

Notes for
Midrash on the Book of Lamentations
UMJC Conference Workshop

In this workshop, we study passages of Lamentations Rabbah, which records insights of our ancient Sages on the purpose and practice of Jewish community mourning on Tisha b'Av, which begins on Saturday night of the conference

Important: Since my approach to teaching is interactive and spontaneous, much of what was said in our workshop is not reflected in these notes, which I prepared beforehand. Also, please excuse errors in these notes—they are not edited.

Backgrounds

1. What is Tisha b'Av (9th of Av)? It is the only day of the year when the community traditionally mourns as a community. On this day we mourn the effects of violence committed against us throughout our our history, especially the destruction of the two Temples and our ongoing exile.
2. Lamentations Rabbah is a Midrash commentary on the book of Lamentations that was published in the fifth century C.E. Although Lamentations was written after the destruction of the First Temple, the Sages also understood it as a paradigm for all acts of violence against the Jewish community, including the Hurban.
3. For historical and cultural backgrounds of the Sages, download Rav Carl's "The Sages of Galilee" from the Midrash, Etc. website at <http://midrashetc.com>.

Our Goal

To learn what some of our early Sages say about the role of genuine weeping in the redemption of Israel and the world.

(Transition)

I'm going to start by reading some verses from the book of Lamentations and Jeremiah 31 about two women who weep bitterly over their unfathomable loss.

Lamentations 1

The lonely woman is the devastated City, Jerusalem, who weeps like a widow over her crushed and humiliated people.

Comments

1. Poetry makes up about 1/3 of the Tanakh.
2. Poetry is not another way to express what prose can express, but a discreet way of thinking about and expressing certain aspects of reality and human experience.
3. In this approach, it is crucial to pay special attention to poetic imagery and descriptions as the primary bearers of the meaning(s) of the poetic text. (Likewise, it is crucial to pay special attention to prose techniques as the primary bearers of the meaning(s) of biblical prose texts.)
4. Chapter 1 is an acrostic of 22 verses. The verses begin with a letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet in sequence (beginning with aleph, bet, gimel and ending in tav). Although we cannot know why the poets used the acrostic form, we can study the text to determine how the 22 verses relate to one another. (The acrostic form is often used to express the all-inclusive nature of the contents.)

Jeremiah 31:15-17

Jeremiah 31 is all about Exile and Return.

Comments

1. God responds to Rachel's weeping by promising that he will return her children.

2. What is Exile? According to the Torah and our tradition, Israel was expelled from the Land because of our long-term (eight or more centuries) of unfaithfulness to God and the Torah. Likewise, return from Exile is more than a physical return to the Land: it also involves return to God and the Torah. By this standard, in the Sages' day (as in ours) the vast majority of Jews had not returned from Exile, whether or not they live in the Land of Israel. On the other hand, Jews who had returned to God and the Torah, but not to the Land, were still in exile.

(Transition)

Next, the Sages explore three possible remedies for the exile: Abraham's intercession, Isaiah's prophecies, and Israel's weeping.

I. ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION



Abraham in the Holy of Holies

(This takes place sometime after the beginning of the Babylonian Exile.)

[*She weeps bitterly* (Lam 1:2).] Rav Ukba said: On the night of the ninth of Av our father Abraham entered the Holy of Holies. The Holy One, Blessed Is He, grabbed him by the hand and walked with him in all directions. The Holy One, Blessed Is He, asked Abraham, *What is my beloved [doing] in my house?* (Jer 11:15). Abraham answered, Master of the World—My children, where are they?

Comments

I. The Temple (or the Tabernacle) and therefore the Holy of Holies did

not exist in Abraham's Day; (2) The High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies only on the day of Yom Kippur, not on Tisha b'Av; (3) The high priest entered with the blood of the Yom Kipper sacrifice; (4) Abraham was not a high priest.

2. Since the Sages knew all these things, this is clearly a fable they wrote to make a point.

He said to him, They have sinned, and I have exiled them among the nations.

Abraham asked, Were there not righteous among them? He replied, She has done vile deeds (Jer 11:15).

Abraham said, Did you not observe the best of them?' He replied: The mass of them are schemers, as it is written, The many have done vile deeds (Jer 11:15).

Abraham said, Did you not look at the covenant of circumcision in their flesh? He replied, By your life, they have disavowed it, as it was said, Can holy flesh avert your disaster?

And whatsmore, they rejoice in one other's downfall, as it is written, When you do evil, you rejoice (ib.); and it is written, And whoever gloats over another's disaster, shall not go unpunished (Prov 17:5, NIV).

Comments

1. This resembles Abraham's intercession for Sodom its righteous (Genesis 18:16-3)
2. In this midrash, God rejects Abraham's intercession for Israel in exile. Those who sinned must be punished.
3. The same is true in a lengthy another midrash passage (in Lamentations Rabbah Prologue 24), where Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the letters of the aleph-bet intercede one after the other, though unsuccessfully, for Israel in exile. Rachel offers a successful argument (though not weeping, as she does in Jeremiah 31:15-17).

(Transition)

The Sages take a second approach, appropriating the Psalm 77 songwriter's response to his "trouble" (or, "distress") (Ps 77:2).

2. ISAIAH'S PROPHECIES



Lamentations Rabbah 1.23

An Acrostic

She weeps bitterly in the night (Lam 1:2).] I said: Let me remember my song in the night; [let me meditate in my heart. Then my spirit made a diligent search: Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?] (Ps 77:6-7).

Comment

Asaph,¹ the songwriter of Psalm 77, responds to God's silence in the face of Israel's suffering by remembering their songs of celebration and by meditating on what God has done in the past.

Psalm 77:3 When I remember [אֶזְכֹּרֶה] God, I moan;
when I meditate [אֶשְׁכַּחַם], my spirit faints. Selah.

...

6 let me meditate [אֶשְׁכַּחַם] in my heart."

Then my spirit made a diligent search.

7 "Will the L-rd spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?

1. Asaph was the ancestor of the Asaphites, one of the Temple musician guilds.

2. In verse 3, Asaph remembers God and meditates on the past in a way that pains and weakens him. In verse 6, he is determined to remember his nighttime song (presumably of praise) and to meditate on God's work in the past (see verses 10-22, which focus on the Exodus).

3. Memory and Meditation

אִזְכָּרָה

זָכַר [zachar]= to name or mention, remember or call to mind (HALOT)

אֲשִׁיחָה

שִׁיחַ [siach] = Loud, enthusiastic, emotionally laden speech (praise, lament, taunt or mock, instruct or teach, to meditate with thanks and praise (HALOT).

וְהִגִּיתִי

הִגָּה [hagah] = mutter, coo (pigeon), growl (lion). This is some kind of vocal meditation: those who delight in the Torah also meditate on it vocally all day long.

So biblical meditation is vocal, not silent; and its goal is not to empty the mind, but to focus it.

(Transition)

Armed with Asaph's approach and the question, "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?", the Sages search diligently for 22 avenues of hope that correspond to the 22 discouraging verses of Lamentations I. They find them in the book of Isaiah.

Rabbi Judah b. Rabbi Simon, Rabbi Aibu, and the Rabbis say: Because they sinned from *alef* to *tav*, they are comforted from *alef* to *tav*. And so you find that all the severe prophecies which Jeremiah [the purported author of Lamentation] prophesied against Israel, Isaiah anticipated and healed. [Here are the first three letters of the acrostic in the midrash:]

✠ Jeremiah said, *How solitary sits the city!* (Lam 1:1); Isaiah said, *Then you will say in your heart, who has borne me these* [children, I was bereaved and

barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?] (Isaiah 49:21).

א Jeremiah said, *She weeps bitterly in the night* (Lam 1:2); Isaiah said, [*For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem;*] *you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you [at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you.]* (Isa 30:19).

א Jeremiah said, *Judah has gone into exile because of affliction* (Lam 1:3); Isaiah said, [*He will raise a signal (the Root of Jesse) for the nations and]* *he will assemble the banished of Israel [and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.* (Isa 11:12).

And so on to א (Lam 1:22).

3. ISRAEL WEeping



Two Kinds of Weeping

[*She weeps bitterly in the night* (Lam 1:2).] . . . Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai said: The Holy One, Blessed Is He, said to Israel : You are weeping [now] with superficial weeping, but in the end you will weep with real weeping. Where did Israel weep with superficial weeping? *And Moses heard the people weeping, family by family [everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased.]* (Num 11:10). *And all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried [and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron.]* (ib. 14:1-2).

Comments

1. Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai (the Rashbi) was a sage who flourished after the failed Bar Kochba revolt of 132-135 C.E.

2. The word I have translated as “superficial” is the Hebrew *tefilut*. I am not know of any word that captures its meaning. The Rashbi essentially defines it in terms of the two quotes. In Num 11:10 the people weep because they were dissatisfied and longed to return to Egypt. In Num 14:1-2, they weep because they are overwhelmed by fear induced by bad report of the ten spies.
3. If this midrash is addressed to the Rashbi’s contemporaries, he is essentially accusing them of weeping superficially after the loss of the Temple and the Exile.

And where did they weep with real weeping? Rabbi Aibu and Rabbi Yehudah b. Rabbi Simon give answers. Rabbi Aibu said: Once in Ramah and once in Babylon. In Ramah, for it is written, *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping* (Jer 31:15); in Babylon, for it is written: *By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept [when we remembered Zion]* (Ps 137:1).

Rabbi Yehudah b. Rabbi Simon said: Once in the province of Judah and once in Babylon. In the province of Judah, [as it is said], *She weeps bitterly in the night* Lam 1:2). In Babylon [as it is said], *By the rivers of Babylon,*’ etc.

Rabbi Aibu said: The Holy One, Blessed Is He, spoke to Israel: As a reward for weeping I will gather your exiles, as it is written: *Thus says the L-rd: Refrain your voice from weeping. [They shall come back from the land of your enemy. And there is hope for your future* (Jer 31:16-17).

Comments

1. Rabbi Aibu and Rabbi Yehuda agree that real weeping took place in Babylon. Why do they differ about where it took place in the Land. In Ramah (Rabbi Aibu) or in Judah (Rabbi Yehuda)? (“In Judah” refers to Jerusalem.)
2. Of course, both rabbis are correct: Lamentations I describes Jerusalem’s real weeping and Jeremiah 31 describes Rachel’s real weeping. However, in Jeremiah 31 God responds to Rachel’s weeping with a promise to

regather her children, but Lamentations does not include a similar response.

3. Remember that Lamentations Rabbah is a Midrash commentary on the book of Lamentations. Although the Sages quote and use many passages from other books of the Tanakh to elucidate their commentary, their main concerns remain the meaning and relevance of Lamentations. Since they are looking for hope, God's missing response presents a problem.
4. Rabbi Aibu seems to double-down by quoting Jeremiah 31 again, this time with the emphasis on God's response to Rachel. Yet, Rabbi Aibu actually says that the Holy One spoke to Israel! This implies at least two things: (i) that Rachel is Israel; and (ii) that the Holy One addresses the bitterly weeping Jerusalem (Lam 1:2), too, since she is part of Israel. Thus, the Sages can incorporate Jeremiah 31:15-17 in their Midrash commentary on Lamentations.

(Transition)

Our last Midrash is based on the premise that Israel's weeping does more than elicit God's promise.

She Weeps and Makes Others Weep

. . . Another comment: *She weeps* and makes others weep with her.²

She weeps and makes the Holy One, blessed Is He, weep with her, [as] it is written, *And in that day the Lord, the God of hosts, called to weeping, and to lamentation* (Isa 22:12-14) *She weeps* and makes the Ministering Angels weep with her, for it is written, *Behold, their valiant ones cry without* (ib. 33:7). . . *She weeps* and makes heaven and earth weep with her, as it is written, *The sun and the moon have become black* (Joel 2:10)? *She weeps* and makes mountains

2. In Jeremiah, *Rachel is weeping* [מְבַכָּה | *m'bachah*] *for her children* (Jer 31:15). This is the only place where this form (the Piel participle) of בָּכָה is found in the entire Tanakh. In Rabbinic Hebrew, the Piel participle מְבַכָּה intensive ("weeps intensely") and/or causative ("makes [another])

and hills weep with her, as it is written, *I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled* (Jer 4:24). *She weeps* and makes the seventy nations weep with her.

She weeps and makes the Community of Israel weep with her, as it is written, *And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried* (Num 14:1).

Comments

1. Rachel's weeping is so deeply felt that it affects everyone who hears.
2. Rachel's weeping does not only affect God, but also the Ministering Angels, heaven and earth, and so on. Its affect is cosmic.
3. All of these weep *with her*—that is, for her children in exile.
4. Note the resemblance to Romans 8:22: *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*

A Voice Was Heard in Ramah

Matthew 2:16-18

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Comments

1. Just as Jeremiah 31 refers to the Exile, so does Matthew 2. If we miss this, we miss a big chunk of what Matthew is trying to say to us.
2. As we have learned, the Sages claimed that Israel is in exile when it is expelled from the Land and when it is dominated by foreign powers. This is the case here.
3. Matthew 2:16-18 fulfills Jeremiah 31:15-17, but not completely. It is one of many fulfillments that take place in Jewish history until the return of the Messiah.