

# Mourning and Suffering in this Moment

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Most of us aren't sitting shiva right now, but we are in mourning. We continue to mourn the brutal murder of 1200 people, and we are filled with deep anxieties about the fate of the hostages in Gaza and the terrible toll of this war on innocent lives in Israel and Gaza alike. But many of us are also in mourning for the sense of security and belonging that we took for granted not long ago. Yes, we were aware of rising antisemitism in the USA and beyond, but we also assumed that acts of barbarism against Jews like those committed by Hamas on October 7 would be recognized for what they are: evil and simply inexcusable. Given some of the responses, or lack of responses, to Jewish suffering, especially at American and Canadian universities, both the Middle East and North America look different to many of us than they did before October 7. We are sad, angry, scared, and confused.

For North American Jews, and perhaps especially for those of us on college campuses, part of what is so frustrating and scary in this moment is the competing univocal and exclusivist narratives we are confronted with, both within and beyond the Jewish community. But in this deeply wretched and bewildering time, it's worth reminding ourselves that many classical Jewish sources, and the Hebrew Bible in particular, are anything but univocal. When compared, for instance, to Christian theology, Jewish thought is often portrayed as less developed, and perhaps less rigorous, because our sources speak in so many voices. But while some may regard this as a weakness, I see it as a strength not only because pluralism is a social good but also, and perhaps more importantly, because life is complicated. Especially when it comes to traumatic moments like the one we are now in, it's a great gift to be able to turn to sources in which we can recognize the complexity, and even the contradictions, of our difficult emotions.

One of the customs of sitting shiva seems to me particularly pertinent now. As part of the initial mourning practice, mourners are not supposed to study or read for pleasure. But there is an exception: mourners may read from the books of Job and Lamentations and from certain parts of the book of Jeremiah. A focus on these texts suggests, as the many rituals surrounding mourning do, that we need to acknowledge our suffering. “Suffering” can take many forms, but on the most fundamental level, suffering is consciousness, or awareness, of our pain, which can be physical or mental as well as spiritual. As responses to suffering, both Job and Lamentations can be read as stressing human inadequacy, whether in the form of ignorance or sinfulness, in contrast to God’s perfection and goodness. Read this way, suffering is understood to be a consequence of human shortcomings. In this vein, both texts can also be read as contending that obedience to God’s voice, as opposed to continued focus on our own sorrow, confusion, and anger, is the only path away from suffering to a better world. At first glance, then, it may seem that Job and Lamentations offer straightforward and easy responses to suffering, from which only traditional believers would be able to take comfort.

But Job and Lamentations are both much more complex than they might initially seem. They certainly can affirm the views of God as almighty and just and ourselves as unworthy and ignorant. But they also embody ambivalences that call these conceptions into question. The power of these texts, I want to suggest, is that they are multi-valent and ambiguous. They do not offer easy answers, and this is why they are appropriate reading for times of mourning in which easy or simple answers are almost always inadequate.

Let’s turn first to Job. As we know, Job did nothing to deserve his suffering. He was a wealthy and pious man whom God admired. But Satan, or a fallen angel, made a bet with God: if Job lost all of his possessions, his family, and even his health, Job would no longer be such a good man. Instead, he would curse God. God took the bet, and Job suffered and continued to proclaim his innocence. Job questioned God’s justice, but did not curse God. Job complained and complained, and God finally did answer him. God did not give Job a reason for his suffering, but instead insisted on God’s supremacy. Where were you, Job, asked God, when I created the earth and the heavens? Can you, Job, do the wondrous things that I, God, can do? In short, God’s response to Job is, “who do you think you are to question me?” And Job answers God and acknowledges that God is indeed God: “I know that you can do everything and that no purpose can be withheld from you.” (42:2) Job recognizes his smallness, indeed his insignificance, in the scheme of God’s creation. Verse 6 of chapter 42 marks Job’s last words to God: “Therefore I abhor my words and repent, seeing that I am dust and ashes.” The chapter ends with God’s restoration of Job’s wealth as well as with a new wife and children for Job. We are told that after his ordeal, Job lived for 140 years, “and saw his sons and his sons’ sons, even four generations. So Job died, being old and full of days.” (42:16-17)

Many have read the book of Job as a theodicy, that is, a defense of divine justice when the innocent suffer. These defenses of God include the idea that human beings cannot understand

God's justice. Another version of this notion is that God has a plan, even if we don't know what it is. If we are righteous, like Job, we will receive our reward, just as Job eventually received his. Yet another rendering of this position is that God not only tests us with suffering but that God especially tests those whom, like Job, God loves most. Some rabbinic texts support exactly this perspective, as we read, for instance, in the collection of rabbinic midrash, Sifrei Devarim:

R. Eleazar b. Jacob says, Behold, it says, 'Do not reject the discipline of the Lord...' For what reason? 'For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes [as the father the son whom he favors]' (Pro. 3:11-12). You say: come and see, what caused this child to be pleasing to his father? Say: suffering.

According to this view, suffering is a sign of God's love, for just as a parent disciplines a child for the sake of the child, so, too, God disciplines the people of Israel for their sake. There may be people right now for whom these classical responses might be comforting.

But for many others, myself included, the injustices of life are too harsh to make such answers palatable. Just as many of us recognize the cruelty and counter-productiveness of harsh parenting, so too many Jews find the notion that God wants us to suffer simply perverse. This is where the text of Job becomes even more interesting. Above, I quoted Job's final response to God: "Therefore I abhor my words and repent, seeing that I am dust and ashes." The word that is translated as "I abhor my words" is אָבִיר אֶמְצָא. But this word is ambiguous in Hebrew. It literally means, "I despise," and it is the translator who adds "my words." The term for "repent" תִּתְּנֶנּוּ is also ambiguous. It means "I regret," and it is the same term that God uses in Genesis 6:7 when, in the face of the great wickedness that had developed among people after creation, God regretted creating human beings: "And the Lord said: 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air; for I regret [תִּתְּנֶנּוּ] that I made them.'" Notice too that תִּתְּנֶנּוּ is a play on Noah's name, נֹחַ, whose father, Lamech, named him so because the name "will comfort us [נֹחַ] in our work and in the toil of our hands, which comes from the ground which the Lord has cursed." (Gen. 5:29) The biblical play on the same word for comfort and regret allows us to see the Hebrew Bible's appreciation of the complexity of human emotions and realities.

What does all this mean for Job's final statement to God? It is possible to understand what Job says to God as an apology for having questioned God's justice. But it's also quite possible to translate this verse very differently. Rather than an apology, it might be read as something along the following lines: "Therefore I despise you, God, and regret saying what I said because I am dust and ashes." On this reading, Job does not despise the truth of what he has said about God's injustice, but rather he despises the unjust God who has punished him for no reason. In this understanding, Job's regret is for not recognizing beforehand how useless it was to ask God to offer him an explanation for his suffering that would make any sense. Job audaciously demands that God bear witness to the truth of his suffering. Job wants his suffering acknowledged, and if

God cannot do that, then Job will, at the very least, continue to testify to the truth of his experience.

Here we can begin to appreciate that testimony and the demand for recognition of our testimony are not just theological matters pertaining only to our relationship to God. Instead, testimony and recognition are necessary for any human attempt to tell the truth about our experiences of the world, including, first and foremost, our own suffering and the suffering of others. Although this reading of Job's words to God is not a standard one, it arguably coheres well with God's response to Job's statement: "And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you, and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me correctly, as my servant Job has.'" Recall that Job's "friends" responded to his suffering by accusing him of having done something wrong. Each "friend" encouraged Job to admit that he must have sinned because God would not have inflicted Job with suffering if he hadn't done something to deserve it. Perhaps God recognized that in despising God's injustice, Job had told the truth: he didn't deserve his suffering. It was not just. Perhaps it was God who repented by telling Job's "friends" to offer a sacrifice (42:8) for having spoken wrongly in denying Job's experience of suffering.

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Both readings I have offered of God's response to Job and Job's subsequent response to God are credible. And both responses seem particularly relevant today in our time of mourning. Some Jews have no doubt found comfort in the belief that divine providence both accounts for and will ultimately offer a response to the suffering of the Jewish people. Other Jews will find this view either unbelievable or offensive or both. But the text offers us both positions, and in doing so, gives voice to our sadness, anger, and confusion.

At the same time, and equally important, the book of Job's conclusion offers us an account of what *not* to do when people are in mourning. After losing his family, his fortune, and his health, Job sits on the ground as a mourner does. It is in this mourner's posture that Job's "friends" find him, and it is here that they offer him the heartless response of those who cannot acknowledge

the suffering of the mourner. Regardless of how we read Job's final words to God, God's final statement rebuking Job's "friends," shows us that no matter who the mourner is, they deserve comfort. This means first and foremost recognition that the mourner is *in mourning*. It is exactly this lack of recognition that so many Jews in North America have felt after Hamas's vicious attack. Our tradition teaches us that we do not and should not blame the mourner for his suffering. We must not try to explain suffering away. And here it is worth mentioning that Job is not identified in the Bible as Jewish or as an Israelite. This rightly suggests that suffering and mourning are universal human experiences. When we mourn individually and collectively as Jews, we are in mourning with the rest of the world.

Unlike the book of Job, the book of Lamentations is about a particular people and a particular place. Lamentations, which we read on Tisha b'Av, mourns the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Jews have also long understood Tisha b'Av and Lamentations as commemorating other severe moments of historical Jewish suffering, including the destruction of the second Temple and the expulsions of the Jews from England and Spain, all of which are said to have taken place on Tisha b'Av. Some Jews resisted the creation of a special day of remembrance for the Holocaust, what came to be Yom Hashoah, because they believed Tisha b'Av is a synecdoche for all Jewish sufferings and therefore, that it, along with the book of Lamentations, could accommodate even the horrors of the Holocaust.

The book of Lamentations is harrowing. It describes in acute and concrete detail what utter devastation looks and feels like. Some of the verses from the book's last chapter may seem especially apt after October 7: "They have ravished the women in Zion, the maidens in the cities of Judah. Princes are hanged up by their hand; the faces of elders are not honored. The young men have borne the mill, and the children have stumbled under the wood. The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music. The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning." (5:11-15) After October 7, some Jewish congregations and groups called for a day of fasting and prayer, acting in resonance with Lamentations and Tisha b'Av. By connecting October 7 with Tisha b'Av, these communities also implicitly affirmed one of Lamentations' main themes: "The crown is fallen from our head; woe unto us! For we have sinned" (5:16). This view comes close to affirming not just our sinfulness, but also the value of suffering. Once again, this view is expressed in some of our classical sources, such as the words attributed to Rabbi Akiva in Sifrei Devarim (emphasis mine):

[It teaches] that *a person should be happier with suffering than with the good*, for even if a person experiences good all of his days, he is not forgiven for his sins. And *what causes his sins to be forgiven? Say: suffering*.

Some Jews may find comfort in reading Lamentations at this time, because they see not just a continuity between Jewish suffering of the past and the present, but also a continuity of cause and remedy for our suffering—we have sinned, but if we repent, we will be forgiven. To other

Jews, this reading of Lamentations, if not Lamentations itself, might seem downright offensive. Did the 1200 people murdered and others who were brutalized suffer because of their sins? Perhaps even worse, did these people die and suffer because of the sins of the Jewish people as a whole? This response is disturbingly close to the reaction of those who responded to Hamas's atrocities by blaming Israel. But it is also affirmed by parts of our tradition, contending that those who attack the Jewish people are instruments of God's will. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 9:12 is perhaps the most well-known display of this perspective. Indeed, it aligns with the most conventional reading of Lamentations: we have sinned, and our destruction and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem are God's response to our sins. We can help ourselves by acknowledging our sin and by praying to God in the hopes of reminding God of our covenant.

Just as with the book of Job, Lamentations is not a univocal text. Here we need to start with the name of the book in Hebrew, Eicha אֵיכָה, which is a question, asking *how can it be that this has happened to us?* This question is arguably as much a protest as it is a lament. Did we really deserve this? Even if the adults of Israel have sinned, what about the children who have done nothing wrong? The grotesqueness of such human desolation is captured in 2:20: "Look Lord, and consider, to whom You have done thus! Shall the women eat their children, the children they have cared for?" How, asks Lamentations, can God make this happened? "Surely the Lord's mercies are not consumed, surely His compassions fail not." (3:22) In challenging God's justice, we hear resonances of Abraham's opposition to God's plan to completely destroy Sodom and Gomorrah: "That be far from You to do in this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked...shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" (Gen. 18:25)

We also hear at least two significant echoes of Job in Lamentations. First, the book refers to God several times as "like an enemy." The Hebrew כְּאֹיֵב ("like an enemy") sounds and looks like Job's name, אִיּוֹב Job pointedly asks God why God treats him like an enemy. (13:24) Once again, we see the ambiguity in the text of Job. Does God wrongly treat Job as an enemy, as Job implies? Or is Job God's enemy because he continues to protest God's treatment of him? Similarly, despite Lamentation's repeated proclamations of the sins of Israel, the text also daringly implies that it is God who has sinned by profaning all that is holy: "The Lord has swallowed up unsparingly all the habitations of Jacob; He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and the princes thereof.... And He has stripped His tabernacle, as if it were a garden, He has destroyed His place of assembly; the Lord has caused Zion to forget its appointed season and Sabbath." (2:2, 6) God acts like an enemy, suggests Lamentations, because God's out-of-control wrath is ultimately responsible for the sins of the people, including their forgetting Shabbat.

This brings us to the second, and perhaps deeper resonance, between Job and Lamentations. Above, we noted the ambiguity of Job's statement, "I despise," אֲבַזֶּה. The last verse of

Lamentations (5:22) uses this same word twice. Here it is in Hebrew first: **כִּי אַם-מְאִסִּים מְאַסְתֵּנוּ, קִצְפֹּתָ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מְאֹד**. Before translating this verse, it is worth mentioning that although this is the last verse in the book, it is not the last verse that is read when we read Lamentations on Tisha b'Av. Instead, the penultimate verse (5:21) is read again after the last verse: “Turn us to you, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.” This verse coheres well with a traditionalist understanding of sin and repentance. We have sinned, God has punished us, and now we ask God to renew our covenant. The actual last verse of the text quoted above in Hebrew is much more disturbing. If we ignore the first two words for a moment, **קִצְפֹּתָ עָלֵינוּ עַד-מְאֹד** means something like “you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” The question is what those first two words, **כִּי אַם**, mean? The phrase can be understood as a conditional, such that the verse would read “for if you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” But **כִּי אַם** can also mean “unless,” with the verse reading “unless you have despised us and been very angry with us.” This verse could also be presenting an opposition to the previous one, so we would read, “Turn us to you O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days of old. But instead you have utterly despised us and been very angry with us.” The first option, which reads **כִּי אַם** as a conditional, doesn't make sense as a concluding verse. But the other two options do make sense, yet they are very disturbing. To put it strongly, both suggest that God has become our enemy, for God has broken the covenant with us, and there is no possibility of renewal or restoration.

The implications of different ways of reading this verse were not lost on the rabbis. One solution they found was to read Lamentations 5:22 in conjunction with Jeremiah 14:19. That verse asks, **הֲמָאִסִּים מְאַסְתָּ אֶת-יְהוּדָה** “Have you utterly rejected Judah?” and then continues: “Has your soul loathed Zion? Why have you smitten us and there is no healing for us? We looked for peace, but no good came; for a time of healing, but behold, terror!” By bringing these verses together, the rabbis can interpret the end of Lamentations as a question, and not as a statement of fact: “Have you utterly despised us?” instead of “You have utterly despised us.” But if this is indeed a question, then the second part of the verse—“you have been very angry with us”—no longer makes sense. If God has rejected us, that is, if God's rejection is a done deal, then God no longer has cause for anger. In other words, it doesn't make sense to be angry about something that can't be changed. It doesn't make sense to be angry about something that can't be changed. This interpretation is what we find in Lamentations Rabbah: “R. Simeon b. Lakish said: If there is rejection there is no hope; but if there is anger there is hope, because whoever is angry may in the end be appeased.”

We can understand this intervention in terms of our relationship to God. Even if God is angry, anger suggests a relationship. As significantly, we can appreciate this interpretation in terms of our own feelings and ambivalences. Many of us are angry more with other people than with God. But we need not hide from our anger, because anger means that there is hope for a different and better reality. Anger is the opposite of passivity, and it's remarkable, I think, that

the very texts that mourners are allowed to read during Shiva are filled not just with sadness and connection to our collective past but also with anger—which means that they are also filled with hope for a different future.

Even before October 7 of this year, I have thought of Gaza in the last decade and a half when reading Eicha. No text better describes what it's like to literally see one's life and people destroyed. Acknowledging and recognizing the suffering of innocent Palestinians in Gaza does not negate our own suffering. We can, in fact, feel the suffering of others precisely because we, too, suffer. While Lamentations is a book about a particular people and a particular city, its message, like Job's, is universal. Desolation is desolation, no matter where it is and no matter to whom it befalls.

Part of what we learn from the book of Job and Lamentations, I think, is that grief is complicated. We have many conflicting emotions, and we must make room for all of them. We are blessed to be part of a tradition that embraces all aspects of our humanity—our sadness, our anger, our fear, as well as compassion for ourselves and others. This is uncomfortable but it is also reassuring. We are not the first to confront these competing sentiments. And we won't be the last.