her; the LORD hath commanded concerning Jacob, that they that are round about him should be his adversaries; Jerusalem is among them as one unclean.

18 The LORD is righteous; for I have rebelled against His word; hear, I pray you, all ye peoples, and behold my pain: my virgins and my young men are gone into captivity.

19 I called for my lovers, but they deceived me; my priests and mine elders perished in the city, while they sought them food to refresh their souls.

20 Behold, O LORD, for I am in distress, mine inwards burn; my heart is turned within me, for I have grievously rebelled. Abroad the sword bereaveth, at home there is the like of death.

21 They have heard that I sigh, there is none to comfort me; all mine enemies have heard of my trouble, and are glad, for Thou hast done it; Thou wilt bring the day that Thou hast proclaimed, and they shall be like unto me.

22 Let all their wickedness come before Thee; and do unto them, as Thou hast done unto me for all my transgressions; for my sighs are many and my heart is faint.

יד נִשְׁקַד עַל פְּשָׁעַי בְּיָדוֹ, יִשְׁתַּרְגּוּ עָלַי עַל-צִוְאוֹרָי--
הַכְּשִׁיל כְּחִי; נִתְּנָנִי אֲדָנִי, בְּיָדֵי לֹא-אוֹכֵל קוֹם:

טו סָלַח כָּל-אֲבִירֵי אֲדָנִי בְּקִרְבִּי, קָרָא עָלַי מוֹעֵד
לְשֹׁבֵר בַּחֲוָרִי; גַּת דֶּרֶךְ אֲדָנִי, לְבַתּוֹלֶת בַּת-יְהוּדָה:

טז עַל-אַלֶּה אֲנִי בּוֹכִיָּה, עֵינַי עֵינֵי יִרְדָּה מֵיִם--כִּי-
רָחַק מִמֶּנִּי מְנַחֵם, מְשִׁיב נֶפְשִׁי; הִיוּ בְנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים, כִּי
גָבַר אוֹיֵב:

יז פָּרָשָׁה צִיּוֹן בְּיָדֶיהָ, אִין מְנַחֵם לָהּ--צוֹה יְקוֹק
לִיעֲקֹב, סָבִיבוּ צָרָיו; הֲיִתָּה יְרוּשָׁלַם לְנֹדָה, בְּיָנֶיהֶם:

יח צָדִיק הוּא יְקוֹק, כִּי פִיהוּ מְרִיתִי; שְׁמַעוּ-נָא
כָּל-עַמִּים (הָעַמִּים), וְרֹא וּמִכְאָבִי--בַּתּוֹלֶתִי וּבַחֲוָרִי,
הִלְכּוּ בַשֶּׁבִי:

יט קָרָאתִי לַמֵּאֲהָבִי הֵמָּה רְמוּנִי, כִּהְנִי וּזְקַנִּי בְּעִיר
גִּזְעוֹ: כִּי-בִקְשׁוּ אֶכֶל לָמוֹ, וַיִּשְׁיבוּ אֶת-נַפְשָׁם:

כ רָאָה יְקוֹק כִּי-צָר-לִי, מַעֵי חֲמֻרְמֻרוֹ-נִהְפָּךְ לְבִי
בְּקִרְבִּי, כִּי מָרוּ מְרִיתִי; מַחוּץ שְׂכָלָה-חָרָב, בְּבֵיתִי
כַּמּוֹת:

כא שְׁמַעוּ כִּי נֶאֱנַחָה אֲנִי, אִין מְנַחֵם לִי--כָּל-אֲוִיבִי
שְׁמַעוּ רַעֲתִי שָׁשׂוּ, כִּי אֲתָה עֲשִׂיתִי; הִבָּאת יוֹם-
קָרָאתִי, וַיְהִי כַּמֶּנִּי:

כב תָּבֵא כָל-רַעֲתָם לִפְנֵיךְ וְעוֹלֵל לָמוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר
עוֹלֵלָתִי לִי עַל כָּל-פְּשָׁעַי: כִּי-רַבּוֹת אֲנַחֲתִי, וְלִבִּי דוֹי:

LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 2

1 How hath the Lord covered with a cloud the daughter of Zion in His anger! He hath cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and hath not remembered His footstool in the day of His anger.

2 The Lord hath swallowed up unsparingly all the habitations of Jacob; He hath thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He hath brought them down to the ground; He hath profaned the kingdom and the princes thereof.

3 He hath cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel; He hath drawn back His right hand from before the enemy; and He hath burned in Jacob like a flaming fire, which devoureth round about.

4 He hath bent His bow like an enemy, standing with His right hand as an adversary, and hath slain all that were pleasant to the eye; in the tent of the daughter of Zion He hath poured out His fury like fire.

א אֵיכָה יַעִיב בְּאִפּוֹ אֲדָנִי, אֶת-בַּת-צִיּוֹן--הַשְּׁלִיךְ
מִשְׁמַיִם אֶרֶץ, תִּפְאֶרֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְלֹא-זָכַר הָדָם-וְרַגְלָיו,
בְּיוֹם אָפּוֹ:

ב בָּלַע אֲדָנִי לֹא (וְלֹא) חָמַל, אֶת כָּל-נְאוֹת יַעֲקֹב--
הִרְס בְּעֶבְרָתוֹ מִבְּצָרֵי בַת-יְהוּדָה, הִגִּיעַ לְאָרֶץ; חָלַל
מַמְלָכָה, וַיִּשְׂרֶה:

ג גָּדַע בַּחֲרִי-אֶף, כָּל קֶרֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל--הַשִּׁיב אַחֲוֹר יְמִינוֹ,
מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב; וַיִּבְעַר בְּיַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר לָהָבָה, אֶכְלָה סָבִיב:

ד דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב, נָצַב יְמִינוֹ כֶּצֶר, וַיַּהֲרֹג, כָּל
מַחֲמַד־עֵינִי; בָּאֵהֶל, בַּת-צִיּוֹן, שָׂפַךְ כָּאֵשׁ, חַמּוֹתוֹ:

Eicha and the Mystery of Chapter Three

I just returned from a Tisha B'Av-night reading of the Book of Eicha, Jeremiah's book of lament for the destruction of Jerusalem. I went to a reading in a small shul, and, as I entered the room, was asked by the organizer of the minyan if I would consent to be one of the readers. He asked if I would chant the third chapter of Eicha aloud for the group.



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I was uncomfortable with doing it. I'm not really an active ba'al korei, and wasn't all that familiar with the unique melody of the Eicha trop, so I politely declined. But the fellow at the door wasn't taking no for an answer. Ten minutes later, I found myself singing aloud the mournful words of Chapter 3 after all.

In the end, I am glad he pushed me to do it. Being forced to read that text out loud, and not just to listen to it read by others, sensitized me to a few things that I don't think I ever would've noticed otherwise. Let me share with you what it was like to read the chapter.

Staccato

As I started reading, the strangest thing happened. Every sentence I chanted seemed to come out wrong. It felt silly, embarrassing. I would stop myself mid-sentence and try to correct my voice – but try as I might, I just couldn't seem to get the tune right. As this happened again and again I soon figured out that the problem wasn't me. It wasn't that I was rusty or couldn't read the notes. The problem, somehow, was the text itself.

After finishing my reading, I glanced over at the other chapters just to make sure I wasn't crazy. Nope, they were a cinch to sing. It was Chapter 3 that was the problem. It was written differently, profoundly differently, than all the rest.

You can see it yourself if you open up a copy of Eicha. All you really have to do is scan the book, and as you do, pay attention to the right hand margin. There, in most editions of the Bible, you'll see the verse numbers. Watch those numbers and compare the chapters. For all the other chapters, there's a nice healthy space

5 The Lord is become as an enemy, He hath swallowed up Israel; He hath swallowed up all her palaces, He hath destroyed his strongholds; and He hath multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and moaning.

6 And He hath stripped His tabernacle, as if it were a garden, He hath destroyed His place of assembly; the LORD hath caused to be forgotten in Zion appointed season and sabbath, and hath rejected in the indignation of His anger the king and the priest.

7 The Lord hath cast off His altar, He hath abhorred His sanctuary, He hath given up into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces; they have made a noise in the house of the LORD, as in the day of a solemn assembly.

8 The LORD hath purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion; He hath stretched out the line, He hath not withdrawn His hand from destroying; but He hath made the rampart and wall to mourn, they languish together.

9 Her gates are sunk into the ground; He hath destroyed and broken her bars; her king and her princes are among the nations, instruction is no more; yea, her prophets find no vision from the LORD.

10 They sit upon the ground, and keep silence, the elders of the daughter of Zion; they have cast up dust upon their heads, they have girded themselves with sackcloth; the virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground.

11 Mine eyes do fail with tears, mine inwards burn, my liver is poured upon the earth, for the breach of the daughter of my people; because the young children and the sucklings swoon in the broad places of the city.

12 They say to their mothers: 'Where is corn and wine?' when they swoon as the wounded in the broad places of the city, when their soul is poured out into their mothers' bosom.

13 What shall I take to witness for thee? What shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Zion? For thy breach is great like the sea; who can heal thee?

14 Thy prophets have seen visions for thee of vanity and delusion; and they have not uncovered thine iniquity, to bring back thy captivity; but have prophesied for these burdens of vanity and seduction.

15 All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem: 'Is this the city that men called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?'

16 All thine enemies have opened their mouth wide against thee; they hiss and gnash the teeth; they say: 'We have swallowed her up; certainly this is the day that we looked for; we have found, we have seen it.'

17 The LORD hath done that which He devised; He hath performed His word that He commanded in the days of old; He hath thrown down unsparingly; and He hath caused the enemy to rejoice over thee, He hath exalted the horn of thine adversaries.

ה הָיָה אֲדֹנֵי כְאוֹיֵב, בִּלְע יִשְׂרָאֵל--בִּלְע כָּל-
אֲרָמְנוֹתֶיהָ, שַׁחַת מִבְצָרֶיהָ; וְיָרַב, בְּבֵת-יְהוּדָה,
תַּאֲהִי, וְאִמְנָה:

ו וַיַּחַמֵּס כְּגֵן שָׂכָן, שַׁחַת מַעְדוֹ; שִׁבַּח יִקוֹךְ בְּצִיּוֹן
מוֹעֵד וְשַׁבָּת, וַיִּנָּאץ בְּזַעַם-אָפּוֹ מֶלֶךְ וְכֹהֵן:

ז זָנַח אֲדֹנֵי מִזְבְּחוֹ, נָאֵר מִקְדָּשׁוֹ--הִסְגִּיר בְּיַד-אוֹיֵב,
חוֹמוֹת אֲרָמְנוֹתֶיהָ; קוֹל נְתָנוּ בְּבֵית-יִקוֹךְ, כִּיּוֹם
מוֹעֵד:

ח חָשַׁב יִקוֹךְ לְהַשְׁחִית, חוֹמַת בֵּת-צִיּוֹן--נָטָה
קוֹ, לֹא-הִשִּׁיב יָדוֹ מִבְּלָע; וַיֹּאבֵּל-חָל וְחוֹמָה, יַחְדָּו
אֶמְלָלוּ:

ט טָבְעוּ בְּאֶרֶץ שַׁעְרֶיהָ, אֲבָד וְשֹׁבֵר בְּרִיחֶיהָ; מִלְכָּה
וְשָׂרֶיהָ בְּגוֹיִם, אֵין תּוֹרָה--גַּם-נְבִיאֶיהָ, לֹא-מִצָּאוּ
חֲזוֹן מִיָּקוֹךְ:

י יָשְׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ יָדְמוּ, זָקְנֵי בֵת-צִיּוֹן--הָעֹלָו עֹפֵר עַל-
רֹאשָׁם, חָגְרוּ שָׂקִים; הוֹרִידוּ לְאֶרֶץ רֹאשָׁהּ, בְּתוֹלַת
יְרוּשָׁלַם:

יא כָּלוּ בְדַמְעוֹת עֵינֵי, חֲמַרְמְרוּ מַעַי--נִשְׁפָּף לְאֶרֶץ
כְּבָדִי, עַל-שֹׁבֵר בֵּת-עַמִּי: בַּעֲטַף עוֹלָל וְיוֹנֵק,
בְּרַחֲבוֹת קִרְיָהּ:

יב לֹא-מָתָם, יֹאמְרוּ, אִיהָ, דָּגָן וַיֵּין: בְּהִתְעַטֵּפִם
כְּחָלָל, בְּרַחֲבוֹת עִיר--בְּהִשְׁתַּפֵּף נִפְשָׁם, אֶל-חֵיק
אִמְתָּם:

יג מֶה-אֶעֱיִיד לָּהּ מֶה אֲדַמָּה-לָּהּ, הַבֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם--מֶה
אֲשׁוּרָה-לָּהּ וְאֶנְחָמָהּ, בְּתוֹלַת בֵּת-צִיּוֹן: כִּי-גָדוֹל כִּים
שֹׁבְרָהּ, מִי יִרְפָּא-לָּהּ:

יד נְבִיאֶיהָ, חֲזוּ לָּהּ שָׁוָא וְתַפְּלָה, וְלֹא-גָלוּ עַל-עֲוֹנָהּ,
לְהַשִּׁיב שְׁבִיתָהּ (שְׁבוּתָהּ); וַיַּחְזוּ לָּהּ, מִשְׁאוֹת שָׁוָא
וּמִדּוּחַיִם:

טו סָפְקוּ עֲלֶיהָ כַּפִּים, כָּל-עִבְרֵי דָרָה--שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּנְעוּ
רֹאשָׁם, עַל-בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם: הַזֹּאת הָעִיר, שְׁיֵאֲמָרוּ
כְּלִילַת יִפִּי--מְשׁוֹשׁ, לְכָל-הָאָרֶץ:

טז פָּצוּ עֲלֶיהָ פִּיהֶם, כָּל-אֲבִיבֵי--שָׁרְקוּ וַיַּחֲרֻקוּ-שֹׁן,
אָמְרוּ בִלְעָנֵנוּ; אֵךְ זֶה הַיּוֹם שֶׁקִּינָהּ, מִצָּאֵנוּ רֵאיוֹנוֹ:

יז עָשָׂה יִקוֹךְ אֲשֶׁר זָמַם, בַּעַז אֲמָרְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה
מִימֵי-קֶדֶם--הִרֵס, וְלֹא חָמַל; וַיִּשְׁמַח עֲלֶיהָ אוֹיֵב,
הַרִים קֶרֶן צִרְיָהּ:

between the verse numbers. But not in chapter 3. There are two or three verses in every line. Verse tumbles upon verse. Chapter 3 is an experience in verbal claustrophobia.

I went back to look at this phenomenon more carefully. None of the verses in the chapter I had just read were longer than seven words. Some were as short as five.

So Chapter 3 was strange, in some way. But that only began to explain its strangeness. There was more. The difficulty I had vocalizing the notes came from one more fact as well: There weren't any natural pauses in any of the sentences.

If you know anything about trop, the system of musical notation that traditionally accompanies the Torah's text – you know that any given verse is likely to contain a variety of notes, but there is one note it almost certainly contains: An etnachta.

The etnachta is probably the most ubiquitous note in all of Biblical text. Go through the entire Five Books of Moses and you'll be hard pressed to find a single verse without one. The etnachta signifies a pause. It is the natural break between two parts of a verse, basically the Biblical equivalent of a semicolon.



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So there I am, reading chapter 3, and it dawns on me: There is not a single etnachta to be found in this entire chapter. That's what was making it so hard to sing. The structure of each sentence was convoluted by the forced absence of the etnachta. Trop just wasn't constructed to be sung this way. Each and every verse in Eicha chapter 3 had a convoluted musical feel to it. Once you started a verse, there was absolutely no pause: Just a breathless race to the finish line.

Mourning in Triplicate

Finally, one last thing struck me about chapter 3. Each of the first four chapters of Eicha are arranged in the form of an alphabetical acrostic. But chapter 3 is different, here too. In the third chapter, each letter of the alphabet gets not just one, but three consecutive verses assigned to it. Three verses start with aleph, followed by three that start with beit, and so on, until the end of the alphabet.

18 Their heart cried unto the Lord: 'O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river day and night; give thyself no respite; let not the apple of thine eye cease.

19 Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out thy heart like water before the face of the Lord; lift up thy hands toward Him for the life of thy young children, that faint for hunger at the head of every street.'

20 'See, O LORD, and consider, to whom Thou hast done thus! Shall the women eat their fruit, the children that are dandled in the hands? Shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?

21 The youth and the old man lie on the ground in the streets; my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword; Thou hast slain them in the day of Thine anger; Thou hast slaughtered unsparingly.

22 Thou hast called, as in the day of a solemn assembly, my terrors on every side, and there was none in the day of the LORD'S anger that escaped or remained; those that I have dandled and brought up hath mine enemy consumed.'

יח צעק לבם, אל-אֲדָנִי; חומת בַּת-צִיּוֹן הוֹרִידִי כִנְחָל דְּמָעָה, יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה--אֶל-תַּתְּנִי פֹגֶת לָךְ, אֶל-תִּדּוֹם בַּת-עֵינֶיךָ:

יט קוּמִי רַנִּי בַלִּיל (בְּלַיְלָה), לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֻׁמְרוֹת--שִׁפְכִי כַמִּים לִבֶּךָ, נִכַּח פְּנֵי אֲדָנִי; שְׁאִי אֱלֹו כַּפֶּיךָ, עַל-נַפְשׁ עוֹלְלֶיךָ--הַעֲטוּפִים בְּרָעַב, בְּרֹאשׁ כָּל-חוּצוֹת:

כ רֹאֵה יְקוֹק וְהִבִּיטָהּ, לְמִי עוֹלָלָתָ כֹּה: אִם-תֹּאכְלֶנָּה נָשִׁים פְּרִים עֲלֵלֵי טַפִּים, אִם-יִהְיֶה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ אֲדָנִי כֹה וְנָבִיא:

כא שִׁכְבוּ לְאַרְץ חוּצוֹת נַעַר וְזָקֵן, בְּתוֹלְתִי וּבַחוּרִי נָפְלוּ בַּחֲרֹב; הִרְגֵתָּ בְּיוֹם אֶפֶר, טַבַּחְתָּ לֹא חֲמִלָתָ:

כב תִּקְרָא כִּיּוֹם מוֹעֵד מְגוּרֵי מִסְבִּב, וְלֹא הִזָּה בְּיוֹם אֶף-יְקוֹק פִּלִּט וְשָׂרִיד: אֲשֶׁר-טַפַּחְתִּי וְרַבִּיתִי, אִיבִי כֹלָם:

LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 3

1 I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.

2 He hath led me and caused me to walk in darkness and not in light.

3 Surely against me He turneth His hand again and again all the day.

4 My flesh and my skin hath He worn out; He hath broken my bones.

5 He hath builded against me, and compassed me with gall and travail.

6 He hath made me to dwell in dark places, as those that have been long dead.

7 He hath hedged me about, that I cannot go forth; He hath made my chain heavy.

8 Yea, when I cry and call for help, He shutteth out my prayer.

9 He hath enclosed my ways with hewn stone, He hath made my paths crooked.

10 He is unto me as a bear lying in wait, as a lion in secret places.

11 He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces; He hath made me desolate.

12 He hath bent His bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow.

13 He hath caused the arrows of His quiver to enter into my reins.

א אֲנִי הַגִּבֹּר רֹאֵה עָנִי, בְּשֹׁכֵט עֲבָרְתִּי:

ב אוֹתִי נִהַג וַיִּלֶּךְ, חֹשֶׁךְ וְלֹא-אוֹר:

ג אֵךְ בִּי יִשָּׁב יִהְיֶה יָדוֹ, כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

ד בִּלְהַ בְּשָׂרִי וְעוֹרִי, שֶׁבַר עֲצָמוֹתִי:

ה בָּנָה עָלַי וַיִּקַּף, רֹאשׁ וּתְלָאָה:

ו בְּמַחְשָׁכִים הוֹשִׁיבֵנִי, כְּמֵתִי עוֹלָם:

ז גָּדַר בְּעָדִי וְלֹא אֲצֵא, הַכְּבִיד נַחֲשָׁתִי:

ח גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וְאֲשׁוּעַ, שֵׁתָם תִּפְלָתִי:

ט גָּדַר דְּרָכִי בְּגִזִּית, נְתִיבֹתַי עוֹה:

י דָּב אֲרֹב הוּא לִי, אֲרִיהַ (אֲרִי) בְּמִסְתָּרַיִם:

יא דְּרָכִי סוּרָר וַיִּפְשַׁחֵנִי, שְׁמִנִי שָׁמָם:

יב דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ וַיַּצִּיבֵנִי, כְּמִטְרָא לַחִין:

יג הִבִּיא, בְּכִלְיָתִי, בְּנִי, אֲשַׁפּוֹתוֹ:

So not only are the verses short, and shorn of pauses. There are a lot of them. The verses just keep tumbling out; a torrent of Hebrew that is relentless and unyielding.

And so, I wondered to myself: Why did Jeremiah do things this way? What accounts for chapter 3's unique structure within Eicha? Clearly, this chapter is built differently than the other chapters. But why is it built differently?

This Time, its Personal

Here's the theory I want to propose to you: Chapter 3 is Jeremiah's moment standing by that river in Cambodia. Chapter 3 is where Eicha stops telling a story and starts getting personal.

The first two chapters of Eicha lament the destruction of Jerusalem, but more or less from the outside. Jeremiah speaks as an onlooker, describing tragedy as it befalls someone else. The city of Jerusalem is anthropomorphized as a young maiden, making the tragedy of the city's downfall more poignant than the mere destruction of bricks and stone – but it is still a tragedy that is happening to someone over there. In chapter three, all that changes. The perspective shifts to first-person. Jeremiah begins to describe his own experience.

The shift is brought home, jarringly, with the chapter's very first words:

אֲנִי הַגֵּבֶר רָאָה עָנִי, בְּשֶׁבֶט עֲבָרְתוֹ

I am the man who has seen affliction, with the rod of His wrath.

All of a sudden, it's personal.

Jeremiah speaks, for the first time, from his own perspective. This is no longer

a lament for someone else's pain, however empathetically felt; this is the raw voice of someone living the suffering of which he tells. The voice we hear is short and breathless, like someone panting. Gone is the pretense of elegantly crafted lament, or even basic dignity. All that remains is the disjointed, stumbling, first-person



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14 I am become a derision to all my people, and their song all the day.

15 He hath filled me with bitterness, He hath sated me with wormwood.

16 He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, He hath made me to wallow in ashes.

17 And my soul is removed far off from peace, I forgot prosperity.

18 And I said: 'My strength is perished, and mine expectation from the LORD.'

19 Remember mine affliction and mine anguish, the wormwood and the gall.

20 My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is bowed down within me.

21 This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.

22 Surely the LORD'S mercies are not consumed, surely His compassions fail not.

23 They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness.

24 'The LORD is my portion', saith my soul; 'Therefore will I hope in Him.'

25 The LORD is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him.

26 It is good that a man should quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

27 It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

28 Let him sit alone and keep silence, because He hath laid it upon him.

29 Let him put his mouth in the dust, if so be there may be hope.

30 Let him give his cheek to him that smiteth him, let him be filled full with reproach.

31 For the Lord will not cast off for ever.

32 For though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies.

33 For He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.

34 To crush under foot all the prisoners of the earth,

35 To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High,

36 To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not.

37 Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not?

יד הִיִּיתִי שֹׁחַק לְכָל-עַמִּי, נִגְנַתָם כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

טו הִשְׁבִּיעַנִי בְּמִרְרִים, הִרְוֵנִי לַעֲנָה:

טז וַיִּגְרַס בְּחֶצֶץ שָׁנִי, הִכְפִּישַׁנִּי בָאֶפֶר:

יז וַתִּזְנַח מִשְׁלוֹם נַפְשִׁי, נִשְׁתִּיתִי טוֹבָה:

יח וְאָמַר אֲבָד נַחְחִי, וַתּוֹחַלְתִּי מִיִּקוֹק:

יט זָכַר-עֵנָיִי וּמְרֹדִי, לַעֲנָה וְרָאשׁ:

כ זָכוֹר תִּזְכּוֹר, וַתִּשְׁחִי (וַתִּשְׁוֹחַ) עָלַי נַפְשִׁי:

כא זֹאת אֲשִׁיב אֶל-לִבִּי, עַל-כֵּן אוֹחִיל:

כב חֲסִדֵּי יִקוֹק כִּי לֹא-תִמְנָנִי, כִּי לֹא-כָלוּ רַחֲמָיו:

כג חֲדָשִׁים, לְבָקָרִים, רַבָּה, אֱמוּנָתְךָ:

כד חֲלָקֵי יִקוֹק אֶמְרָה נַפְשִׁי, עַל-כֵּן אוֹחִיל לוֹ:

כה כֹּה טוֹב יִקוֹק לָקוֹן, לְנֶפֶשׁ תִּדְרָשְׁנִי:

כו טוֹב וַיַּחֵל וְדוֹמָם, לְתִשְׁוֹעַת יִקוֹק:

כז טוֹב לִגְבֹּר, כִּי-יֵשֶׁא עַל בְּנֵעוּרָיו:

כח יֵשֶׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדָּם, כִּי נָטַל עָלָיו:

כט יִתֵּן בְּעֶפֶר פִּיהוּ, אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה:

ל יִתֵּן לְמַכְהוֹ לָחִי, יִשְׁבַּע בְּחִרְפָּה:

לא כִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם, אֲדֹנָי:

לב כִּי אִם-הוֹנָה, וַיִּרְחַם כְּרַב חֲסִדָּיו:

לג כִּי לֹא עָנָה מִלְּבוֹ, וַיִּגַּה בְּנִי-אִישׁ:

לד לְדַכָּא תַּחַת רַגְלָיו, כָּל אֲסִירֵי אֶרֶץ:

לה לְהַטּוֹת, מִשְׁפַּט-גְּבֹרָה, נִגַּד, פָּנֵי עֲלִיוֹן:

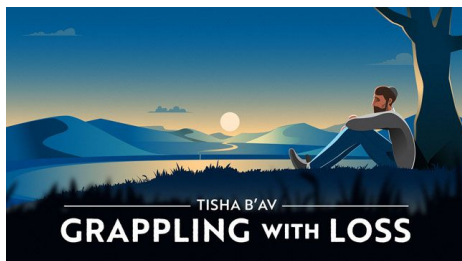
לו לְעוֹת אָדָם בְּרִיבוֹ, אֲדֹנָי לֹא רָאָה:

לז מִי זֶה אָמַר וַתֵּהִי, אֲדֹנָי לֹא צָוָה:

account of anguish and horror.

From Judge to Enemy

But Chapter 3 is different in another way as well. It is not just that Jeremiah's involvement in the story, his own point of view, has become more direct and personal; his perception of God's involvement in the story is becoming more direct and personal, too.



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Chapter One begins with Jeremiah lamenting the fall of Jerusalem. He observes the solitude of the city, its desolation; how no one is available to comfort it. The focus is on Jerusalem, on how the enemy callously debased her. But God remains safely out of the frame of the camera.

Gradually, towards the middle of the chapter, this changes. Jeremiah's focus moves away from the victim, Jerusalem, and towards the perpetrator. Who did all this? The obvious answer is Babylonia. But Jeremiah looks beyond this. He looks to God:

מִמְרוֹם שְׁלַח-אֵשׁ בְּעַצְמוֹתַי

From on high, He sends fire in my bones...

פָּרַשׁ רֶשֶׁת לְרַגְלִי

He spreads a net for my legs...

For the first time, Jeremiah brings God into the frame. He identifies the Almighty as the source from which all this pain derives. God has allowed this to happen, and therefore -- if I am feeling fire in my bones, it is God who has done that; if I am feeling trapped as if in a net, it is God who has done that, too.

So where does that leave Jeremiah in his relationship with God? A few verses later, Jeremiah considers whether God is to be condemned for His role in all this, and he gives this answer:

צָדִיק הוּא יְקוֹק, כִּי פִיהוּ מְרִיתִי

The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against Him.

לח מפי עליון לא תצא, הרעות והטוב:

לט מה-יתאונו אדם חי, גבר על-הטאור:

מ נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה, ונשובה עד-יקוק:

מא נשא לבבנו אל-כפים, אל-אל בשמים:

מב נחנו פשענו ומרינו, אתה לא סלחת:

מג סכותה באף ותדפנו, הרגת לא חמלת:

מד סכותה בענו לך, מעבור תפלה:

מה סחי ומאוס תשימנו, בקרב העמים:

מו פצו עלינו פיהם, כל-איבינו:

מז פחד ופחת היה לנו, השאת והשבר:

מח פלגי-מים תרד עיני, על-שבר בת-עמי:

מט עיני נגרה ולא תדמה, מאין הפגות:

נ עד-ישקף וירא, יקוק משמים:

נא עיני עוללה לנפשי, מכל בנות עירי:

נב צוד צדוני כצפור, איבי חנם:

נג צמתו בבור חי, וידו-אבן בי:

נד צפוי-מים על-ראשי, אמרתי נגזרתי:

נה קראתי שמך יקוק, מבור תחתיות:

נו קולי, שמעת: אל-תעלם אזנך לרוחתי, לשועתי:

נז קרבת ביום אקראך, אמרת אל-תירא:

נח רבת אדני ריבי נפשי, גאלת חי:

נט ראיתה יקוק עותתי, שפטה משפטי:

ס ראיתה, כל-נקמתם--כל-מחשבתם, לי:

סא שמעת חרפתם יקוק, כל-מחשבתם עלי:

38 Out of the mouth of the Most High proceedeth not evil and good?

39 Wherefore doth a living man complain, a strong man because of his sins?

40 Let us search and try our ways, and return to the LORD.

41 Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens.

42 We have transgressed and have rebelled; Thou hast not pardoned.

43 Thou hast covered with anger and pursued us; Thou hast slain unsparingly.

44 Thou hast covered Thyself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through.

45 Thou hast made us as the offscouring and refuse in the midst of the peoples.

46 All our enemies have opened their mouth wide against us.

47 Terror and the pit are come upon us, desolation and destruction.

48 Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water, for the breach of the daughter of my people.

49 Mine eye is poured out, and ceaseth not, without any intermission,

50 Till the LORD look forth, and behold from heaven.

51 Mine eye affected my soul, because of all the daughters of my city.

52 They have chased me sore like a bird, that are mine enemies without cause.

53 They have cut off my life in the dungeon, and have cast stones upon me.

54 Waters flowed over my head; I said: 'I am cut off.'

55 I called upon Thy name, O LORD, Out of the lowest dungeon.

56 Thou heardest my voice; hide not Thine ear at my sighing, at my cry.

57 Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon Thee; Thou saidst: 'Fear not.'

58 O Lord, Thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul; Thou hast redeemed my life.

59 O LORD, Thou hast seen my wrong; judge Thou my cause.

60 Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their devices against me.

61 Thou hast heard their taunt, O LORD, and all their devices against me;

The mere fact that God stands behind the curtain as architect, in some way, of the destruction, does not imply that an injustice has been done. God, Jeremiah tells us, is not to be condemned: Humans rebelled against God, and God is to be seen as just. What has happened is harsh, yes -- but not wrong.

Several verses later, though, Jeremiah returns to the theme of God's role in the calamity, and this time, his view of things is more complicated. God is once again the source of misfortune, but gone is Jeremiah's earlier protestation that the Almighty is nothing but the recalcitrant dispatcher of justice. Here is what Jeremiah tells us towards the beginning of Chapter Two:

דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב

He has bent his bow like an enemy...

נָצַב יְמִינוֹ כְּצֹר

He has established His right hand as an adversary.

הִזָּה ה' כְּאוֹיֵב, בָּלַע יִשְׂרָאֵל

The Lord has become like an enemy, swallowing up Israel...

This is new, and darker, territory for Jeremiah. God is no longer portrayed as judge of Israel. Now, he is seen as acting 'like an enemy'. A judge is dispassionate, objective. An enemy is decidedly not. A judge dispatches justice; an enemy, revenge. To be clear, in these verses, Jeremiah does not go so far as to recant his earlier declaration that God is just. But he certainly edges closer to that theological cliff.



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Truth to be told, the space between Jeremiah and the edge of that cliff, is no larger than the breadth of a single Hebrew letter, a kaf. If you peruse the above verses carefully, you'll find that God is portrayed as 'like' an enemy – in Hebrew, k'oyev (there's the kaf). There's at least a wee bit of difference between being 'like' an enemy and actually being an enemy. The kaf leaves room for doubt, for a

סב שִׁפְתֵי קָמִי וְהִגִּינוּ, עָלֵי כָל-הַיּוֹם:

סג שְׁבַתְּם וְקִימְתֶם הַבִּיטָה, אֲנִי מִנְגִּינְתָם:

סד תָּשִׁיב לָהֶם גְּמוּל יְקוֹק, כְּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵיהֶם:

סה תִּתֵּן לָהֶם מִגְנַת-לֵב, תִּאֲלָתֶךָ לָהֶם:

סו תִּרְדֹּף בְּאֵף וְתִשְׁמִידֵם, מִתַּחַת שָׁמַי יְקוֹק:

62 The lips of those that rose up against me, and their muttering against me all the day.

63 Behold Thou their sitting down, and their rising up; I am their song.

64 Thou wilt render unto them a recompense, O LORD, according to the work of their hands.

65 Thou wilt give them hardness of heart, Thy curse unto them.

66 Thou wilt pursue them in anger, and destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD.

LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 4

1 How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! The hallowed stones are poured out at the head of every street.

2 The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!

3 Even the jackals draw out the breast, they give suck to their young ones; the daughter of my people is become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness.

4 The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst; the young children ask bread, and none breaketh it unto them.

5 They that did feed on dainties are desolate in the streets; they that were brought up in scarlet embrace dunghills.

6 For the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom, that was overthrown as in a moment, and no hands fell upon her.

7 Her princes were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was as of sapphire;

8 Their visage is blacker than coal; they are not known in the streets; their skin is shrivelled upon their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick.

9 They that are slain with the sword are better than they that are slain with hunger; for these pine away, stricken through, for want of the fruits of the field.

10 The hands of women full of compassion have sodden their own children; they were their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people.

11 The LORD hath accomplished His fury, He hath poured out His fierce anger; and He hath kindled a fire in Zion, which hath devoured the foundations thereof.

12 The kings of the earth believed not, neither all the inhabitants of the world, that the adversary and the enemy would enter into the gates of Jerusalem.

13 It is because of the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her.

14 They wander as blind men in the streets, they are polluted with blood, so that men cannot touch their garments.

א אֵיכָה יוֹעַם זָהָב, יִשְׁנָא הַכֶּתֶם הַטּוֹב; תִּשְׁתַּפְּכֶנָּה, אֲבִנֵי-קֶשֶׁד, בְּרֹאשׁ, כָּל-חֻצוֹת:

ב בְּנֵי צִיּוֹן הַיְקָרִים, הַמִּסְלָאִים בְּפֶז--אֵיכָה נִחְשְׁבוּ לִנְבִל־חֶרֶשׁ, מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי יוֹצֵר:

ג גַּם-תַּנִּין (תַּנִּים) חָלְצוּ שֵׁד, הַיִּנִּיקוּ גּוּרֵיהֶן; בַּת-עַמִּי לֹא-זָכָר, כִּי עֵינִים (כְּעֵינִים) בְּמִדְבָּר:

ד דָּבַק לְשׁוֹן יוֹנֵק אֶל-חִבּוֹ, בְּצִמָּא; עוֹלָלִים שָׁאָלוּ לָחֶם, בְּרֹשׁ אֵין לָהֶם:

ה הָאֲכִלִים, לְמַעַדְנִים, נִשְׁמָו, בַּחֻצוֹת; הָאֲמָנִים עָלֵי תוֹלַעַ, חִבְקוּ אֲשַׁפְּתוֹת:

ו וַיִּגְדֵּל עוֹן בַּת-עַמִּי, מַחֲטָאֵת סֹדִם: הַהִפּוּכָה כְּמוֹ-רֶגֶעַ, וְלֹא-חָלוּ בָּהּ יְדֵים:

ז זָכוּ נְזִירֶיהָ מִשְׁלָה, צָחוּ מִחֶלֶב; אָדְמוּ עֵצִים מִפְּנִינִים, סָפִיר גִּזְרָתָם:

ח חֲשֹׁךְ מִשְׁחֹר תֹּאֲרָם, לֹא נָכְרוּ בַּחֻצוֹת; צִפֹּד עוֹרִם עַל-עֲצָמָם, יָבֵשׁ הָיָה כַעֲץ:

ט טוֹבִים הָיוּ חֻלִּי-חֶרֶב, מִחֻלִּי רָעַב: שָׁהֶם יָזְבוּ מִדְּקָרִים, מִתְּנוּבוֹת שִׁדִּי:

י יְדֵי, נָשִׁים רַחֲמָנוּת--בִּשְׁלָה יִלְדֵיהֶן; הָיוּ לְכֹרוֹת לָמוֹ, בְּשֹׁכֵר בַּת-עַמִּי:

יא כָּלָה יְקוֹק אֶת-חֲמָתוֹ, שִׁפָּךְ חֲרוֹן אָפוֹ; וַיִּצַּת-אֵשׁ בְּצִיּוֹן, וַתֹּאכַל יִסְדֹּתֶיהָ:

יב לֹא הֶאֱמִינוּ מַלְכֵי-אֶרֶץ, וְכָל (כָּל) יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל: כִּי יָבֹא צָר וְאוֹיֵב, בְּשַׁעְרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם:

יג מַחֲטָאוֹת נְבִיאֶיהָ, עֹנוֹת כְּהֵנֶיהָ: הַשֹּׁפְכִים בְּקֶרְבָּהָ, דָם צַדִּיקִים:

יד נָעוּ עוֹרִים בַּחֻצוֹת, נִגְאָלוּ בָדָם; בְּלֹא יוֹכְלוּ, יִגְעוּ בִלְבָשֵׁיהֶם:

comforting, if uneasy, dose of ambiguity: It sure feels as if God is taking revenge against us, but maybe our feelings aren't a good arbiter of reality. Maybe all this really is Divine justice after all...

But then, just a few short verses later, Jeremiah takes us yet one more step closer to the cliff. In achieving the destruction of Jerusalem, He speaks of God having “done what he plotted to do”. But ask yourself: Where else in the Bible have we heard these words before? Jeremiah didn't make that expression up; he took it from somewhere.

Take a look at the Hebrew, it may well jog your memory:

עָשָׂה יְקוֹק אֲשֶׁר זָמַם

God has done what he plotted to do...

Yes, you guessed it; it is the language of eidim zommim -- ‘treacherous witnesses’ -- lifted straight out of Deuteronomy 19:19.

וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לוֹ, כְּאֲשֶׁר זָמַם לַעֲשׂוֹת לְאַחִיו

You shall do to him, as he plotted to do to his brother...

What are witnesses? Witnesses are meant to be objective, a tool of an impartial and fair justice system. But sometimes, witnesses are corrupt; sometimes, they have a hidden personal stake in the matter they are testifying about; sometimes, they are tools not of justice -- but of revenge. If God ‘did what he plotted to do’, whose side is he on? Is he a witness or judge – truly impartial – or does God Himself have some kind of horse in this race?

Lest the reader miss the point, keep reading the very next words in Eicha. Just after speaking of God having “done what he plotted to do”, Jeremiah states Eicha:

עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר זָמַם, בַּצֵּעַ אֲמָרְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִימֵי קֶדֶם--הָרֶס, וְלֹא חָמַל

God has carried out that which he ordained long ago; he has destroyed, and left behind compassion. (Eicha2:17)

The Hebrew word for ‘carried out’ – batza – evokes the darkest of antecedents. The only time that word is ever used in the Five Books of Moses, it is used to

15 'Depart ye! unclean!' men cried unto them, 'Depart, depart, touch not'; yea, they fled away and wandered; men said among the nations: 'They shall no more sojourn here.'

16 The anger of the LORD hath divided them; He will no more regard them; they respected not the persons of the priests, they were not gracious unto the elders.

17 As for us, our eyes do yet fail for our vain help; in our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save.

18 They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our broad places; our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for our end is come.

19 Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles of the heaven; they chased us upon the mountains, they lay in wait for us in the wilderness.

20 The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD, was taken in their pits; of whom we said: 'Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.'

21 Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, that dwellest in the land of Uz: the cup shall pass over unto thee also; thou shalt be drunken, and shalt make thyself naked.

22 The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion, He will no more carry thee away into captivity; He will punish thine iniquity, O daughter of Edom, He will uncover thy sins.

טו סורו טמא קראו למו, סורו סורו אל-תגעו--כי נצו, גם-נעו; אָמרו, בְּגוֹיִם, לא יוספו לגור:

טז פְּנֵי יְקוֹק חָלְקָם, לא יוֹסִיף לְהִבִּיטָם; פְּנֵי כְהֲנִים לא נָשָׂאוּ, זָקֵנִים (וְזָקֵנִים) לא חָנְנוּ:

יז עוֹדִינָה (עוֹדִינָה) תְּכַלִּינָה עֵינֵינוּ, אֶל-עֲזָרְתָנוּ הֵבֵל; בְּצַפִּיתָנוּ צָפִינוּ, אֶל-גּוֹי לא יוֹשֵׁעַ:

יח צָדוּ צַעֲדֵינוּ, מַלְכַת בְּרוּחַבְתֵּינוּ; קָרַב קִצְנוּ מְלֹאוֹ יְמֵינוּ, כִּי-בָא קִצְנוּ:

יט קָלִים הָיוּ רַדְפֵּינוּ, מִנְשָׂרֵי שָׁמַיִם; עַל-הָהָרִים דָּלְקָנוּ, בַּמִּדְבָּר אָרְבוּ לָנוּ:

כ רוּחַ אֲפִינוּ מָשִׁיחַ יְקוֹק, נִלְכַּד בְּשָׁחִיתוֹתָם; אָשָׁר אֲמָרְנוּ, בְּצִלּוֹ נַחִיָּה בְּגוֹיִם:

כא שִׁישִׁי וְשִׁמְחִי בַת-אֲדוֹם, יוֹשְׁבַתִי (יוֹשְׁבַת) בְּאֶרֶץ עוֹיֵץ; גַּם-עַלֶּיךָ, תִּעָבֶר-כּוֹס--תִּשְׁכְּרִי, וְתִתְעָרִי:

כב תָּם-עוֹנֶךָ, בַּת-צִיּוֹן--לא יוֹסִיף, לְהִגְלוֹתְךָ; פָּקַד עוֹנֶךָ בַּת-אֲדוֹם, גָּלָה עַל-חַטָּאתֶיךָ:

LAMENTATIONS CHAPTER 5

1 Remember, O LORD, what is come upon us; behold, and see our reproach.

2 Our inheritance is turned unto strangers, or houses unto aliens.

3 We are become orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows.

4 We have drunk our water for money; our wood cometh to us for price.

5 To our very necks we are pursued; we labour, and have no rest.

6 We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria, to have bread enough;

7 Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.

8 Servants rule over us; there is none to deliver us out of their hand.

9 We get our bread with the peril of our lives because of the sword of the wilderness.

10 Our skin is hot like an oven because of the burning heat of famine.

11 They have ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah.

א זָכֹר יְקוֹק מֶה-הָיָה לָנוּ, הַבֵּיט (הַבִּיטָה) וְרֵאָה אֶת-חֲרָפְתָּנוּ:

ב נַחֲלָתנוּ נִהְפָּכָה לְזָרִים, בְּתֵינוּ לִנְכָרִים:

ג יְתוּמִים הָייְנוּ אִין (וְאִין) אָב, אֲמָתֵינוּ כְּאַלְמָנוֹת:

ד מִיָּמֵינוּ בְּכֶסֶף שְׁתִּינָה, עֲצִינוּ בַּמַּחִיר יָבֹאוּ:

ה עַל צִנְאָרְנוּ נִרְדָּפְנוּ, יִגְעָנוּ לא (וְלא) הַנַּח-לָנוּ:

ו מִצָּרִים נָתַנוּ יָד, אֲשׁוּר לְשַׁבַּע לָחֶם:

ז אֲבִיתָנוּ חָטְאוּ אִינִם (וְאִינִם), אֲנַחְנוּ (וְאֲנַחְנוּ) עוֹנֵתֵיהֶם סָבְלָנוּ:

ח עֲבָדִים מָשְׁלוּ בָנוּ, פָּרַק אִין מִיָּדָם:

ט בְּנַפְשָׁנוּ נָבִיא לַחֲמָנוּ, מִפְּנֵי חָרַב הַמִּדְבָּר:

י עוֹרְנוּ כְּתַנּוּר נִכְמְרוּ, מִפְּנֵי זֶלַעְפוֹת רָעָב:

יא נָשִׁים בְּצִיּוֹן עָנוּ, בְּתֵלֶת בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה:

characterize perhaps the greatest act of treachery of all: the Sale of Joseph. Judah, speaking to his brothers, convinces them to sell Joseph as a slave rather than kill him – and in so doing, states: mah betza ki na'harog et achinu vechisinu et damo; or, 'what do we gain by killing our brother and covering his blood?'. The Sale of Joseph may have seemed like a bitter but necessary act of justice to the brothers who carried it out. But was it really as 'just' as it seemed to them, or was their perspective tainted by the fact that Joseph had sinned against them?

The Jews had sinned against God, too. Jeremiah seems to be inching closer to lodging a veiled grievance against the God who wrought all this devastation: God, are you apart from this story or are you part of it? If you were the target of Israel's sin, how can you also be the judge of it?

When It's Personal For You, It Feels Like It's Personal for God, Too

All of this brings us to the doorstep of Eicha, Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, all pretense of staying on this side of the cliff dissipates. Again, we hear of God as enemy – but this time, gone is the dissimulating kaf:

דב ארֶב הוּא לִי, אֲרִיָּה (אַרִּי) בְּמַסְתֵּרִים

He is for me a bear lying in wait, a lion in secret places...

דָּרָךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ וַיַּצִּיבֵנִי כַמִּטָּרָא לַחֵץ

He has bent His bow, and set me as a target for the arrow.

In these verses, God is unambiguously the adversary. There is no judge here; only a foe.

Standing back and looking at the progression of these three chapters, we might ask: What changed? The journey Jeremiah makes here, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3 – does it represent a change in Jeremiah's philosophical attitude towards the legitimacy of Divine actions? Have Jeremiah's ideas about God's culpability in the destruction of Jerusalem undergone some sort of logical restructuring?

My suspicion is that this is not the case. The logic of the situation is not what

12 Princes are hanged up by their hand; the faces of elders are not honoured.

13 The young men have borne the mill, and the children have stumbled under the wood.

14 The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music.

15 The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning.

16 The crown is fallen from our head; woe unto us! for we have sinned.

17 For this our heart is faint, for these things our eyes are dim;

18 For the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it.

19 Thou, O LORD, art enthroned for ever, Thy throne is from generation to generation.

20 Wherefore dost Thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time?

21 Turn Thou us unto Thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.

22 Thou canst not have utterly rejected us, and be exceeding wroth against us!

יב שָׂרִים בְּיָדָם נִתְּלוּ, פְּנֵי זִקְנִים לֹא נִהְדָּרוּ:

יג בַּחֲוִירִים טָחוּן נָשָׂא, וַנַּעֲרִים בַּעֲץ כָּשְׁלוּ:

יד זִקְנִים מִשְׁעַר שְׁבַתוֹ, בַּחֲוִירִים מִנְּגִינָתָם:

טו שִׁבַּת מְשׁוּשׁ לִבָּנוּ, נִהְפָּךְ לְאֵבֶל מִחֲלָנוּ:

טז כִּנְפֵּלָה עֲטֹרַת רֹאשֵׁנוּ, אוֹי־נָא לָנוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ:

יז עַל-זֶה, הִיָּה דָוָה לִבָּנוּ--עַל-אֱלֹהִים, חֲשָׁכּוּ עֵינֵינוּ:

יח עַל הֶר-צִיּוֹן שְׁשֻׁמָּם, שׁוֹעֲלִים הִלְכוּ-בוֹ:

יט אֶתָּה יְקוֹק לְעוֹלָם תִּשָּׁב, כְּסֶאֱךָ לְדוֹר וָדוֹר:

כ לָמָּה לִנְצַח תִּשְׁכַּחֲנוּ, תַּעֲזֹבֵנוּ לְאַרְץ יָמִים:

כא הִשְׁיִבֵנוּ יְקוֹק אֱלֹהִים וְנִשׁוּב (וְנִשׁוּבָהּ), חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם:

כב כִּי אִם-מָאֵס מְאֻסָּתָנוּ, קִצְפָּת עָלֵינוּ עַד-מָאֵד:

Lamentations. A Hebrew - English Bible According to the Masoretic Text and the JPS 1917 Edition. Mechon Mamre, n.d. Web. <<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt3201.htm>>.

changed; Jeremiah's point of view is what changed.

As we discussed before, Jeremiah began Eicha having assumed a third-person point of view. When you recount the destruction of something else, no matter how empathetic you are, you do so as a reporter. A reporter can pretend to some level of objectivity. And when you are objective, well, it is easier, then, to see God as being objective, too. God's actions can be ascribed to a hard and painful justice.

But as Jeremiah continues his lament, he is drawn into Jerusalem's suffering. He can't just be a reporter. He is part of the people. The third-person viewpoint crumbles. Suddenly, it is all personal and breathless. Elegant prose is brushed aside. The pain is raw and it is visceral and it is happening to us and this is what it

feels like. From this perspective, the ultimate subjective perspective -- God seems "subjective", too. It doesn't feel like He is the dispassionate dispenser of justice anymore. It feels like He hates us. The suffering of which Jeremiah tells, now has the acrid aftertaste of revenge.

It is interesting that Chapter Three -- the breathless first-person account of suffering -- is anything but sure of itself as to the meaning of this suffering. Yes, it suggests the possibility of God as enemy -- but just a few short verses later, it suggests the opposite possibility, too. It expresses the fleeting sense of hope that somewhere in the ashes of Jerusalem, God's kindness is out there, just waiting to be discovered:

חֶסֶדִּי יְקוֹק כִּי לֹא-תִמְנָג, כִּי לֹא-כָלוּ רַחֲמָיו

Surely, God's kindness is not consumed; surely, His mercy is not exhausted.

From there, Jeremiah goes on to speak of why, after all this, he still trusts in God. The victim of an enemy's ruthless revenge would be unlikely to profess faith or trust in that very enemy's kindness. But when one's perceived adversary is God, things are more complicated. And when Jeremiah changes point of view; when he leaves the relative comfort of the reporter's microphone and stands, vulnerable and alone, at one with his devastated city and its exiled inhabitants -- well, contradictions in how you see things are just the order of the day.

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then; I contradict myself...

-- Walt Whitman

The Twinned Ending of Eicha: Bitterness and Hope

Two chapters later, the contradictions expressed in Chapter 3 come back to form a kind of twinned end to Eicha. A long time ago, I remember reading Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. It had a poignant but terribly bitter ending, and I recall finding out later that Dickens, hounded by disenchanted readers, had finally assented to compose an alternative ending. It was sweeter, and professed a sense of hope for the future -- a hope that was entirely absent from the first ending. Some publishers chose to print both endings. The reader, in

effect, was left to choose: Which ending is more genuine? Or: Do I even care which is more genuine? I remember reading the second, newer ending, and leaping, emotionally to accept it – despite whatever misgivings I had about its provenance. Sometimes, an authors' truest feelings are just too bitter to swallow.

In Eicha, too, we have a twinned ending. One verse expresses a hope and a prayer for the future:

'Bring us back, O Lord, and we will return; renew our days as of old'.

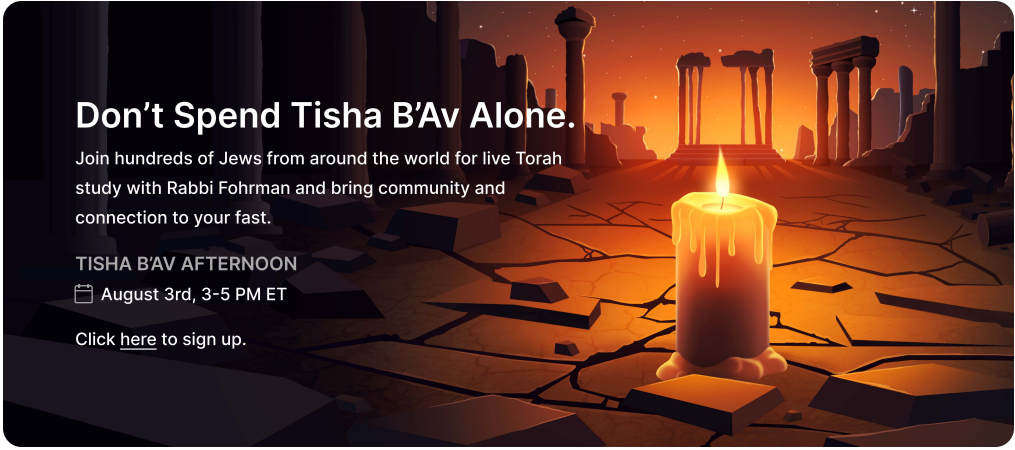
The other verse looks to the past, and pronounces its harsh conclusion:

'Even if You have utterly discarded us, your anger against us was very great.'

The Hebrew, as we might expect, leaves room to wonder. My translation, above, is perhaps too charitable. The words for 'utterly discarded us', in the original, are 'ma'os m'astanu', which could probably just as easily be translated as: 'Even if you are thoroughly disgusted with us'. As for the last part of the verse, 'your anger against us was very great' -- the Hebrew there is 'katzafta aleinu ad me'od'. Does that mean 'your anger was very great' or 'your anger was too much'?

What, in the end, was Jeremiah really saying here? The reader is left to piece it together for himself. Hope on the one hand. But on the other hand, a shattering truth-telling, if not of the way things really are, then at least of the way things seem when you are part of the terrible destruction of which you tell: Even if you were thoroughly disgusted with us, still, look at all this pain; God, what are we to make of this? Don't you think that perhaps you might have overdone it?

Jeremiah started his book as an observer, but ends it as a participant. As participant, he closes it with both hope for a brighter tomorrow and with bitterness at what he's witnessed today. These, after all, are the twin step-children of overwhelming suffering: suffering that is not merely dispassionately reported, but experienced first-hand, in all its terror and ambiguity. We, seventy years after the Holocaust, are no strangers to these feelings. Yes, they contradict one another. But perhaps Jeremiah teaches us that we are not meant to reconcile them.



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