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.

Eichah and the Mystery of Chapter Three

I just returned from a Tisha B'Av-night reading of the Book of *Eichah,* 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 *Eichah* aloud for the group.

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 *Eichah* 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 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 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 *Eichah*. 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 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 between the verse numbers. But not in chapter 3. There are two or three verses in every line. Verse tumbles upon verse. Chapter three 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 *entachta* 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.

So there I am, reading chapter three, and it dawns on me: There is not a single *entnachta* 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 Eichah 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 *Eichah* 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, until the end of the alphabet.

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 Eichah? 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 three is Jeremiah's moment standing by that river in Cambodia. Chapter 3 is where *Eichah* stops telling a story and starts getting personal.

The first two chapters of *Eichah* lament the destruction of Jerusalem, but more or less from the outside. Jeremiah speaks as 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 הַגֶּבֶר רָאָה עָנִי, בְּשֵׁבֶט עֶבְרָתֹו
> *I am the man* who has seen affliction, with the rod of His wrath.

All of a sudden, it is 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 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.

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:

> מִמָּרוֹם שָׁלַח
> -אֵשׁ בְּעַצְמֹתַי
> From on high, He sends fire in my bones…
>
> פָּרַשׂ רֶשֶׁת לְרַגְלָי
> 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 to be condemned for His role in all this, and he gives this answer:

> צַדִּיק הוּא יְהוָה, כִּי פִיהוּ מָרִיתִי
> The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against Him.

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 קַשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב
> He has bent his bow like an enemy…
>
> נִצַּב יְמִינוֹ כְּצָר
> He has established His right hand as an adversary.
>
> הָיָה אֲדֹנָי כְּאוֹיֵב, בִּלַּע 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.

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 wee bit of difference between being 'like' an enemy and actually *being* an enemy. The *kaf* leaves room for doubt, for a 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 זָמָם
> God has done what he plotted to do…

Yes, you guessed it; it is the language of *eidim zommemim* -- 'treacherous witnesses' -- lifted straight out of Deuteronomy 19.

> וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר זָמַם לַעֲשׂוֹת
> 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 *Eichah*. Just after speaking of God having "done what he plotted to do", Jeremiah states:

בִּצַּע אִמָרָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מִימֵי-
קֶדֶם
God has carried out that which he ordained long ago; he has destroyed, and left behind compassion.

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 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 Its Personal For You, It Feels Like its Personal for God, too

All of this brings us to the doorstep of Eichah, Chapter Three. In Chapter Three, 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*:

> דֹּב אוֹרֵב הוּא לִי, אריה (אֲרִי) בְּמִסְתָּרִים.
> He is for me a bear lying in wait, a lion in secret places…
>
> דָּרַךְ קַשְׁתּוֹ וַיַּצִּיבֵנִי, כַּמַּטָּרָא 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 changed; Jeremiah's point of view is what changed.

As we discussed before, Jeremiah began *Eichah* 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:

> חַסְדֵי יְהוָה כִּי לֹא-
> תָמְנוּ,
> 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... A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.*
> -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Twinned Ending of Eichah: Bitterness and Hope

Two chapters later, the contradictions expressed in Chapter 3 come back to form a kind of twinned end to *Eichah*. 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 Eichah, 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 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.