

# 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 איכה ישבה בדד, העיר רבתי עם-היתה, כאלמנה; רבתי בגוים, שרתי במדינות-היתה, למס:

ב כבו תבכה בלילה, ודמעתה על לחיה--אין-לה מנחם, מכל-אהביה: כל-רעייה בגדו בה, היא הו לאיבים:

ג גלתה יהודה מעני, ומרב עבדה--היא ישבה בגוים, לא מצאה מנוח; כל-רדפייה השיגוה, בין המצרים:

ד דרכי ציון אבלות, מבלי באי מועד--כל-שעריה שוממין, כהניה נאנחים; בתולותיה נוגות, והיא מר-לה:

ה היא צריה לראש איביה שלו, כ-יקוק הוגה על רב-פשעיה; עולליה הלכו שבי, לפני-צר:

ו ויצא מן בת- (מבת-) ציון, כל-הדרה; היא שריה, כאילים לא-מצאו מרעה, וילכו בלא-כח, לפני רוף:

ז זכרה ירושלם, מי עניה ומרודיה--כל מחמדיה, אשר היא מימי קדם; בנפל עמה ביד-צה, ואין עוזר לה--ראוה צרים, שחקו על משבתה:

ח חטא חטאה ירושלם, על-כן לנידה היתה; כל-מכבדיה הזילוה כ-ראו ערותה, גם-היא נאנחה ותשב אחור:

ט טמאתה בשוליה, לא זכרה אחריתה, ותד פלאים, אין מנחם לה; ראה יקוק את-עניי, כי הגדיל אויב:

י ידו פרש צר, על כל-מחמדיה: כ-ראתה גוים, באו מקדשה--אשר צויתה, לא-יבאו בקהל לך:

יא כל-עמה נאנחים מבקשים לחם, נתנו מחמודיהם (מחמדיהם) באכל להשיב נפש; ראה יקוק והביטה, כי הייתי זוללה:

יב לוא אליכם, כל-עברי דרך--הביטו וראו, אם-יש מכאוב כמכאבי אשר עולל לי: אשר הוגה יקוק, ביום חרון אפו:

יג ממרום שלח-אש בעצמותי, וירדנה; פרש רשת לגלי, השיבני אחור--נתנני שממה, כל-היום דנה:

# 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.

**י** נִשְׁקַד עַל פְּשָׁעֵי בְּיָדוֹ, יִשְׁתַּרְגּוּ עָלַי עַל-צְאוּרָי--  
הַכְּשִׁיל בְּחַי; תִּתְנַנְּנִי אֲדֹנָי, בְּיָדֵי לֹא-אוֹכֵל קוֹם:

**טו** סֵלָה כָּל-אֲבִירֵי אֲדֹנָי בְּקִרְבִּי, קָרָא עָלַי מוֹעֵד  
לְשֹׁבֵר בַּחֲנֹרִי; גַּת דָּרֶךְ אֲדֹנָי, לְבַתּוֹלֵת בַּת-יְהוּדָה:

**טז** עַל-אֵלֶּה אֲנִי בּוֹכֶיָה, עֵינַי עֵינֵי יְרֵדָה מִיָּם--כִּי--  
רַחֵק מִמִּנִּי מְנַחֵם, מְשִׁיב כְּפָשִׁי; הֲיִו בְּנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים, כִּי  
גְּבַר אוֹיֵב:

**יז** פָּרָשָׁה צִיּוֹן בְּיָדֶיהָ, אִין מְנַחֵם לָהּ--צֹנָה יְקוֹק  
לְיַעֲקֹב, סָבִיבוּ צִרְיִי; הֲיִתָּה יְרוּשָׁלַם לְנֹדָה, בְּיַנְיָהֶם:

**יח** צָדִיק הוּא יְקוֹק, כִּי פִיהוּ מְרִיתִי; שְׁמַעוּ-נָא  
כָּל-עַמִּים (הָעַמִּים), וְרֹא וּמְכַאֲבֵי--בַּתּוֹלְתֵי וּבַחֲנֹרִי,  
הַלְכּוּ בְּשִׁבִי:

**יט** קָרָאתִי לַמֶּאֱהָבֵי הֵמָּה רְמוּנִי, כֹּהֲנֵי וְזַקְנֵי בְעִיר  
גְּעוּ: כִּי-בִקְשׁוּ אֶכֶל לְמוֹ, וְיִשְׁיבוּ אֶת-נַפְשָׁם:

**כ** רָאָה יְקוֹק כִּי-צָר-לִי, מַעֵי חֲמֻרְמְרוּ-נִהְפָּךְ לְבִי  
בְּקִרְבִּי, כִּי מָרוּ מְרִיתִי; מַחוּץ שְׁכָלָה-חָרָב, בְּבֵית  
כְּמוֹת:

**כא** שְׁמַעוּ כִּי נֶאֱנַחָה אֲנִי, אִין מְנַחֵם לִי--כָּל-אֲוִיבֵי  
שְׁמַעוּ רַעֲתֵי שֹׁשׁוּ, כִּי אַתָּה עֲשִׂיתִי; הַבֵּאת יוֹם-  
קְרָאתִי, וְיִהְיֶוּ כְמוֹנִי:

**כב** תְּבֹא כָל-רַעֲתָם לְפָנַי וְעוֹלֵל לְמוֹ, כְּאֶשׁ  
עוֹלֵלָת לִי עַל כָּל-פְּשָׁעַי: כִּי-רְבוֹת אַנְחוֹתִי, וְלְבִי 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 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 אֲדֹנָי, אֶת-בַּת-צִיּוֹן--הַשְּׁלִיךְ  
מַשְׁמַיִם אֶרֶץ, תִּפְאָרַת יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְלֹא-זָכַר הַדָּם-רַגְלָיו,  
בְּיוֹם אָפוּ:

**ב** בִּלַע אֲדֹנָי לֹא (וְלֹא) חָמַל, אֶת כָּל-נְאוֹת יַעֲקֹב--  
הֲרַס בְּעֵבְרָתוֹ מִבְּצָרֵי בַת-יְהוּדָה, הִגִּיעַ לְאָרְצִי; חָלַל  
מַמְלָכָה, וְיִשְׂרָיָה:

**ג** גָּדַע בַּחֲרֵי-אָף, כָּל קַרְן יִשְׂרָאֵל--הֵשִׁיב אַחֲרוֹר יְמִינוֹ,  
מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב; וַיִּבְעַר בְּיַעֲקֹב כְּאֵשׁ לְהָבָה, אֶכְלָה סָבִיב:

**ד** דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב, נִצַּב מִיָּמֵינוּ כְּצַר, וַיִּהְרַג, כָּל  
מַחֲמַדֵּי-עֵינַי; בְּאֵהֶל, בַּת-צִיּוֹן, שִׁפָּךְ כְּאֵשׁ, חֲמוֹתוֹ:

## 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 thee 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 הִיא אֲדֹנָי פְּאוֹיֵב, בִּלְע יִשְׂרָאֵל--בִּלְע כָּל-  
אֲרָמְנוֹתֶיהָ, שַׁחַת מִבְּצָרֶיךָ; וְנִרְבַּ, בְּבֵת-יְהוּדָה,  
תִּאֲהִי, וְאֲמִינָה:

ו וַיִּחַמַס כַּגֵּן שָׂכֵנו, שַׁחַת מַעֲדוֹ; שִׁכַח יְקוֹק בְּצִיּוֹן  
וַיִּנְאֹץ בְּזַעַם-אִפּוֹ מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה:

ז זָנַח אֲדֹנָי מִזְבְּחוֹ, נָאֵר מִקְדָּשׁוֹ--הִסְגִיר בְּיַד-אֹיֵיב,  
חֹמוֹת אֲרָמְנוֹתֶיהָ; קוֹל נִתְנָו בְּבֵית-יְקוֹק, כִּי־  
מוֹעֵד:

ח חֶשֶׁב יְקוֹק לְהִשְׁחִית, חֹמֹת בֵּת-צִיּוֹן--נֹטָה  
קוֹ, לֹא-הִשִּׁיב יָדוֹ מִבִּלְע; וַיִּאֲבֵל-חַל וְחוֹמָה, וַיִּחְדוּ  
אֲמָלָלוֹ:

ט טָבְעוּ בְּאֶרֶץ שַׁעֲרֶיהָ, אֲבָד וְשֹׁבֵר בְּרִיחֶיהָ; מִלְכָּה  
וְשָׂרִיָּה בְּגוֹיִם, אֵין תּוֹרָה--גַּם-נְבִיאֶיהָ, לֹא-מִצְאוּ  
חֲזוֹן מִיְקוֹק:

י יִשְׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ יְדֻמוֹ, זָקְנֵי בֵת-צִיּוֹן--הֶעֱלוּ עֹפֵר עַל-  
רֹאשָׁם, חָגְרוּ שִׁקְיִם; הוֹרִידוּ לְאֶרֶץ רֹאשָׁהּ, בְּתוֹלַת  
יְרוּשָׁלַם:

יא כָּלוּ בְּדַמְעוֹת עֵינָי, חֲמַרְמְרוּ מַעֵי--נִשְׁפָּף לְאֶרֶץ  
כַּבְּדִי, עַל-שֹׁבֵר בֵּת-עַמִּי: בַּעֲטַף עוֹלַל וַיִּנְכַּח,  
בְּרַחֲבוֹת קִרְיָהּ:

יב לֹא-אִמְתָּם, יֹאמְרוּ אֵיהָ, דָּגְנוּ וַיִּזְנוּ: בְּהִתְעַטְפָם  
כָּחֹל, בְּרַחֲבוֹת עֵיר--בְּהִשְׁתַּפֵּף נַפְשָׁם, אֶל-חֵיק  
אִמְתָּם:

יג מֵה-אֶעֱיֵדֶךָ מֵה אֲדַמָּה-לָּהּ, הַבֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם--מֵה  
אֲשׁוּה-לָּךְ וְאֲנַחְמָךָ, בְּתוֹלַת בֵּת-צִיּוֹן: כִּי-גָדוֹל כִּים  
שִׁבְרָךָ, מִי יִרְפָּא-לָּךְ:

יד נְבִיאֶיהָ, חֲזוּ לָךְ שׁוֹא וְתַפְּלָה, וְלֹא-גִלוּ עַל-עוֹנָהּ,  
לְהִשִּׁיב שְׁבִיתָךְ (שְׁבוּתָךְ); וַיִּחְזוּ לָךְ, מִשְׁאוֹת שׁוֹא  
וּמְדוּחִים:

טו סִפְקוּ עֲלֶיךָ כַּפִּים, כֹּל-עֲבָרֵי דָרְךָ--שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּנְעוּ  
רֹאשָׁם, עַל-בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם: הַזֹּאת הֵעִיר, שְׁאִימְרוּ  
כְּלִילַת יַפִּי--מְשׁוֹשׁ, לְכָל-הָאָרֶץ:

טז פָּצוּ עֲלֶיךָ פִּיהֶם, כֹּל-אֲבֵיךָ--שָׁרְקוּ וַיִּחְרְקוּ-שׁוֹ,  
אָמְרוּ בִלְעֵנִי; אֵף זֶה הַיּוֹם שִׁקְרִינָהּ, מִצְאֵנוּ רֵאיוֹנוֹ:

יז עֲשֵׂה יְקוֹק אֲשֶׁר זָמַם, בַּצַּע אֲמָרְתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צוּה  
מִימֵי-קָדְמָה--הֲרַס, וְלֹא חָמַל; וַיִּשְׂמַח עֲלֶיךָ אֹיֵיב,  
הַרִים קִרְוֹ צִרְיָךְ:

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 כַּנְחַל דְּמָעָה, יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה--אֶל-תַּתְּנִי פּוּגַת לֶךָ, אֶל-תִּדְם בַּת-עֵינֶיךָ:

**יט** קומי רני בליל (בלילה), לראש אשמרות--שפכי כמים לבך, נכח פני אֲדָנִי; שאי אליו כפיה, על-נפש עוללך--העטופים ברעב, בראש כל-חוצות:

**כ** ראה יקוק והביטה, למי עוללת כה: אם-תאכלנה נשים פרים עללי טפחים, אם-הרג במקדש אֲדָנִי כהן וְנָבִיא:

**כא** שכבו לארך חוצות נער וְזָקֵן, בתולתי ובחורי נפלי בחרב; הרגת ביום אפה, טבחית לא חמלת:

**כב** תקרא כיום מועד מגורי מסביב, ולא היה ביום אף-יקוק פליט וְשָׂרִיד: אֲשֶׁר-טפחתי וְרַבִּיתִי, אֲבִי כֵלָם:

### 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 הַגֵּבֶר רָאָה עָנִי, בַּשֶּׁבֶט עֲבַרְתָּו:

**ב** אוֹתִי נִהַג וַיִּלְקֶה, חֲשֹׁךְ וְלֹא-אוֹר:

**ג** אֵךְ בִּי יָשַׁב יְהַפֵּךְ יָדוֹ, כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

**ד** בִּלְהַ בְּשָׂרִי וְעוֹרִי, שִׁבַר עֲצָמוֹתַי:

**ה** בָּנָה עָלַי וַיִּקַּף, רֹאשׁ וַתִּלְאַה:

**ו** בַּמְחֻשְׁכִּים הוֹשִׁיבֵנִי, כְּמֵתֵי עוֹלָם:

**ז** גָּדַר בְּעָדָי וְלֹא אֶצֵּא, הַכְּבִיד נִחַשְׁתִּי:

**ח** גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וְאֶשׁוּעַ, שְׁתָּם תִּפְלִיתִי:

**ט** גָּדַר דְּרָכִי בְּגִזִּיתִי, נִתִּיבִיתִי עוֹהָ:

**י** דָּב אֲרַב הוּא לִי, אַרְיָה (אָרִי) בְּמִסְתָּרַיִם:

**יא** אֲדָרְכִי סוּרָר וַיִּפְשַׁחֲנִי, שְׁמָנִי שָׁמָם:

**יב** דָּרַךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּצַּיְבֵנִי, כַּמִּטְרָא לַחֲיָן:

**יג** הִבִּיא, בְּכִלְיָתִי, בְּנִי אֶשְׁפֹּתוֹ:

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:

אָנִי הַגִּבּוֹר רָאָה עֵינַי בְּשִׁבְט עֲבָרְתִּי

*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

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EICHA:  
HOW DO WE  
RESPOND TO  
TRAGEDY?

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

**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** הייתי שחוק לְכָל-עַמִּי, נְגִינְתֶם כָּל-הַיּוֹם:

**טו** הִשְׁבִּיעַנִי בְמִרְוּרִים, הַרְוִי לַעֲנָה:

**טז** וַיִּגְרַס בְּחֻצֵי שֹׁנֵי, הַכְפִּישֵׁנִי בְּאִפְרָ:

**יז** וַתִּזְנַח מִשְׁלוֹם נַפְשִׁי, נְשִׁיתִי טוֹבָה:

**יח** וְאָמַר אֲבָד נְצַחִי, וַתּוֹחַלְתִּי מִיִּקוֹק:

**יט** זָכֶר-עַנְיֵי וּמְרֹדַי, לַעֲנָה וְרָאֵשׁ:

**כ** זְכוֹר תִּזְכּוֹר, וַתִּשְׁחֵחַ (וַתִּשְׁחָח) עָלַי נַפְשִׁי:

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

**כב** חֲסִדֵי יִקוֹק כִּי לֹא-תִמְנַנֶּה, כִּי לֹא-כָלוּ רַחֲמָיו:

**כג** חֲדָשִׁים, לְבַקְרִים, רַבָּה, אֲמוֹנַתְךָ:

**כד** חֲלָקֵי יִקוֹק אֲמָרָה נַפְשִׁי, עַל-כֵּן אוֹחִיל לוֹ:

**כה** כֹּה טוֹב יִקוֹק לְקַוֹ, לְנַפְשׁוֹ תִדְרָשׁוּ:

**כו** טוֹב וַיְחַיֵּל וְדוֹמָם, לַתְּשׁוּעַת יִקוֹק:

**כז** טוֹב לְגָבֶר, כִּי-יִשָּׂא עַל בְּנֵעוּרָיו:

**כח** יֵשֶׁב בְּדַד וַיִּדָּם, כִּי נָטַל עָלָיו:

**כט** יִתֵּן בְּעַפְרָ פִּיהוּ, אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה:

**ל** יִתֵּן לְמַכְהוֹ לַחִי, יֵשֶׁבַע בְּחַרְפָּה:

**לא** כִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם, אֲדַנִּי:

**לב** כִּי אִם-הוֹנָה, וַיִּרְחַם כְּרַב חֲסִדָיו:

**לג** כִּי לֹא עָנָה מִלְבוֹ, וַיִּגְהַ בְּנֵי-אִישׁ:

**לד** לְדַכָּא תַחַת רַגְלָיו, כָּל אֲסִירֵי אֶרֶץ:

**לה** לְהַטּוֹת, מִשְׁפַּט-גָּבֶר, נִגְדָה, פְּנֵי עֲלִיוֹן:

**לו** לְעוֹת אָדָם בְּרִיבוֹ, אֲדַנִּי לֹא רָאֵה:

**לז** מִי זֶה אָמַר וַתִּהְיֶה, אֲדַנִּי לֹא צָוָה:

account of anguish and horror.

## From Judge to Enemy

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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.



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 רְשֵׁת לְרַגְלֵי

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:

צַדִּיק הוּא יְקוּק, כִּי פִּיהוּ מְרִיתִי

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

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

**לח** מפי עליון לא תצא, הרעות והטוב:

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

**לט** מה-יתאונו אדם חי, גבר על-הטאו:

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

**מ** נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה, ונשובה עד-יקוק:

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

**מא** נשא לבבנו אל-כפים, אל-אל בשמים:

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

**מב** נחנו פשענו ומרינו, אתה לא סלחת:

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

**מג** סכותה באף ותרדפנו, הרגת לא חמלת:

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

**מד** סכותה בענן לה, מעבור תפלה:

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

**מה** סחי ומאוס תשימנו, בקרב העמים:

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

**מו** פצו עלינו פיהם, כל-איבינו:

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

**מז** פחד ופחת היה לנו, השאת והשבר:

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

**מח** פלגי-מים תרד עיני, על-שבר בת-עמי:

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

**מט** עיני נגרה ולא תדמה, מאין הפגות:

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

**נ** עד-ישקיף וירא, יקוק משמים:

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

**נא** עיני עוללה לנפשי, מכל בנות עירי:

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

**נב** צוד צדוני בצפור, איבי חנם:

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

**נג** צמתו בבור חיי, וידו-אבן בי:

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

**נד** צפו-מים על-ראשי, אמרתי נגזרתי:

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

**נה** קראתי שמך יקוק, מבור תחתיות:

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

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

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

**נז** קרבת ביום אקראך, אמרת אל-תירא:

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

**נח** רבת אדני ריבי נפשי, גאלת חיי:

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

**נט** ראיתך יקוק עותתי, שפטה משפטי:

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

**ס** ראיתך, כל-נקמתם--כל-מחשבתם, לי:

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

**סא** שמעת חרפתם יקוק, כל-מחשבתם עלי:

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 כְּאֹיֵב

He has bent his bow like an enemy...

נָצַב יְמִינוֹ כְּצַר

He has established His right hand as an adversary.

הֲיֵה ה' כְּאֹיֵב, בֹּלַע 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

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.

סב שפתי קמי והגיונם, עלי כל-היום:

סג שבבתם וקיתתם הביטה, אני מנגינתם:

סד תשיב להם גמול יקוק, כמעשה ידיהם:

סה תתן להם מגנת-לב, תאלתך להם:

סו תרדף באף ותשמידם, מתחת שמי יקוק:

## 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 איכה יועם זהב, ישנא הפתם הטוב; תשתפכנה, אבני-קדש, בראש כל-חוצות:

ב בני ציון היקרים, המסלאים בפי--איכה נחשבו לנבל-חרש, מעשה ידי יוצר:

ג גם-תנין (תנים) חלצו שד, היניקו גוריהן; בת-עמי לאדור, כי ענים (כיענים) במדבר:

ד דבק לשון יונק אל-חבו, בצמא; עוללים שאלו להם, פרש אין להם:

ה האכלים, למעדנים, נשמו, בחוצות; האמנים עלי תולע, חבקו אשפתות:

ו ויגדל עון בת-עמי, מחטאת סדם: ההפוכה כמו-רגע, ולא-חלו בה ידים:

ז זכו נזיריה משלג, צחו מחלב; אדמו עצם מפנינים, ספיר גזרתם:

ח חשך משחור תאדם, לא נכרו בחוצות; צפד עורם על-עצמם, יבש היה כעץ:

ט טובים היו חללי-חרב, מחללי רעב: שהם יזבו מדקרים, מתגובת שדי:

י ידי נשים רחמניות--בשלג ילדיהן; היו לברות למו, בשקר בת-עמי:

יא כלה יקוק את-חמתו, שפך חרון אפו; ויצת-אש בציון, ותאכל יסדתייה:

יב לא האמינו מלכי-ארץ, וכל (כל) ישיבי תבל: כי יבא צר ואויב, בשערי ירושלים:

יג מחטאות נביאיה, עונת כהניה: השפכים בקרבם, דם צדיקים:

יד נעו עורים בחוצות, נגאלו בדם; בלא יוכלו, יגעו בלבשיהם:

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 יְהוָה 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 לְאָחִיו

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 אֲמַרְתּוּ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִיַּמֵּי-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-געו; אַמְרו, בְּגוֹיִם, לא יוספו לגור:

**טז** פְּנֵי יְקוֹק חִלְקָם, לא יוֹסִיף לְהַבִּיטָם; פְּנֵי כְהֵנִים לא נָשְׂאוּ, זְקֵנִים (וְזִקְנִים) לא חֲנְנוּ:

**יז** עוֹדִינָה (עוֹדִינוּ) תְּכַלֶּינָה עֵינֵינוּ, אֶל-עֲזָרְתֵנוּ הִבֵּל; בְּצַפְיֵתֵנוּ צַפִּינוּ, אֶל-גּוֹי לא יוֹשֵׁעַ:

**יח** צְדוֹ צַעֲדֵינוּ, מַלְכַת בְּרַחֲבֵיתֵנוּ; קֶרֶב קֶצְנוּ מְלֵאוּ יְמֵינוּ, כִּי-בָא קֶצְנוּ:

**יט** קָלִים הָיוּ רַדְפֵינוּ, מִנְשָׂרֵי שָׁמַיִם; עַל-הַהָרִים דָּלְקָנוּ, בַּמִּדְבָּר אֲרָבוּ לָנוּ:

**כ** רוּחַ אֲפִינוּ מְשִׁיחַ יְקוֹק, נִלְכַד בְּשַׁחֲיוֹתֵם: אֲשֶׁר אֲמַרְנָה, בְּצִלוֹ נַחֶיָה בְּגוֹיִם:

**כא** שִׁישֵׁי וְשִׁמְחֵי בַת-אֲדוֹם, יוֹשְׁבֵי (יוֹשְׁבַת) בְּאֶרֶץ עוּץ; גַּם-עַלְיָהּ, תִּעֲבֹר-בוֹס--תִּשְׁכַּרְי, וְתִתְעָרִי:

**כב** תָּם-עוֹבָהּ, בַּת-צִיּוֹן--לא יוֹסִיף, לְהַגְלוֹתְךָ; פִּקְדַת עוֹנְךָ בַּת-אֲדוֹם, גְּלָה 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** זְכוֹר יְקוֹק מַה-הָיָה לָנוּ, הַבֵּיט (הַבִּיטָה) וְרֵאֵה אֶת-חֲרָפְתֵנוּ:

**ב** נַחֲלֵתֵנוּ נִהְפְּכָה לְזָרִים, בְּתֵינוּ לִנְכָרִים:

**ג** יְתוֹמִים הָייְנוּ אִין (וְאִין), אָב, אֲמֵתֵינוּ כְּאֵלְמוֹת:

**ד** מִיְמֵינוּ בְּכֶסֶף שְׁתִּינָה, עֲצִינוּ בְּמִחִיר יְבֵאוּ:

**ה** עַל צַוְאֲרֵנוּ נִרְדַּפְנוּ, יִגְעֵנוּ לא (וְלא) הַנַּח-לָנוּ:

**ו** מְצָרִים נָתַנוּ יָד, אֲשׁוּר לְשַׁבַּע לְחָם:

**ז** אֲבִיתֵנוּ חָטְאוּ אִינִים (וְאִינִים), אֲנַחְנוּ (וְאֲנַחְנוּ) עוֹנֵיתֵיהֶם סָבְלָנוּ:

**ח** עֲבָדִים מְשֻׁלוּ בָנוּ, פֶּרֶק אִין מִיָּדֵם:

**ט** כִּנְפֵשֵׁנוּ נָבִיא לְחַמְנוּ, מִפְּנֵי חֲרֵב הַמִּדְבָּר:

**י** עוֹרֵנוּ כְּתַנּוּר נִכְמְרוּ, מִפְּנֵי זִלְעָפוֹת רָעָב:

**יא** נָשִׁים בְּצִיּוֹן עָנּוּ, בְּתֵלַת 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 (אַרְיֵ) בְּמַסְתְּרִים

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

דָּרָךְ קִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּצְיֵבֵנִי כַמְטָרָא 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 זְקֵנִים לֹא נִהְדָּרוּ:

יג בַּחֲוִירִים טָחוּן נָשְׂאָה, וּנְעָרִים בַּעַץ כָּשְׁלוּ:

יד זְקֵנִים מִשְׁעַר שַׁבְּתוֹ, בַּחֲוִירִים מִנְּגִינְתָם:

טו שִׁבְת מְשׁוּשׁ לִבְנוֹ, נִהְפָּךְ לְאֵבֶל מִחֻלְנוֹ:

טז נָפְלָה עֲטֹרַת רֹאשֵׁנוּ, אוֹי-נָא לָנוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ:

יז עַל-זֶה, הִיָּה דָוָה לִבְנוֹ--עַל-אֱלֹהִים, חֲשָׁכוּ עֵינֵינוּ:

יח עַל הַר-צִיּוֹן שְׁשִׁמָּם, שׁוֹעֲלִים הִלְכוּ-בוֹ:

יט אַתָּה יְקוּק לְעוֹלָם תִּשָּׁב, כְּסֶאֱדָךְ לְדוֹר וָדוֹר:

כ לָמָּה לִנְצַח תִּשְׁכַּחֲנוּ, תַּעֲזֹבֵנוּ לְאֶרֶץ יָמִים:

כא הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יְקוּק אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשׁוּב (וְנִשׁוּבָה), חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם:

כב כִּי אִם-מָאֵס מְאֻסְתָּנוּ, קִצַּפְתָּ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מָאֵד:

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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:

חֶסֶדְּךָ יְיָ קִוּוּ בִּי לֹא-תִמְנוּג, בִּי לֹא-כָלוּ רַחֲמֵי

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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Because this book contains verses from the Torah, as well as the name of God, please refrain from throwing it in the trash. It should be buried with other holy writings.