

Tisha B'Av

Tisha B'Av is like a sponge for occasions to lament. It absorbs more and more of them. According to the [Mishnah](#) ([Taanit](#) 4:6), five specific events occurred on the ninth of Av that warrant fasting:

1. The [twelve spies](#) sent by [Moses](#) to observe the land of [Canaan](#) returned from their mission. Only two of the spies, [Joshua](#) and [Caleb](#), brought a positive report, while the others spoke disparagingly about the land. The majority report caused the [Children of Israel](#) to cry, panic and despair of ever entering the "[Promised Land](#)". Because of the Israelites' lack of faith, God decreed that for all generations this date would become one of crying and misfortune for their descendants, the Jewish people. (See [Numbers](#) Ch. 13–14)
2. The [First Temple](#) was destroyed by the Babylonians
3. The [Second Temple](#) was destroyed by the Romans
4. The Romans crushed [Bar Kokhba's revolt](#) and destroyed the city of [Betar](#), killing over 100,000 Jews, on July 8, 132 CE (in Jewish Calendar av 9, 3892)
5. Following the Roman [siege of Jerusalem](#), Roman commander Turnus Rufus plowed the site of the Temple and the surrounding area, in 133 CE.

Other calamities associated with Tisha B'Av:

- The [First Crusade](#) was declared by [Pope Urban II](#) on July 20, 1095 (in Jewish Calendar av 9, 4855), killing 10,000 Jews in its first month and destroying Jewish communities in [France](#) and the [Rhineland](#).
- Jews were expelled from England on July 25, 1290 (Av 9, 5050 in Jewish Calendar).
- Jews were [expelled](#) from [Spain](#) on August 11, 1492 (Av 9, 5252 in Jewish Calendar). On Tisha B'Av 5674 (August 1, 1914), World War I broke out, causing unprecedented devastation across Europe and set the stage for World War II and the [Holocaust](#).
- On the eve of Tisha B'Av 5702 (July 23, 1942), the mass deportation began of Jews from the [Warsaw Ghetto](#), en route to [Treblinka](#).

Hence the crusades are lamented on Tisha B'Av, and the Holocaust is mourned on Tisha B'Av. Liberal Jews have included mourning for global events that foreground human inhumanity to one another such as Hiroshima day which generally falls close to Tisha B'Av. Tisha B'Av is then both particular and universal. But most of all, it is the day on which we do not have a covenant. Our entire nomos, our universe of meaning, is broken and we are stumbling around in the existential chaos, not knowing what to hope for or how to hope again. This sense of being in a terminally disordered world is expressed in the place where

meaning is most concentrated for us, in the sanctuary of our synagogue. Here at BCC, following ancient customs, we have made mourning and disorder in our cherished brand-new sanctuary. A black cloth shrouds the Ark. Chairs are overturned on the bima. The colored glasses of our rainbow menorah have been replaced by plain yortzeit lights. Mourners sit on the ground. It is a devastating scene.

Why do we do this? Why do we remember what is excruciating to remember? Why do we read the the book of Lamentations and in its own haunting trope? Some circumstances call forth lament. We human beings are ill-suited to loss and to emptiness. When we cease to feel held in a web of relationships, when the network of meanings that make the world intelligible are destroyed, we are seized with spiritual vertigo. We don't know where we stand or what can be relied upon. "What are we? Mah anu? we ask. What is our life, Meh chayenu?" This sense of radical unmeaning, of dangling loose from the web that had safely held us is almost like physical pain.

The cultural critic Elaine Scarry writes about physical pain and its effects on the universe of the sufferer. Intolerable pain, says Scarry, unmakes the universe, expunging thought and feeling, self and world, "all that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language." In severe torment, the sufferer is utterly isolated, unable to experience relatedness unable to attend to her surroundings, unable to speak – for language is displaced by gasps, moans, and screams. In contrast, Scarry observes, "to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech is almost to be present at the birth or rebirth of language."

I want to argue that some of these observations are also germane to sufferings from emotional and spiritual pain. There is more than one kind of pain that can leave us tormented and bereft. And to be present when the sufferer reaches relational speech is to be present at the rebirth of redemption. According to our mystical tradition, language precedes everything, for the world is created with the alphabet. To unmake a world is to undo the alphabet of creation, to plunge the world constituted by language back into disorder, to strike it wordless. But how can the alphabet so violently broken be reconstituted? How can the broken reenter and speak the unspeakable? The doorway, I would maintain, is lament. In lament, the boundary between the made and unmade universe is thinnest, for it is the cultural form closest to the preverbal howl of pain. Lament can be incoherent and chaotic, picking its way through a broken rubble of unbearably vivid happenings and intolerable sensations. Its content is dangerously dark and disordered, and in its meaning may be nonexistent, rejected, or found wanting. And yet I want to argue that the doorway through which lament enters the world is a *petach tikvah*, a doorway of hope.

What, first of all, is lament? Lament is composed of several sub-genres. There are laments for the dead, laments by the sick and the disheartened, communal laments over lost battles, destroyed cities, and states and eventually, for other communal catastrophes. There is a lament from a Sumerian city that was dust five thousand years ago and there is a lament for the city of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. We are not the only culture that lamented. Lament was common to the entire Mediterranean and Middle East as well as to

other cultures across the globe. In laments, human beings bewail all that hurts about being human: having bodies that hurt; being mortal; suffering brutality at the hands of others; losing control over our lives; losing kin; losing home; losing freedom; being tormented by memories of happier times or by memories of horrific occurrences; feeling abandoned by an indifferent or actively punitive God. Usually the original makers and performers of those songs were women, and although the makers of biblical literary laments are identified as men, the prophet Jeremiah mentions the *mekonenot*, the lamenting women. God commands Jeremiah: "Call the lament-singing women [*mekonenot*], let the wise women come." (Jeremiah 9:16-17). Jeremiah exhorts the elegy-makers to teach their daughters the craft because the prophesied devastation will require so many lamenters (9:19). Lament-singing women are referenced in several of the prophetic books but the only full-scale biblical depiction of a female lamenter is of Zion in the Book of Lamentations.

The Book of Lamentations quite explicitly reconstitutes the alphabet. Four of its five chapters are alphabetical acrostics. Order is imposed by alphabetical sequence and the patterning of poetic language on content that is logically disordered. The poet and the two speakers, the woman Zion and the man who has known affliction, pour out a torrent of personal and collective woe: physical torment, humiliation, pity, self blame, accusations hurled at a violent and predatory God, dreadful tableaux of jeering enemies, starving children, cannibal mothers, slave laborers, slaughtered bodies, pleas for mercy, pleas for bloody revenge and all this is crammed into an alef to tav alphabet.

This disturbance of narrative is consonant also with descriptions of Holocaust memory. Borrowing Hannah Arendt's phrase "the unbearable sequence of sheer happenings," post-modern ethnographer Ruth Linden contends that the accounts of the women survivors she records contain precisely these: fragments of "sheer happenings" whose senselessness and arbitrariness are falsified by ordering them in narrative.¹ One repository for "sheer happenings," that are distorted by narrativization is lament. Lament is non linear, non-logical. It repeats itself as traumatized people do. Lament's capacity to represent a pre-narrative or non-narrative state, gives it a unique capability to preserve what is irreducible and inexplicable about evil, curbing narrative's tendency to assign causes and meanings, to use storytelling to mend the unmendable.²

The theological work of lament is to embody not only grief but indignation, not only acceptance but challenge. The great Protestant Bible scholar Walter Bruggeman contends that lament is a form of protest that "shifts the calculus and redresses the distribution of power between the two parties, so that the petitionary party is taken seriously and the God who is addressed is newly engaged in the crisis in a way that puts God at risk."³ Rather than presenting a compliant false self, the lamenter confronts God with the immediacy of suffering in a way that renders retribution unjustifiable. The lamenter accuses God not of injustice but of compassionlessness. The woman Zion, urged by the poet to mobilize herself in defense of her little ones, to pour out her heart like water and

¹ R. Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1993), 9, 17-18

²For example, Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* [citation incomplete]

³ Walter Bruggeman, "The Costly Loss of Lament" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 59.

lift up her hands to God, responds not with a plea but a challenge. "See O God, look well (*habita*) at whom you have so brutalized. *Imi 'ollalta ko*. (Lam. 2:20)

There is a ubiquitous trope in which the nation is imaged as a woman, and conquest is the rape of the body politic. Invasions are national rapes. The trope portrays the woman's body as the passive indicator either of purity or violation. But the female speaker of Lamentations is not passive. She challenges the the Deuteronomic theodicy of retribution, repentance, and then maybe restoration invoked by the masculine persona. Zion's concrete indignation, her challenges of God and calls for redress are compelling.⁴ The concluding chapter, where gendered personifications merge into a communal "we," is poised between hopeful reconciliation and the reiterated testimony of violation and abandonment. It is the liturgical tradition that tips the balance in favor of restoration. The rabbis have a rule that no public reading may be ended on a note of despair. That is why, after we have read all of Lamentations, we repeat penultimate verse "Take us back O God and we will turn back. Renew our days as of old" after the final verse "for truly you have rejected us, bitterly raged against us." There will be hope, but not tonight. Fasting, wearing non-leather shoes or no shoes, we read Lamentations. We will not greet one another or welcome one another tonight. We will not have cheery little conversations as we walk out after the reading. Tomorrow at Beth Am and other synagogues, people will pray the morning service and read Lamentations again. They will not put on Tefilin until an early mincha service at midday. And on Shabbat morning, the Ten Commandments are read and everyone rise to assume the yoke of covenant once more. There will be comfort, but not tonight. The refrain of Lamentations is

⁴ Mintz, 91-93.

ain menachem lah, no one comforts her, ain menachem li, no one comforts me.

This is the time of lament, of pouring out our hearts like water.