

When God learns to mourn – A midrash for Tisha B'Av

The following text is taken from Eikha Rabbah – a midrashic collection on the book of Lamentations (known in Hebrew as Eikha). The Book of Lamentations is a book of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) that mourns the loss of the First Temple. It is read on the fast day of Tisha B'Av, the 9th day of the month of Av. Tisha B'Av is the day on which the Jewish community mourns the loss of the First and Second Temples and many other tragedies which befell the Jewish people. The observance of this day varies in different Jewish communities. The observance bears some similarities to Yom Kippur, in terms of practices including: 25 hour fast, avoiding washing, wearing leather shoes and abstinence from sex. Some people also observe practices associated with the shiva period of mourning in Judaism (the seven days following burial of an immediate relative) – such as sitting on the floor or on a low stool. In progressive Judaism, where the temple cult is not idealised or its restoration desirable, and universalism is championed alongside particularism, the mourning practices are more varied. The connection to this day, for Jews today, is full of tension and complexity. Many people struggle with the theology of an interventionist God 'then', at the time of the destruction, and a silent God 'now'. The midrash below hints at this complexity and how the sages of the rabbinic period gave voice to it.

Eikha Rabbah 1:1 (Buber edition)

[ד"א ישבה בדד]. אמר רב נחמן שאל הקדוש ברוך הוא למלאכי השרת מלך בשר ודם שהוא אבל, מה ראוי לו לעשות, אמרו לו תולה שק על פתחו, אמר להם אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר אלביש שמים קדרות ושק אשים כסותם (ישעיה נ ג). ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו מכבה הפנסים אמר להן אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר שמש וירח קדרו כוכבים אספו נגהם (יואל ד טו). ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו כופה את המצעות, אמר להם אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר חזיה הוית עד די כרסון רמיו ועתיק יומין יתיב (דניאל ז ט). ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו הולך יחף, אמר להם אף אני אעשה כן, דכתיב ה' בסופה ובסערה דרכו וענן אבק רגליו (נחום א ג). ועוד אמרו לו מבזע פורפריה, אמר אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר עשה ה' אשר זמם בצע אמרתו (איכה ב ז), [מהו בצע אמרתו, ר' יעקב דכפר חנין אמר מבזע פורפירא]. ועוד אמרו לו יושב דומם, אמר אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר ישב בדד וידום (איכה ג כח). ועוד אמרו לו יושב ובוכה [אמר אף אני אעשה כן], שנאמר ויקרא ה' אלהים צבאות ביום ההוא לבכי ולמספד (ישעיה כב יב).

[Another interpretation of "She sits alone" (Eikha 1:1)]. Rav Nachman said: The Holy One ever to be blessed asked the ministering angels, "A mortal king, who is mourning, what should he do?" They answered, "He hangs sackcloth over his door way". God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, *I clothe the heavens with blackness and I make sackcloth their covering* (Isaiah 50:3). God further asked them, "A king who is mourning, what does he do?" They answered, "He extinguishes the lanterns." God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, *The sun and the moon are blacked out, the stars gathered their shining* (Joel 4:15) Still further God asked them, "A king who is in mourning, what does he do?" They said, "He upturns the mattress [on to the floor]" God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, *As I looked on, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took His seat* (Daniel 7:9). Again God asked them, "A king who is mourning, what does he do?" They answered, "He goes barefoot." God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it is written, *The Eternal One, in the tempest is His way, and the clouds are the dust of His feet* (Nahum 1:3). Again they said to God, "He rends his purple cloak." God said, "I will do likewise." As it says, *The Eternal One did that which He purposed and rent his robe [bitza emrato]* (Eikha 2:17). What is *bitza imrato*? R. Yaakov of Kefar Hanin said, "Rending the [purple] robe." Once again they said to God, "He sits in silence." God said, "I will do likewise." As it says, *He sits alone in silence* (Eikha 3:28). Again they said to God, "He sits and weeps." God said, "I will do likewise." As it says, *The Eternal One God of hosts called on that day to weeping and eulogising* (Isaiah 22:12).

Eikha Rabbah

If the book of Eikha is a biblical reaction to the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Eikha Rabbah can be seen as a rabbinic reaction to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE – though composed much later (in the Amoraic period (200-400 CE in the land of Israel). However, more than that, Eikha is, according to tradition considered to have been written by Jeremiah – one of the biblical prophets. In reading the biblical text as a work of a prophet, the rabbinic exegesis views the biblical description as timeless, or at least applicable for all time: in other words, though the book was written about the First Temple, it also contains a prophetic message with regard to the Second Temple and to Jews forever. Thus, all verses could refer to any period – a warning for the future or a reflection on the previous two destructions, a comment on the Babylonian Empire, or on the Roman Empire. This is a lesson in rabbinic exegesis, in which not only can a verse be 'pulled' out of its context and seemingly 'obvious' meaning and placed alongside a verse with no apparent connection, but also the verses can be applied to any time in history. Unlike Eikha, which is a book of despair and bitterness, Eikha Rabbah also contains messages of consolation and hope. Major questions come alive in the text about God's relationship to Israel – the silence of God, God's love for Israel, etc.

Biblical Verses**Eikha 1:1**

איכה ישבה בדד העיר רבתי עם היתה כאלמנה רבתי בגוים שרתי במדינות היתה למס:

Alas! Lonely sits the city once great with people! She that was great among nations is become like a widow; the princess among states is become a thrall.

Isaiah 50:3

אלביש שמים קדרות ושק אשים כסותם:

I clothe the skies in blackness and make their raiment sackcloth.

Joel 4:15

שמש וירח קדרו וכוכבים אספו נגהם:

Sun and moon are darkened, and stars withdraw their brightness.

Daniel 7:9

חזה הוית עד די כרסון רמיו ועתיק יומין יתב לבושה כתלג חור ושער ראשה כעמר נקא כרסייה שביבין די נור נלגלוהי נור דלק:

As I looked on, Thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days too His seat. His garment was like white snow, and the hair of His head was like lamb wool and the hair of His head was like lamb's wool. His throne was tongues of flame its wheels were blazing fire.

Nahum 1:3

יקוק ארף אפים וגדל כח ונקח לא ינקח יהנה בסופה ובשערה דרכו וענן אבק רגליו:

The Eternal One is slow to anger and of great forbearance, but the Eternal One does not remit all punishment. He travels in whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust and stone.

Eikha 2:17

עשה יהוה אשר זמם בצע אמרתו אשר צוה מימי קדם הרס ולא חמל וישמח עליך אויב הרים קרו צרף:

The Eternal One has done what He purposed, has carried out the decree that He ordained long ago; He has torn down without pity. He has let the foe rejoice over you, has exalted the might of your enemies.

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Eikha 3:28

יִשָּׁב בְּדָד וְיִדָּם כִּי נָטַל עָלָיו:

Let him sit alone and be silent, when He has laid it upon him.

Isaiah 22:12

וַיִּקְרָא אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה צְבָאוֹת בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְבָכִי וּלְמִסְפָּד וּלְקִרְחָה וּלְחֹגֵר שָׁק:

My Lord God of Hosts summoned on that day to weeping and lamenting, to tonsuring and girding with sackcloth.

(Note in this verse, the phrase אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה – the name Adonai repeated twice – is actually read, according to convention, 'Adonai Elohim'. The vowels under יהוה also indicate that this is the case).

Working through the midrash

Midrash	Translation	Notes
ד"א ישבה בדד]. אמר רב נחמן שאל הקדוש ברוך הוא למלאכי השרת מלך בשר ודם שהוא אבל, מה ראוי לו לעשות, אמרו לו תולה שק על פתחו, אמר להם אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר אלביש שמים קדרות ושק אשים כסותם (ישעיה נ ג).	[Another interpretation of "She sits alone" (Eikha 1:1)]. Rav Nachman said: The Holy One ever to be blessed asked the ministering angels, "A mortal king, who is mourning, what should he do?" They answered, "He hangs sackcloth over his door way". God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, <i>I clothe the heavens with blackness and I make sackcloth their covering</i> (Isaiah 50:3).	This part of the midrash is in the form of an exegetical midrash – in which a verse by verse exegesis of the text is offered. The midrash we are looking at comes from the very beginning of the collection and is therefore based on the very first verse of the Book of Eikha. We are thrust into the desolation of the city of Jerusalem, a lonely city apparently alone. The midrash suggests that looking down on the ruins, equally alone, is God. In midrash, it is common for the rabbis to use a parable of a mortal king as an allegory for God's behavior. Here, however, the direction is reversed – God looks to the mortal king for guidance on how he should be behaving. God's divine retinue offers their answer. The first answer is the sackcloth over the opening to indicate mourning – God, taking lead from Isaiah, also puts sackcloth over the 'gates of heaven'. This verse from Isaiah is also part of the haftarah for the seven Sabbaths of consolation after Tisha B'Av.
ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו מכבה הפנסים אמר להן אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר שמש וירח קדרו כוכבים אספו נגהם (יואל ד טו).	God further asked them, "A king who is mourning, what does he do?" They answered, "He extinguishes the lanterns." God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, <i>The sun and the moon are blacked out, the stars gathered their shining</i> (Joel 4:15)	Our second example, offered by the ministering angels, is that lanterns are extinguished. Once again, like the verse from Isaiah, the context of the proof text from the book of Joel elicits a glimmer of hope because it relates how God's saving power will darken the skies before offering shelter to the Children of Israel.
ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה, אמרו לו כופה את המצעות, אמר להם אף אני אעשה כן, שנאמר חזיה הוית עד די כרסון רמיו ועתיק יומין יתיב (דניאל ז ט).	Still further God asked them, "A king who is in mourning, what does he do?" They said, "He upturns the mattress [on to the floor]" God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it says, <i>As I looked on, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took His seat</i> (Daniel 7:9).	Another proof text for the mourning practice is taken from the book of Daniel. This also describes in apocalyptic terms the everlasting kingdom which God will bestow on the people of God. Once again, out of the mourning of God comes a glimmer of hope for Israel.
ועוד שאלן מלך שהוא אבל מה הוא עושה,	Again God asked them, "A king who is mourning, what	The verse from the book of Nahum also carries a message – first it contains one variant of the attributes of God; these 'thirteen attributes'

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אמרו לו הולך יחף,
אמר להם אף אני
אעשה כן, דכתיב ה'
בסופה ובסערה דרכו
וענן אבק רגליו (נחום
א ג).

ועוד אמרו לו מבזע
פורפריה, אמר אף אני
אעשה כן, שנאמר
עשה ה' אשר זמם
בצע אמרתו (איכה ב
יז), [מהו בצע אמרתו,
ר' יעקב דכפר חנין
אמר מבזע פורפירא].

ועוד אמרו לו יושב
דומם, אמר אף אני
אעשה כן, שנאמר
ישב בדד וידום (איכה
ג כח).

ועוד אמרו לו יושב
ובוכה [אמר אף אני
אעשה כן], שנאמר
ויקרא ה' אלהים
צבאות ביום ההוא
לבכי ולמספד (ישעיה
כב יב).

does he do?" They answered, "He goes barefoot." God said to them, "I will do likewise." As it is written, *The Eternal One, in the tempest is His way, and the clouds are the dust of His feet* (Nahum 1:3).

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constitute a key component of prayers of forgiveness as part of repentance. Thus, there is hope that through repentance God will allow the people to be restored. The second aspect of the verse implies just such a thing from its context – the prophecy of Nahum says that God will restore the people.

From the repentance implied by the verse in the book of Nahum, we turn to a verse from the book of Eikha (which ends with the moving words 'Turn us back O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old!'). The book sinks the midrash into the depths of distress. Jerusalem destroyed, torn down and the people consumed. Yet, in the very act of quoting the verse in which God's actions appear to have been foretold, God's actions become, in the play on the Hebrew words, a simultaneous act of mourning.

The silence described here (or patience as one translation has it) is the silence of the person who trusts in God. In a fascinating twist, it is no longer a human being who trusts in God, but God. And as the next verses remind God, "For the Eternal One does not reject forever, but first afflicts, then pardons in His abundant kindness." (verses 31-32). That kindness is once again a connection to the forgiving attributes of God, mentioned in part in the verse from Nahum.

The mournfulness of God is now reemphasized with the verse from Isaiah. Isaiah's vision describes how God demanded repentance by the sinful people through the mournful actions, it is not forthcoming. Whereas in the context, the verse describes God's demand of the people, now in the midrash it is a demand of Godself. Isaiah's vision at this point also concludes some glimmer of hope, perhaps implied by the midrash, "Then the Eternal One God of hosts revealed Himself to my ears: This iniquity shall never be forgiven you until you die – said the Eternal One God of hosts.

Reflections on the midrash

Imitatio hominis and the reason for God's mourning

Professor David Stern describes this form of midrash as featuring 'imitatio hominis' – God's imitation of man. It is the reverse of imitation Dei (the imitation of God) in which human beings strive to imitate the qualities of God as the right way of life. Stern discusses an earlier part of the collection of Eikha Rabbah (Petichta 24) which is an exegesis of Isaiah 22:1-12 (note that our midrash ends with verse 12). In this exegesis, God is described as having to vacate the Temple in order to destroy it and then is filled with grief. This mourning by God progresses through a number of stages: blame, anger, failure and seeing himself as the victim. Finally, God learns from Rachel, wife of Jacob, how to overcome his jealousy and anguish and become compassionate again, promising to restore Israel. According to the theology, it is the people's failure to repent that is the reason that God causes the destruction of the Temple. However, after the destruction God begins to mourn. In our midrash, God is mourning but does not know how to mourn and therefore seeks the example of human beings as described by the divine retinue of the ministering angels. God, so utterly not human, becomes almost like a child, filled with human emotion with no outlet for expression or idea what is the right

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way to behave. We can read this as a straight anthropomorphism, but perhaps there is more to it: what does it mean for God to need human beings as an example of right conduct? Doesn't God know the rules of mourning? How do we interpret a God who performs the rites of mourning? The implied hope that seems to lie beneath each of the proof texts is also a message of hope for the Jewish people and hints towards the future of the relationship between God and the Jewish people.

The Number Seven

The number seven recurs throughout biblical and rabbinic literature, here we find it too. There are seven Sabbaths of consolation after Tisha B'Av. On these Shabbatot, a special haftarah (prophetic reading) is read which offers a message of consolation and hope after the mourning of destruction and desolation remembered on Tisha B'Av. The seven Sabbaths end before Rosh Hashanah – thus connecting the loss and consolation with our potential for repentance. It is well known in Judaism that there are seven days of intense mourning following a death of a relative – known as Shiva. Finally, in our midrash, there are seven proof texts and expressions of grief by God – which connect to a restoration through repentance.

From the city alone to God alone

In the midrash, the first verse of Eikha appears to refer to the city of Jerusalem sitting alone, we then move to the penultimate proof text, also from Eikha, which is re-read: no longer is it a description of a person who trusts in God sitting alone, but rather God who sits alone waiting for God's own forgiveness. It is, as if, through the long process of God's own shiva, providing himself with proof texts for mourning practices, that God becomes silent, alone and aware that He will eventually forgive and restore the people. From here, the next proof text returns us to a starker reality, as if the psychological process of grieving – in which the intensity of shiva, when we step out of the world's rhythms for a moment, is concluded with a gradual re-entry into the reality of the world living with the loss.

God's silence

There is another piece of literariness to this midrash, which we might be a bit circumspect about without checking manuscripts, but carries weight in our text nonetheless. Note the moment that ministering angels introduce the idea of silence, God stops asking them for examples. God's silence is a powerful hint towards the human experience of loss – whether personal or national (in the case of Tisha B'Av). We are often silent, just as Aaron was silent when his sons died after offering strange fire. Words cease to have any function in explaining the world around us satisfactorily in light of death and loss. In the biblical book of Job, Job's friends heap their words upon more words and yet fail miserably to comfort him. But there is another side to the silence – God's silence is deafening when we are confronted by loss. We wish that an answer to the question 'Why?' would be forthcoming. We demand answers. But God is silent. God does not seem to speak to us. Elijah heard a small, silent voice. We too hear silence, but the silence we hear does not bring the answers we want. This too is part of the rabbinic concern – how to cope with God's silence. In the midrash it is a sign of hope, because it means God will eventually restore the people, just as the other prophecies came true.

Our mourning

What can we derive from this midrash: that God grieves? That God caused the destruction of the Temple, not historical process? That the temple will be restored? All of these seem theologically problematic. Perhaps then there is a deep insight into the experience of grief from a human perspective. Out of the anger, blame, guilt, disbelief, we may reach a point of silence. Silence that may allow us to find a new space. A space to re-emerge from the loss and destruction – not to how things were 'as of old', rather to a reality in which our grief is real, always with us, but so is our hope for the future.