

DR. SAMUEL ATLAS MEMORIAL LECTURE FOR THESE I WEEP: A THEOLOGY OF



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LAMENT

In the Book of Ruth, when the two widows Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth return to Bethlehem, the women of the town greet Naomi and she laments, “Do not call me Naomi, Pleasantness. Call me Mara, Bitterness, for Shadai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full and Adonai has brought me back empty.” (Ruth 1:20-21). Her bitterness and rage are understandable. We spend our lives defending ourselves from the sure knowledge that fullness does not last. All that we love we will lose. We are fated to return empty. We 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.¹ 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.”² In severe torment, the sufferer is utterly isolated, unable to experience related-

ness, unable to defend her values from a torturer’s insistence that she betray them, or to give or withhold consent to a medical procedure, 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.”³

I want to argue that some of these observations are also germane to sufferings from emotional and spiritual pain. “I am a little world made cunningly,” the poet John Donne writes about the delicacy and complexity of the human being. There is more than one way to unmake the little world that is a person or even the larger world that is a people. 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

the realm of language 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.⁴

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. 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. Listen and you hear a mighty

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symphony of the broken and bereft:

Here is the author of Psalm 77:

Has God forgotten how to pity?
Has He in anger stifled His compassion?
(Psalm 77:10)

And here is King David:

My son Absalom O my son, my son
Absalom.
If only I had died instead of you. O
Absalom, my son, my son.
(2 Samuel 19:1b)

And Job:

Why did I not die at birth?
Expire as I came forth from the womb?
Why were there knees to receive me
Or breasts for me to suck?
(Job 3:11-12)

And the man of Lamentations 3,
complaining about God:

He is a lurking bear to me,
A lion in hiding;
He has forced me off my way and
mangled me,
He has left me numb.
(Lamentations 3:10-11)

I have called this a symphony rather than a cacaphony because these explosions of poignant, bitter, even accusatory utterances are contained in literary forms. Some are identified as *qinot* – dirges – and exhibit the characteristic “limping meter.”⁵ Others exhibit structures peculiar to lament psalms: a series of complaints, a statement of guilt, a request for God’s favor, a petition against enemies, and an abrupt turn to hope and trust in God. Lament psalms, *qinot*, and other biblical genres, which were intended to be sung, share characteristics we would call poetic: patterned stresses, repetition, alliteration, parallelism, and imagery. Imposing form and structure on lament constrains its wildness and socializes it so that it can engage a community as witnesses and as participants.

I want to speak now about three major varieties of laments, all of which offer some resources for us today. The first of these kinds of lament is the lament for the dead. Rather than talking about literary laments for the dead in the Bible, I want to focus on

the social phenomenon they reflect. There really were laments for the dead, and although men also lamented, the fashioning of laments was regarded as a women’s genre. Wailing women or “professional mourners” as the word *mekonenot* is often translated, did not just wail or howl wordlessly as popularly supposed, they orally composed and sang funeral poetry.⁶ Hence, 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 formal structures of lament and their performance by female artists are familiar to the rabbis of the Talmud. “What is meant by ‘chanting’ [*innui*]?” asks Mishnah Moed Katan. “When all the women sing in unison. And lament [*kinah*]?” When one speaks and all respond after her.”⁷ For the Mishnah what distinguishes *kinah* is not a distinctive meter but a call and response type of structure. In Mishnah Ketubot (4:4), Rabbi Yehuda rules that even the poorest husband must provide at the very minimum two flute players and one lament-singing woman for his wife’s funeral. A funeral may be delayed in order to summon the lament-singers (Sanhedrin 47a). The position of the lament-singers in the funeral procession was pivotal. A *baraita* teaches that they either immediately preceded or immediately followed the corpse, depending on local custom (Sanhedrin 20a).

Compare what we have learned so far about rabbinic lament with the vivid account of travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor who in the 1950s witnessed a performance of oral lament poetry in Mani, the mountainous, isolated Southern Peloponnese region of Greece.⁸ This lament poetry is believed to be descended from the laments of classical antiquity.⁹

The chief woman mourner begins the *klama*, or weeping . . . [T]he [lament] unfolds in spite of the semi-ecstatic mode

of delivery in a logical sequence of proem, exegesis, and epilogue. As the dirge continues, the knees stiffen, the hair falls in disorder, the handkerchief is stretched across the shoulders, an end held in each hand, which work up and down with a sawing motion in time to the slow beat of the metre. The breast is struck, the cheeks clawed, and very often the [lament] accelerates into a gabble and finally into wails and shrieks without meaning. If the dead man has been killed in a feud, the dirge may finish with terrible curses and oaths of vengeance . . . When she fades out, another woman ‘takes’ the [lament].

What do we learn from this? As in the Talmud, Greek lament is a performance by individual women and groups of women, and it has structure and meter. Between this modern Greek lament and the literary lament poetry of *Tanakh*, there are a number of analogies. In both traditions, lament is contradictory rather than emotionally consistent. The lamenter is, by turns accusatory, guilt-wracked, reminiscent, despairing, imploring, vindictive, bitter, hopeful.¹⁰ In both lament is tumultuous and disordered language interspersed with returns to the preverbal: gasps, sobs, tears, keening, cries of ah, alas, woe, while at the same time, strict literary conventions are maintained. Gail Horst-Warhaft, a classics scholar, writes:

Like the cries that puncture the text, so sobs, sighs and sudden intakes of breath are integral to the performance of lament. Singers of dramatic or plaintive songs from opera to blues will use their breath for heightened emotional effect. . . . [B]reathing and singing, like weeping and singing have always been so intimately associated that it may be difficult to determine where a sigh ends and a song begins.¹¹

Breathing. Weeping. Music. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean, flutes are used at funerals. They represent the breath, the body’s mysterious, God-given internal wind instrument, now stilled.¹² Percussion instruments like drums may be used to represent the thumping heart.

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A THEOLOGY OF LAMENT (continued)

The third century Palestinian Amora Ulla offers the following details about how Jews grieved at funerals: “*Hesped* means beating on one’s heart . . . *Tipuach* means clapping one’s hands together (Rashi). And *Kilus* means [lamenting] with the foot” – either stamping one’s foot or, as Tosafot suggests, slapping one’s thigh (Moed Katan 27b). What these actions tell us is threefold. They tell us that grief is expressed with the whole body. They tell us that grief is expressed rhythmically, probably as a percussive accompaniment to the lament music. And they tell us that lament exists at some intersection between art and violence.

I have said that lament is language traumatized, but there is also an impulse to traumatize the body. Many commentators talk about mourners enacting a mimesis of death.¹³ Like the dead, the mourner does not bathe, anoint, or have sex. The mourner rips his clothes, a custom that safely channels the mourner’s wish to imitate the disintegrating body of the corpse, to be united with her once more. And from Ulla we have heard about striking the body. The little black ribbon the funeral director snips for us today does not even begin to address this desire for violent grief. We must ask ourselves how we are going to make a place for it today.

What did lament-making women say? I have so far been able to find only one source that gives examples. In tractate Moed Katan (28b) the 4th-century Amora Rava quotes seven snippets of lament sung by the women of Shochentziv. The Aramaic quotations are enigmatic enough to make one wonder if the women of Shochentziv were having a little fun at Rava’s expense. The first is straightforward enough: “Alas for the departed./Alas for his wounds.” The second, I will follow the Soncino in translating “Take the soupbone out of the pot/ and fill the vessel with water.”¹⁴ The irony is that the same pot that made the sick man’s broth will now heat the water to wash his corpse. Leigh Fermor in his account of Greek women’s laments notes their custom of making homely objects such as the dead man’s tools testify to his death.¹⁵ Here the evidence of the transition from sickness to death is the pot and its two uses.

In times when burial societies were quite rare, the dead man may have been washed by the same woman who made the soup.¹⁶ A third quotation is in the grand style: “Cloak yourselves [in splendor],¹⁷ high mountains, a great man and a noble was he [who is dead].” One snippet is both frank and acidly funny about the dead man’s fecklessness: “he rushes and tumbles aboard the ferry/ and has to borrow his fare.” An interesting detail here is the ferry, a feature of the Hellenistic underworld. Like the Greek lamenters, these women are not particularly orthodox in their theology.¹⁸

In lament for the dead, then, we have a type of social performance led by experts, the lament-making women, but with open participation for everyone, female and male. In this performance, language, weeping, breast-beating, clapping, stamping, and ripped clothing, all express and respond to a world disordered. Death has irrupted into the domain of the living and uprooted a member of a family and a community. All must lament before comforters can begin to console.

Lament of this sort may have continued for many centuries in some communities. A researcher heard lament songs from Iraqi Jewish women as late as 1950.¹⁹ Funeral songs have also been attested among Jews in Southern Iran and among Moroccan Jews. In Ashkenaz, women’s lamenting may have succumbed to a one-two combination punch from the newly influential Zohar and from the growth of burial societies organized like medieval guilds. The Zohar warned that because through Eve’s sin, death was introduced into the world, the Angel of Death is present among the women during funerals, and he has permission to kill during the funeral ceremony.²⁰ Hence separating the women from the men is a matter of life or death. At the same time, *chevrei kadisha*, burial societies, introduced their own customs and theology of reception into the afterlife. The women’s “weeping and lamenting” were accused of weakening the song of the seraphim, “who rejoice at the arrival of the deceased.”²¹ These developments may explain why several Ashkenazic communities’ records from the 16th century on confirm

that women were placed at the back at funerals. Harsh punishments were prescribed for those who ventured forward among the men: having their cloaks taken away, being sprayed with water, or, in one community, stone throwing.²² The implication is that the law was difficult to enforce because the women were recalcitrant. Possibly they were lamenters protesting the devaluing of their expertise.

I want to present rather briefly the second of the lament subgenres I have chosen to address. Here is an individual lament, Psalm 13. The Bible scholar Tod Linafelt makes a distinction between the lament for the dead and the lament psalm. The lament for the dead is focused on death, while the lament psalm is directed toward life and seeks more life. It is, ultimately, hopeful rather than hopeless. The dirge can afford to be hopeless, because the community contains and preserves hope for the mourner. In the individual lament, the lamenter must himself turn toward hope and life.

Hope is intrinsic to the theological work of lament. The 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.”²³ Because God is a God of justice and not a cosmic bully, God can be confronted by God’s covenant partner. According to Bruggeman, rather than presenting a compliant false self and rendering the relationship manipulative and insincere, the lamenter confronts God with the immediacy of suffering in a way that renders retribution unjustifiable.

You will notice this motif in Psalm 13. The psalm starts off with a derangement of language, the accusatory and paradoxical question: “How long, Adonai, will you forget me forever?” The JPS translation ‘tames’ this question into an exclamation. “How long O Lord; will you ignore me forever?” But this particular expression, *ad ana*, how long, occurs only four times in the book of Psalms, all in Psalm 13. A similar expression, *ad matai*, occurs in 6 psalms (6:4, 74:10, 80:5,

82:2, 90:13, 94:3), and it is an interjection of exasperation. *Ad ana*, on the other hand seems to seek both information and a response. The question “*How long will you forget me forever*” has to be located in deep memories of infancy, when mommy’s leaving was experienced as if she had dropped into a black hole. But the despair in this personal experience of abandonment “forever” is lightened by the hopeful “how long,” which implies an eventual ending. So the lamenter, presenting his most vulnerable self, senses a glimmer of hope even at the opening of the lament.

How long will You hide Your Face from me?

This evokes another deep memory. An infant’s first reactions are to faces. Faces reassure the infant in his helplessness. They offer love and attention. The hiding of the face, its going away, is a primal occasion of anxiety. The game of peekaboo is a version of the “gone and reappeared” game that Freud observes a toddler playing. The feared abandonment by the face is overcome again and again by the repeated reappearance.

“In the access to the face,” the philosopher Levinas says, “there is . . . also an access to the idea of God.”²⁴ Human faces bear a hint or recollection of God that can spur the desire for God. For Levinas, relation to the Infinite is not a contemplation of an abstract idea, but a Desire. For our speaker in Psalm 13, the turning away of God’s face represents his desire for God thwarted and blocked. He suffers.

How long will I have cares on my mind/ grief in my heart all day? The speaker is preoccupied with plans or schemes, *eitzot*. But his is the anxious scheming of one whose insecurity will not let him rest. Instead, persistent grief clings to him, as if his plans had already failed.

How long will my enemy have the upper hand (yarum – be high above me, tower over me)? These four repetitions of “how long” present to us a speaker increasingly frantic with anxiety. God’s abandonment in his vulnerable situation is intolerable. For there is an enemy, as there often is in Psalms, a person, a conspiracy, or a metaphorical enemy, a sickness, or an obsessive idea that is a mortal threat to the speaker.

Look at me, answer me Adonai my God. The speaker pleads for recognition and response from the withdrawn Deity.

Restore the luster to my eyes/ Lest I sleep the sleep of death The speaker’s eyes are dulled like a fainting or dying person.

Lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him (or I have put an end to him/ my foes exult when I totter (emoi) or you might translate it ‘stumble.’ Repetition again expresses anxiety. The repeated word *lest* (*pen*) introduces what the speaker dreads: defeat and death. In keeping with the disarrangement of lament, the images are out of logical order. First he imagines his death, then, his defeat, and at the last veers back to the nightmare moment when a running man stumbles, begins to fall, and his adversaries close in to drag him down. But at this horrid moment the speaker pulls his mind away from these despairing images of collapse and ruin.

But I trust in your faithfulness (chasdekha). Instead he calms himself by remembering his trust in God. A similar conjunction of images occurs in Psalm 94. “When I think my foot has given way, your faithfulness, Adonai, supports me.” (*Im amarti mata ragli/ chasdekha, Adonai, yisadeni.*) Now the speaker can envision his own joy at the deliverance he trusts to occur.

My heart will exult in your deliverance/ I will sing to Adonai for He has been good to me

I want to turn now to the last of the three types of lament: the communal lament for the fallen city in the paradigmatic lament text of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Lamentations. This will not be a full scale analysis. I have only a few points. The book’s Hebrew name is *Eikha*, and three of its five chapters begin with that word. *Eikha*, How! is used in the Book of Lamentations, not as a call for reasoned explanations of cause and effect, not as the rational inquiry, *eikh?* but as an exclamation of incredulous horror. “How dreadfully everything has changed!” How awful this is! The open vowel of the emphatic *ah*, a scream: *Eikhaaah*. For when people are truly horror stricken, what astonishes them is *how* an ordinary day turned

into a catastrophe after which nothing will ever be the same.²⁵

The liturgical performance of Lamentations is the centerpiece of a mimesis of unmaking and remaking. Hauntingly chanted on the Ninth of Av, it commemorates the destructions of the Temple and other catastrophes of Jewish history. Ashkenazic tradition surrounds its recitation with graphic representations of a dead covenant and a bereaved community. The synagogue, locus of the ordered *nomos*, is deliberately disordered. The Holy Ark is shrouded like a corpse. Chairs on the altar are overturned and fasting worshippers sit on the ground. The following Sabbath the community rises to recontract the covenant as the Ten Commandments are read. The liturgical performances that frame Lamentations, both present and overcome the terrifying possibilities of cosmic disorder and covenantal rupture.

The Book of Lamentations both bewails and remakes this shattered world quite explicitly by reconstituting the broken alphabet of creation. Four of its five chapters are alphabetical acrostics. Chapter 3 is a triple alphabetical acrostic. Chapter 5 is not an acrostic but has the same number of verses as there are alphabet letters. The alphabet represents the totality of language, and the acrostic thus represents the gamut of catastrophic experiences and the gamut of human reactions that can be represented in language. The structure of the book, its strict, alphabetical sequence of verses, barely serves to contain the wildly disordered content. 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.

Because lament is without rational sequence, this torrent of complaint strikes us as confused and overwhelming. One can see this sequenceless, anarrative quality in Holocaust memories.

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A THEOLOGY OF LAMENT *(continued)*

The post-modern ethnographer Ruth Linden observes that the accounts of the women survivors she records contain fragments of “sheer happenings” whose senselessness and arbitrariness would be falsified by ordering them in narrative.²⁶ Lament is a repository for “sheer happenings.” It curbs narrative’s tendency to assign causes and meanings, to use storytelling to mend the unmendable.²⁷ Lament’s capacity to represent non-narratives allows it to preserve what is irreducible and inexplicable about evil.

The first two chapters of Lamentations are a mixture of genres. They are at first death dirges but, as the woman Zion becomes increasingly active and alive, they become laments beseeching life. In Lamentations I we see both the isolation of pain and the lack of logical sequence I have been talking about. The first fact we learn about the female figure Zion is her loneliness. The poet’s portrait contrasts her present with her former state as a death dirge would do. She was populous and is now lonely, was great and is now a widow, was a princess and is now a forced laborer. Zion is pictured weeping in the night, an image that will recur. We get the first instance of what will become a refrain, “*Ain menachem lah*” “there is no one to comfort her.” Then suddenly Judah’s exile is introduced and Zion is in exile. Verse 4 swerves back to the deserted city. Verse 5 introduces three themes that will persist throughout the book: 1) the triumph of Zion’s foes; 2) Zion’s punishment for sins; 3) Zion’s children going into exile. From these first five verses we can see how the demands of alphabetical acrostic, which constrain the choice of the verse’s subject matter, actually enhance the disjointedness that characterizes lamentation.

Linafelt calls the Book of Lamentations “survivor literature,” because it is literature written by survivors in the wake of a catastrophe, but also because the literary figure Zion is centrally concerned with the survival of her children.²⁸ “It is survival,” says Linafelt, “rather than the theological categories of guilt or hope that I take to be the hermeneutical key to the poetry of chapters 1 and 2.”²⁹

The outrageousness of pain forms the core of Zion’s complaint. She keeps presenting to God the palpable, soul-shattering reality of suffering and death as simply unjustifiable as punishment. She accuses God not of injustice but of compassionlessness. “*Re’eh v’habita*,” “See and look hard,” are words that recur along with words for pain, suffering, torment, agony. Zion interrupts the poet-narrator in verse 9 to say, “See Adonai, my misery; How the enemy triumphs.” And in Verse 11: “See Adonai, look hard at how abject I have become.” She calls on witnesses to her ordeal:

May it never befall you –
All who pass along the road
Look about and see:
Is there any agony like mine
which is meted out to me
when Adonai made me suffer
on the day of His wrath. (1:12)

The poet calls on Zion to mobilize herself in defense of her little ones. Act like a lamenting-woman, he tells her.

Arise, cry out in the night
At the beginning of the watches
Pour out your heart like water
In the presence of Adonai!
Lift up your hands to him
For the life of your infants
Who faint for hunger
At every street corner. (2:19)

She responds less with pleading than with indignation.

See O God, look well (*habita*)
at whom you have treated so badly.
Imi ’ollalta ko (Lam. 2:20).
Alas women eat their own fruit,
Their new-born babes
Alas priest and prophet are slain
In the Holy Place of Adonai. (2:20)

That women are eating their infants rather than infants nursing from their mothers, she construes as God’s fault, like the slaying of priest and prophet in the sanctuary. They are evidence of how God has turned the world upside down. Zion does not let God off the hook.

In the concluding chapter, where gendered personifications merge into a communal “we,” the lamenting community 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, by insisting that the penultimate verse, “Take us back O God and we will turn back. Renew our days as of old” must be repeated after the final verse, “for truly you have rejected us, bitterly raged against us.” If I orchestrated a performance of Lamentations, I would draft a powerful soprano to sing that last verse over the congregation’s repetition of “take us back,” “renew our days” in order to restore the textual tension that forbids easy recuperation.

Take us back. The covenant is compared to a marriage. What I always find most moving about this metaphor of God and Israel as partners in a marriage is precisely its insistence that the one we hurt is the one with whom reconciliation is nevertheless possible. The covenant-marriage metaphor is troubled and sometimes violent, as many feminist theologians have pointed out.³⁰ Yet it is the one covenant metaphor that offers God and Israel an opportunity to grow into partnership, to begin to recognize the Other as separate from self and yet intimately bound to self. The metaphor of the sacred marriage whose participants persist, despite violence and betrayal, is applicable to human, political dilemmas as well. In South Africa, Rwanda, Cambodia, and in Eretz Yisrael, where civil covenants were intolerably violated, human, political beings struggle with conflicting impulses. Like the violent God of Lamentations, they are caught between the unslakable passion for just retribution and the bitter compassion that counsels us all to pardon the unpardonable, to mediate and mend broken covenants.

This is one reason why I believe we need lament. Lament can help us to bear witness to violence and injustice in the life of the community, to respond with indignation and outrage and then with constructive action. We do not know and will not know why God does not protect us from atrocities or genocide or why God created a world

which can be devastated by tsunamis or hurricanes, but we can express our anger, our grief, our sense of abandonment. We can bring to God not only our best behaved happy selves but also selves seized by despair, brokenness, a thirst for revenge, and other so-called “unacceptable” feelings. This is lament, the first step in reconstituting the broken world.

We Reform Jews have not made much room for lament in our communal life. Early Reform worshippers, who wanted their services to be “edifying and uplifting,” were dismayed by the negativity of lament and by the disorderly universe it depicted. Reform congregations valued decorum and restraint. The anger at God in lament texts and the penitential themes, which were thought to demean human dignity, were removed from Reform liturgy early on. The national events to which lament was tied, the destruction of the Temple and exile, were not seen by Reform theology as tragic, but rather as necessary steps to evolve an international Jewish diaspora that could fulfill its mission to be a light unto the nations. Not until a few years ago did Reform Jews begin to celebrate Tisha B’Av, the holiday that has come to commemorate all acts of destruction against the Jewish people.

Currently, because our psychologically sophisticated community has become more tolerant of public expressions of pain, and because of the healing movement’s revelation that many congregants are ill or suffering, Reform is accustoming itself to public acknowledgments of brokenness. There is still work to do. Healing services are often segregated from the rest of the congregation, as if congregants in need of them were undergoing some exceptional misfortune that will not befall the rest of us. And some healing services are relentlessly upbeat and make no room for lament. Lament with its tears, illogic, poignancy, and shadow of death is still an explosive topic.

It is an irony. We want to repair the world and yet we are reluctant to acknowledge that everything is broken, including ourselves. We need laments to vocalize the pain before we can be comforted. We need laments at

funerals so mourners can grieve their loss. We need laments for people in persistent vegetative states and those who have become profoundly demented, to give their loved ones words to bewail the loss of those relationships. We need laments for divorces, miscarriages, abortions, diseases, and mutilations. We need laments for communal catastrophes. The history of lament can help us by reminding us how poetry and music open the heart to its pain and give sorrow a voice. Maybe we will once again have music at funerals, and weeping will follow.

When a Torah scroll has an effaced or mutilated letter, a reader may not read from it until it is repaired and made whole. Every human loss is a silencing, a letter of the alphabet of creation effaced, erased, a whole world destroyed. We cannot go on until we can break that silence, until we can speak authentically to God out of our wounds. The language of lament allows us to rearticulate the alphabet of creation and restores for us the hope of redemption. As it says in Isaiah (25:8), “He will destroy death forever. Adonai Elohim will wipe the tears from every face.” ■

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

² Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 30.

³ Scarry, 172.

⁴ Hosea 2:1

⁵ Limping meter was first identified by Budde. Lines with three stresses are followed by lines with two stresses. Footnote incomplete.

⁶ See also Amos 5:16. On women as communal elegists see S.D. Goitein, “Women As Creators of Biblical Genres,” *Prooftexts* 8:1 (1988), 1-33.

⁷ M. Moed Qatan 3:9. In b. Moed Qatan 28b some verses of women’s lament songs are cited.

⁸ Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 53-62.

⁸ Fermor, *Mani*, 59.

⁹ Gail Horst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰ Fermor, *Mani*, 60.

¹¹ Horst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 70

¹² Horst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 71.

¹³ Saul M. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39-46

¹⁴ Jastrow’s translation is strained. See *antikhi* p. 83.

“Take the bone pin out of the jaw (the base in which the vessel is suspended and let water be put into the *antichi*” (sic). Soncino emends *mekhaca* to *khacava* Latin *cacabus*, cooking pot, parallel to *antikhi*. Moed Katan p. 186f.

¹⁵ Fermor, *Mani*, 60.

¹⁶ It is permissible for a woman to wash either a man’s or a woman’s body, and before the ubiquity of *chevrei kaddisha* and the rising prestige of the *mitzvah*, it is likely that women often performed that task.

¹⁷ Following the gloss of Rabbi Chananel Moed Katan 28b loc. Cit.

¹⁸ Horst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 10.

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica* 8, 461.

²⁰ Gesher HaChaim, 14:15 citing Zohar Parashat Vayyakhel

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabboq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 115.

²³ Walter Bruggeman, “The Costly Loss of Lament” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 59.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985)92.

²⁵ Joan Didion *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 4.

²⁶ R. Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1993), 9, 17-18.

²⁷ For example, Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*

²⁸ Todd Linafeldt *Surviving Lamentations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

²⁹ Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 18.

³⁰ For an extended discussion of this topic see Rachel Adler, “The Battered Wife of God: Violence, Law, and the Feminist Critique of the Prophets,” *Review of Law and Women’s Studies* 7:2 (Spring, 1998), 171-201. Some major examples of the literature of feminist critique are: Gracia Fay Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*. (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlets, 1988); T. Drorah Setel, “Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 86-95; Renita J. Weems, “Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?” *Semeia* 47 (1989): 87-104 and *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995; Naomi Graetz, “The Haftarah Tradition and the Metaphoric Battering of Hosea’s Wife,” *Conservative Judaism* 45:1 (Fall, 1992), 29-42. Fokkelen Van Dijk-Hemmes, “The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel xiii,” *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993), 162-170. See also Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation,” in Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, eds. *Weaving the Visions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), esp. 312. In response to Naomi Graetz, see Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, “Bible-Battering,” *Conservative Judaism* 45:1 (Fall, 1992), 43-52.