



The Heart of Eicha

The uniqueness of Chapter Three, the structural center of Megillat Eicha, is immediately discernible: its unusual triple acrostic sets it apart from the other chapters. It therefore has 66 verses, as opposed to the 22 verses of the other four chapters.

While this technical difference draws our attention, other distinctive elements of the chapter are substantive. The absence of the word *Eicha* at its opening suggests this chapter was not composed as a lament.

A unique, first-person voice launches the chapter; the speaker introduces himself as a *gever*, a lone individual.¹

In a book concerned with national calamity, the central chapter focuses upon the misfortunes of an individual, offering a portrait of how one suffering person contends with G-d and copes with travail. The sufferer navigates through the morass of his misery, experiencing religious growth along the way. Every person who experiences adversity can regard this *gever's* journey as his own.

Chapter Three omits the major motifs of Eicha's other chapters, including the fall of Yerushalayim and the *Beit HaMikdash*, and the suffering, starvation and exile of the Judeans. There are no priests, kings or leaders, no maidens or young men, no vulnerable, dying children and no hint of a national tragedy. Even the suffering of the individual is not directly connected to the events of 586 BCE.

Instead, this chapter is uniquely concerned with theological reflection, considering the nature of G-d and His interactions with humans (verses 21-39). The suffering individual of this chapter seeks and finds hope in G-d – the only lengthy message of hope in the book of Eicha appears at its center (verses 21–26). The core of the chapter also discusses the lessons one may draw from suffering (verses 27–30), and several erroneous conclusions one should scrupulously avoid (verses 31–39). Prayer, repentance and communal responsibility

follow these reflections (verses 40–51). The *gever's* experience can rightly be termed a journey, inasmuch as he progresses in a linear fashion (albeit with some twists) during the course of Chapter Three.

The linear progression marks this chapter's distinctness as surely as the differences noted above. Constructed in a chiasmic fashion, the previous two chapters maintain a cyclical form that conveys the hopelessness of ceaseless suffering.

Chapter Three, in contrast, moves from despair to reflection to hope, in a steady forward motion. Contemplation spawns comprehension of responsibility and consequently moves the *gever* toward reconciliation with G-d.



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To arrive at these conclusions, the *gever* draws from his deep resources of faith, depicted at the core of the chapter, the pivotal center of the book (verses 21–39). The *gever* at the beginning of the chapter (verses 1–20) is not the same as the *gever* at its conclusion (verses 52–66), though his external circumstances appear unchanged.

Nevertheless, the ending of the chapter is far from triumphant. The suffering *gever* resurfaces in 3:52–66, his plight still miserable, his immediate prospects grim. The individual continues to feel entrapped, taunted and tormented. Yet, while the *gever's* external circumstances have not changed, he has certainly undergone an inner transformation.

The final section of the chapter illustrates the individual's astonishing development. Possibly the most significant transformation occurs as he abandons his self-centered victimhood and begins to perceive

those around him. The *gever* no longer feels alienated from his compatriots (as in verse 14), nor does he regard G-d as his adversary (see verses 1–16).

Instead, he advocates on his people's behalf (verses 47–51) and enlists G-d as his protector (verse 55). This process allows him to restore a relationship with both G-d and his community, alleviating his loneliness, restoring his sense of meaningful existence and facilitating his recovery. Chapter Three opens with the word *Ani*, “I,” introducing an individual whose self-absorbed obsession with his hardships alienates him from his surroundings.

The chapter closes with the name of G-d, illustrating that the *gever* has learned to look beyond the narrow scope of his own grief. Though G-d never directly intervenes in the chapter (or in the book), in this final section the sufferer hears G-d's words (verses 57), senses His immanence (verses 57), and anticipates the restoration of Divine justice (verses 58–59).

By the end of his process of introspection, the *gever* has indeed found G-d, deep within the recesses of his own inner being.

■ Adapted from Dr. Yael Ziegler's new book, *Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World (Maggid, 2021)*.

¹ While both Chapters One and Two contain first-person accounts, the individual speaker seems to represent a collective “I” of Yerushalayim, rather than a lone individual.

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