

Megillath Eichah

The Book of Lamentations

Introduction

The prophet Jeremiah is the author of the Book of Lamentations, which tells of the imminent destruction of the First Temple. Most of it was not written after the fact as a historical account of what had occurred, but rather, it is a book of prophecy forecasting what awaited the people of ancient Israel. After the book, which had only three chapters at that time, was read to King Jehoiakim, he ordered that it be burnt on his brazier (Jeremiah 36:23). The king and his entourage were not disturbed by the dire prophecy. They did not repent, and the disasters indeed overcame them.

The fourth chapter is Jeremiah's eyewitness account of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the fifth chapter is his lament for what he had witnessed.

The Talmud (Gittin 56b) tells about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai's encounter outside the walls of Jerusalem with Vespasian, the Roman general in command of the siege. He asked Vespasian to grant him three requests. One, the city of Yavneh and the Sages of the Sanhedrin that met there. Two, the royal family of Rabban Gamliel, the ancestral leader of the Jewish people. Three, a doctor for Rabbi Zadok, who was emaciated after fasting and praying for forty years that Jerusalem be spared.

The first two requests were understandable as necessities for the preservation of the Jewish people in the wake of the destruction. The Sages of the Sanhedrin would ensure the continuity of the Torah, which is the heart and soul of the Jewish nation. The royal family would form the nucleus around which the remnants of the people would coalesce and reconstitute themselves as a nation. The third request, however, is quite

puzzling. Rabbi Zadok was undoubtedly a very holy sage, and saving his life was certainly important. Surely, there were many other sages in dire need of medical attention after the privations of the siege. Why was Rabbi Zadok's medical condition so critical? And how did his survival rise to the level of the other two requests, which had vital national implications? A look into the future provides the answer.

In 1096, many Jewish communities in the Rhineland were wiped out by the marauding Crusaders armies on their way to the Middle East. The rabbis at the time established 20 Sivan as a day of mourning and fasting. The observance of that day did not last very long. The blood libel in Blois in 1177 and the infamous Rindfleisch Massacres in 1298 also occurred at about that time of the year, and the rabbis declared that 20 Sivan should be observed as a fast day in commemoration of the series of tragedies. The observance did not last very long.

During the Cossack Rebellion in 1648, the Jewish community of Nemirov, Ukraine, was massacred on 20 Sivan. The Council of the Four Lands, the internal government of the Jewish communities of Poland-Lithuania, declared 20 Sivan as a fast day in commemoration of that tragedy as well as the series of tragedies that preceded it. The observance of that day did not last very long. In fact, many people in our times have never even heard of 20 Sivan as a significant date.

Why is this so? Because this observance never became an integral part of Jewish identity. For the first few years after each tragedy, while the wounds were still raw, people undoubtedly fasted and said special prayers in observance of 20 Sivan. As time went on, however, and life returned to normal, people's thoughts turned away from the sorrowful past and focused on the hopeful future.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai understood that mourning the destruction of Jerusalem had to become a permanent feature of Jewish life. Regardless of where and in what conditions they would find themselves, the unceasing

recollection of the world they had and lost would maintain their connection to God and His holy Presence in this world. Moreover, according to the Talmud (Taanis 30b), “All who grieve for Jerusalem will merit to see it joyful once again. All who do not grieve for Jerusalem will not merit to see it joyful once again.” If there was to be any hope for a rebuilt Jerusalem, the Jewish people had to grieve for its destruction.

It was critical, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai understood, that the Jewish people fast, pray and grieve over the Destruction of Jerusalem, that they congregated and read the Book of Lamentations every year on the anniversary of the terrible tragedy. It must never be forgotten. The fast of 9 Av must not fall by the wayside, as would 20 Sivan over a thousand years in the future.

How could this be accomplished? The answer was Rabbi Zadok. The old sage was the living symbol of grief over the Destruction.¹ For forty years, taking the words of the prophets to heart, he had fasted and grieved over the impending Destruction. People were awed and disquieted by his deep anguish at the looming tragedy, and as great as was the effect of his grief before the destruction, it would have a greater effect in its aftermath.

But Rabbi Zadok was very ill, and if he were to die before the Destruction, there would no longer be such a living symbol to impress the need to grieve so deeply on the Jewish soul that it would last for thousands of years. Therefore, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, in his great vision, saw an especially urgent need for a doctor to revive Rabbi Zadok. He would grieve publicly for the rest of his life, just as he had grieved publicly for forty

¹ A living symbol has a much greater effect than words in a book. By becoming those words personified, he gives them a vitality they would otherwise not have. In our times, for example, the Chafetz Chaim was the living symbol of *shemiras halashon*, guarded speech, and therefore, the book he wrote had a very powerful effect. Rabbi Zadok was the Chafetz Chaim of the Destruction.

years over the impending destruction, and thus, he would ensure that Jerusalem would one day be rebuilt.

Almost no one today fasts on 20 Sivan, but almost everyone fasts on 9 Av and reads the Book of Lamentations. For this, we owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Zadok.

The Book of Lamentations is arranged according to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first and second chapters feature twenty-two verses, the first letters of which are in alphabetical order. The third chapter features sixty-six verses, corresponding to the total number of verses in the other chapters and arranged in sets of three for each letter of the alphabet. The fourth chapter is not in alphabetical order, but it maintains poetic symmetry in that the number of its verses corresponds to the number of letters in the alphabet, as in the other chapters.

Chapter 1

1. How can it be that she sits deserted?

that this once populous city
has become like a widow?
that this greatest among the nations,
this mistress of the provinces,
has been reduced to paying tribute?²

2. O she cries, she cries in the night,

her tears stain her cheeks,
she has no one to console her
among all her friends,
all her allies have betrayed her,
they have become her enemies.³

3. Judah has been driven into exile,

because of the hardship and forced labor
when she came among the nations,
she has found no respite,

² In describing Jerusalem as a widow, the prophet does not mean she has become like a woman whose marital bond has been severed. Rather, she has become like a wife whose husband has departed to a distant land with every intention to return someday. In the meantime, she lives the life of a widow, alone and sad.

³ She cries twice, once for the destruction of the First Temple and once for the destruction of the Second Temple. She “cries in the night” can be read as “she cries over the events that happened at night.” The Temple was torched just before sundown of the Ninth of Av, and it burned through the night of the tenth. Furthermore, the slanderous reconnaissance report of the Spies that delayed the entry of the Jewish people to Canaan for four decades was delivered at night, on the eve of the Ninth of Av. It can also be read as she “cries during the night.” The sound of weeping in the dark stillness of the night touches the hearts of those who hear it. She cries constantly, her tears leaving permanent stains on her cheeks.

all her pursuers have overtaken her
trapped between the bulwarks.

4. Zion's highways are mourning,
empty of festival traffic,
all her gateways are desolate,
her priests are groaning,
her maidens are suffering,
and she herself is embittered.
5. Her oppressors were triumphant,
her enemies lived in peace,
for God afflicted her for her many sins,
her babes went off into captivity
in front of the oppressors.
6. All her glory has left Zion's daughter,
her ministers have become like stags
that cannot find fodder and flee feebly
before their tenacious pursuers.⁴
7. Jerusalem recalled her hard, raw days,
and all her opulence of olden times,
before her people fell to the oppressors,
and there was no one to relieve her,
her oppressors saw her,
they rejoiced at her devastation.⁵

⁴ The word *rodef*, pursuer, generally is spelled without the letter *vav*, but in this case it is spelled with the letter *vav*, indicating that the pursuit was in full force.

⁵ The exiled people of Jerusalem reflected on their past, the days of sorrow that followed the destruction of the Holy Temple as well of the goodness of earlier times. The oppressors rejoiced at her destruction. In an alternate reading, according to the Midrash, the oppressors mocked the Jewish people when they left their lands fallow during the sabbatical years. Their failure to do so when they were home in

8. Jerusalem committed sins,
for this she has become a wanderer,
all who had honored her now mock her
for they beheld her shame,
she herself groaned and turned away.
9. Her corruption soiled her hemlines,
she had given no thought to her fate,
her decline was therefore spectacular,
and there was none to console her,
pay heed, O God, to my suffering,
for the enemy has grown arrogant.⁶
10. The oppressors spread their hands
over all her precious treasures,
she saw her Sanctuary invaded
by nations that You commanded
not to join Your congregation.⁷
11. All her people groan, they seek bread,
they give away their valuables
for food to keep them alive,
pay heed, O God, look closely,
for I have become a mockery.
12. May it never befall you, all passersby,

Israel led to their exile, and now, in foreign lands where the sabbatical laws do not apply, they suddenly remember to obey the laws.

⁶ She is stained by her sins committed in full public view, just as menstrual blood stains the hemlines for all to see. She behaved without foresight, never considering the consequences of her actions. Therefore, her downfall was more spectacular than that of any other city.

⁷ The Torah excluded the nations of Ammon and Moav from joining the Jewish nation, and therefore, they sought to burn the Torah scrolls.

look closely and pay heed
if there is any pain like my pain
that befell me, that God has inflicted on me
on the day of His burning anger.

13. He sent fire from Above
into my bones and crushed them,
He spread nets for my feet,
turned me away, made me desolate,
distracted all through the day.

14. The burden of my sins
is scored by His hand,
they were braided,
they rose up on my neck,
He has drained away my strength,
the Lord delivered me into the hands
of those that I cannot withstand.

15. The Lord has pummeled
all my mightiest in my midst,
He called down legions upon me
to shatter my young men,
the Lord crushed like in a winepress
the maiden daughters of Judah.⁸

16. Over these I weep,
my eyes, O my eyes dissolve to water,
for so far from me is anyone to console me,
anyone that can revive me,
my children have been desolated,

⁸ In an alternate reading, there is an allusion in this verse to the tragedy of the Spies that took place a thousand years earlier on the same date.

for the enemies have triumphed.⁹

17. Zion wrings her hands,
but there is no one to console her,
God has commanded that Jacob
be surrounded by oppressors,
Jerusalem became an outcast among them.¹⁰

18. God is the righteous One,
for I have defied His commands,
hear, all peoples, I beg you,
and take heed of my pain,
my maidens and young men
have gone off into captivity.

19. I called to my friends, they deceived me,
my priests and elders expired in the city
when they sought food for themselves
that their lives might be saved.¹¹

⁹ The repetition of the eyes indicates that the Jewish people were continually crying. They were in a state of constant sorrow without respite.

¹⁰ Even when they were exiled, their oppressors taunted them there. When Sancheriv, the Assyrian emperor, drove the Jewish people into exile in the Mesopotamian cities of Assyria and Babylon, he also settled exiled Ammonites in nearby cities. The Ammonites were the traditional enemies of the Jewish people, and their proximity in exile added insult to injury.

¹¹ Nations that posed as friends of the Jewish people used the supposed friendship as a subterfuge for their perfidy. The Ishmaelites came out to offer solace to the hungry and thirsty exiles trudging along the road to Babylon. They brought them heavily salted foods that could cause great bodily harm unless washed down with copious amounts of water. The Ishmaelites also brought goatskins water bottles, but instead of filling them with wine or water, they inflated the goatskins with air until they appeared to be bulging with liquid. They fed the salted foods to the

20. Take heed, O God, for I am distressed,
my innards are shriveled,
my heart shudders within me,
because I have been so defiant,
the sword laid waste in the streets,
indoors lurked the spirits of death.

21. They have heard that I am groaning,
there is no one to console me,
all my enemies have heard of my troubles,
they rejoice, for this You have done,
bring them days like You called down on me
that they should suffer like me.¹²

22. Let all their evil come before You,
do unto them as You have done unto me
for all my sins, for my groans are many,
and my heart is despondent.

debilitated exiles and offered them the goatskins. After eating the salted foods, the tormented exiles thirstily opened the goatskins and sucked in what they thought was wine, but it was only air. Writhing in agony, they perished.

¹² God has done this. He has caused the resentment of our enemies. He has detached us from their corrupt societies by forbidding their foods and intermarriage. And thus, they are offended, and they persecute us to vent their anger. Our allegiance to the Almighty has caused the antipathy of the nations.

The suffering we endured because of our sins has not led us to ask God to visit a similar fate on our oppressors. We understand that they are God's instruments, and it is we who have brought this fate upon ourselves. But when our enemies rejoice that our insularity and elitism has not protected us from retribution, they deserve to be punished. We are not the cause of their resentment. God's commandments are the cause.

Chapter 2

1. How can it be that the Lord beclouded
the daughter of Zion in His anger?
that He hurled Israel's glory to the ground?
that He gave no thought to His footstool
on the day of His anger?¹³
2. The Lord consumed without mercy
all the edifices of Jacob,
in His wrath He demolished to the ground
the strongholds of Judah's daughter,
leveled them to the ground,
debased the kingdom and its ministers.¹⁴

¹³ Having lifted the glory of Israel to the heavens, crowning her with the Holy Temple, His footstool, He then sent it plunging down to the earth.

¹⁴ In the plain meaning of the verse, "the kingdom and its ministers" refers to the Jewish people who are considered (Exodus 19:6) "a kingdom of priests." According to the Midrash, the ministers are the angels who administer the various destructive forces of nature. The debasement of the ministers means that God shuffled their assignments. The angel who administered fire was reassigned to water, the administrator of water was reassigned to fire, and so forth. These reassignments thwarted the efforts of those evildoers who had knowledge of the Ineffable Name of God. They might have used their power to coerce the angels to protect them from the destructive forces they respectively oversaw. But after the reassignments, if they tried to compel the angel of fire to spare them, for example, the angel would respond that he is no longer the administrator of fire.

One might ask why this was necessary. Could the evildoers have used the Ineffable Name to force the angel to defy the will of God? Certainly not. Perhaps the purpose was to prevent the defilement of the holy Name. Should one of these evildoers approach an angel and ask for protection, the angel would immediately

3. In His burning anger

He obliterated all honor from Israel,
withdrew His right hand before the enemy,
raged through Jacob like a flaming fire
that devours all around it.¹⁵

4. He trod on His bow like an enemy,

His right hand planted like an oppressor,
and killed all that pleased the eye,
and in the tent of Zion's daughter,
He poured out His fiery wrath.¹⁶

5. The Lord became like an enemy,

consumed Israel, consumed all her palaces,
destroyed all her strongholds
and piled upon the daughter of Judah
grief and lamentation.

6. He pruned away His Temple as in a garden,

destroyed His Meeting Place,
God blotted out Zion's memories
of the Festivals and the Sabbath,
and in His furious anger,

respond that he had been reassigned and that there was no point in uttering the holy Name in vain.

¹⁵ The withdrawal of the right hand indicates His refusal to come to the aid of the Jewish people.

¹⁶ He metaphorically trod with His foot on His bow. The most powerful bows were large and heavy. The archer would brace his foot against the bow and bent it back by drawing the string with his right hand. This created so much tension that when the arrow was released it flew through the air with lethal force.

He reviled king and priest.¹⁷

7. The Lord has forsaken His altar,
shut down His Sanctuary,
delivered the walls of her palaces
into the hands of the enemy,
who raised their voices in God's House
as if it were a festival day.
8. God long resolved to destroy
the fortifications of Zion's daughter,
He set the limit, destroyed relentlessly,
upset ramparts and fortifications,
they collapsed together.
9. Her gates sank into the ground,
He destroyed, shattered her shafts;
with her king and ministers among the nations,
there was no one to teach,
nor did her prophets encounter
visions from God.¹⁸
10. They would sit upon the ground, silent,
the elders of the daughter of Zion,
they raised dust onto their heads,
girded themselves in sackcloth;
they lowered their heads to the ground,

¹⁷ The Meeting Place refers to the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The king and priest refer to King Zedekiah and the High Priest Sariah.

¹⁸ According to the Midrash, the gates sank into the ground and were not destroyed, because they had opened to welcome the Torah with honor. According to the Sages, they escaped destruction because they were the handiwork of King David.

the maidens of Jerusalem.¹⁹

11. My eyes are worn out by tears,
my innards are shriveled,
my liver is spilled out on the ground
over the ruin of the daughter of my people,
when children and sucklings swoon
in the boulevards of the capital.
12. They say to their mothers,
“Where is some grain, some wine?”
when they swoon like casualties
in the boulevards of the city,
when their lives slip away
in their mothers’ laps.
13. What can I tell you,
what parallels can I draw for you,

¹⁹ According to the Midrash, it was the elders of the Sanhedrin who sat upon the ground. King Zedekiah had pledged his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, after the first invasion of Israel, but he did not keep his word. Eventually, he rebelled. Nebuchadnezzar invaded again and summoned the elders of the Sanhedrin, seated them on gilded chairs and demanded that they translate the Torah for him portion by portion.

When they reached the portion of vows and oaths, he asked them, “If a person wants to violate his oath, can he do so?”

“He can approach a rabbi,” they replied, “who can find a way to release him from it.”

“Aha,” said Nebuchadnezzar. “You must be the ones that released Zedekiah from his oath to me.”

He ordered his guards to throw the elders off their gilded chairs onto the ground. Then he had their hair tied to the tails of horses, and they were dragged through the streets until they died.

O daughter of Jerusalem?
what similar experiences
can I mention to console you,
O maiden daughter of Zion?
for your ruin is as vast as the sea,
who can ever heal you?²⁰

14. Your prophets reported to you
worthless, meaningless visions,
they failed to lay bare your sins
to put you back on course,
they reported to you visions
of worthless predictions and sedition.
15. All passersby clap their hands over you,
they whistle and shake their heads
over the daughter of Jerusalem;
“Can this be the city that is called
perfect beauty, the joy of all the earth?”
16. All your enemies opened their mouths
against you, they whistled,
they clenched their teeth, they said,
“We have swallowed her up,
surely this is the day we awaited,
we have realized it, we have seen it.”²¹

²⁰ There is always somewhat of a consolation in misery when others have endured similar suffering, but there are no parallels to the downfall of Israel. No other nation has ever risen to such stellar heights and then been plunged into the depths of destruction.

²¹ In the alphabetic system of the verses in the second, third and fourth chapters, the verses beginning with the letter *peh* come before the ones beginning with the letter *ayin*, even though *ayin* precedes *peh* in the alphabet. This symbolizes that the

17. God did as He intended, He carried out
the word He had given in olden times,
He destroyed and showed no mercy,
set the enemy to rejoice over you,
raised the prestige of your oppressors.
18. Their hearts cried out to the Lord;
O wall of the daughter of Zion,
shed tears like a river, day and night,
do not allow yourself a respite,
do not let the pupil of your eye be still.
19. Arise, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the watches,
pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord,
lift up your hands to Him
for the lives of your children
that are swooning from hunger
at the corner of every street.
20. Take heed, O God, look closely
at whom you have so tormented;
shall women eat their offspring,
their babes in arms?
shall priests and prophets be killed
in the Sanctuary of the Lord?²²

Spies slandered the Land of Israel by expressing with their *peh*, mouth, things they had not observed with their *ayin*, eye.

²² The first question in the verse is asked by the people. God responds with a question of His own, reproving the Jewish people for the assassination of Zechariah ben Yehoyada, a priest and a prophet, in the Sanctuary of the Lord (II Divrei Hayamim 24:20).

21. Young and old lay on the ground
in the streets, maidens and young men
fell before the sword,
You killed on the day of Your rage,
You slaughtered, You showed no mercy.
22. You called down, as if on a festival day,
my hostile neighbors from all around,
there was none on the day of God's rage
that survived or escaped,
those that I raised and nurtured
the enemy has wiped out.

Chapter 3

1. I am the man that witnessed the pain
of the rod of His rage.²³
2. He led me along, set me to walk
through darkness, without light.
3. Only against me does He constantly
direct His hand all through the day.
4. He wore away my flesh and skin,
He smashed my bones.
5. He barricaded me, hemmed me in
with bitterness and misery.²⁴

²³ Jeremiah was the last of the prophets to prophesy about the looming destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple should the people fail to repent and return to God. He wrote the Book of Jeremiah, a collection of prophecies he delivered during the reigns of Jehoiachin and Zephaniah, the last kings of Judah. In his book, he included not only his prophecies but accounts of his challenges and tribulations when confronted with staunch opposition to his message. His prophecies did not produce their desired result, and calamity struck during his lifetime. He was the only one of the prophets of the destruction who actually witnessed and shared the suffering of the people, and as he relates in his book, he also wrote the Book of Lamentations that describes the destruction as if it were a past occurrence even though it was a prophetic prediction.

“I am the man,” declares Jeremiah, “that witnessed the pain of the destruction. I am the one who walked in darkness, whose flesh and bones were battered, whose routes of escape were blocked with insurmountable obstacles. The Book of Lamentations is the record of my own experience, the suffering I have witnessed and the suffering I have endured.”

²⁴ This is the simple meaning of the verse. The Midrash offers an alternate reading. Bitterness and misery are metaphors for Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, and Nebuzaradan, his general. Nebuchadnezzar started the process of the Jewish

6. He set me down in dark places
like those that are dead to the world.
7. He fenced me in so that I cannot leave,
He weighed me down with shackles.
8. Even when I cry and plead,
He has shut out my prayers.²⁵
9. He blocked my roads with stone walls,
forcing me into roundabout routes.
10. He became a stalking bear to me,
a lion hiding in ambush.
11. He strewed my roads with thorns,
forcing me to step across them,
He rendered me desolate.
12. He drew his bow and placed me
as a target for the arrows.
13. He shot into my kidneys
the contents of His quiver.
14. I was a laughingstock to all my people,
an object of their derision all day.²⁶

exile. He deported King Jehoiachin and the elite of Jewish society to Babylon and installed Zedekiah as a puppet king in his place. Nebuzaradan completed the process thirteen years later when he destroyed the Holy Temple. Israel was thus hemmed in by bitterness and misery.

²⁵ He has shut the windows of Heaven, so to speak, so that my prayers cannot penetrate.

²⁶ In this chapter, Jeremiah speaks in the first person as a spokesperson giving voice to the Jewish people. In this verse, however, he speaks only as an individual. He personally was a laughingstock, an object of derision, when he prophesied about the looming disaster. Many false prophets mocked his words. They claimed that his dismal prophecies were not the word of God, that God would never allow

15. He satiated me with bitters,
swamped me with gall.
16. He ground my teeth with gravel,
pushed me down into the ashes.
17. My spirit despaired of peace,

His Holy Temple to be defiled and destroyed, nor would He ever allow His people to be slaughtered and driven from the land. The people of Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown, the friends and neighbors of his youth, plotted against him and tried to assassinate him. They poisoned his food, and if God had not revealed their perfidy to him, he would have died (Jeremiah 11:21). After this verse, the prophet once again speaks in the voice of the Jewish people.

Why is there a change of voice for this particular verse in this particular place? How does this verse, which describes the prophet's individual humiliation, fit into the middle of the verses of this chapter, which describe the suffering and humiliation of the people?

Let us then consider the previous two verses. "He drew his bow and placed me as a target for the arrows. He shot into my kidneys the contents of His quiver." The prophet is clearly speaking in the voice of the people. The prophet was certainly not the target of the arrows, nor were all arrows in God's quiver shot into the prophet's kidneys. We readily understand the significance of the second of these verses, which describes the suffering of the people. What, however, is the significance of the placement of the people as a target "for the arrows" in the first verse? Did that intensify the damage of "the contents of His quiver shot into the kidneys"? Surely, God did not need to set up a target in order to help His arrows find their mark.

Perhaps the placement of the target symbolized the warning God gave the people through His prophet that a quiver full of suffering would soon be coming their way unless they repented. But instead of heeding the prophet's warnings, they mocked him and plotted to suppress his divine message. When the suffering arrived, therefore, the pain of the people was intensified by the knowledge that they had disregarded God's warning and mocked His messenger instead.

- I forgot about goodness.
18. And I thought my world was lost,
and my prospects from God.
19. Remember my affliction, my sorrow,
the gall and the bitterness.
20. My spirit remembers it full well
and crumbles within me.²⁷
21. Yet this is what I tell myself,
this is why I still have hope,²⁸
22. that God's kind deeds are surely not ended,
His mercies are surely not depleted.
23. They are renewed every morning,
Your faithfulness is immense.²⁹
24. "As God is bound to me," said my spirit,
"it is fitting that I have hope in Him."
25. God is good to those that yearn for Him,
to the souls that seek Him out.
26. It is good to hope, to wait silently
for God's salvation.
27. It is good for a man
to bear a yoke in his youth.
28. Let him sit alone and wait silently,

²⁷ In the simple meaning of the verse, the spirit recalls the affliction and the sorrow, and it crumbles. The Midrash offers an alternate interpretation. The spirit knows that God will eventually remember His people, but it cannot bear to wait until that time.

²⁸ For the next eighteen verses, the spirit of the suffering people finds hope and solace in the knowledge that God will not abandon them.

²⁹ Alternatively, trust in God that He will fulfill His promises is a great thing.

- for it was He that encumbered him.³⁰
29. Let him put his mouth into the dust,
perhaps there will be hope.
30. Let him turn his cheek to his assailants,
let him absorb his fill of humiliation.
31. For the Lord does not
abandon forever.
32. For if He afflicts, He then is merciful
in His multitudinous kindnesses.
33. For He torments not from a desire
to afflict humankind,
34. to trample under His feet
all those trapped on the earth,
35. to subvert the justice of men
in the presence of the Supreme One,
36. to impair a person in his rightful quest,
the Lord does not condone all these.³¹
37. Whose decrees can come to pass
if the Lord has not commanded it,
38. if the evil or the good has not issued forth
from the mouth of the Supreme One?³²

³⁰ A person who experiences sorrow and suffering should keep his silence and hope for improvement. He should “put his mouth into the dust” and accept whatever befalls him, knowing full well that it was God that decreed this for him.

³¹ The previous verse refers to injustice at the hands of people. This verse refers to the Heavenly Court, which judges a person according to a set of rules. If the strict enforcement of those rules condemns a person deserving of leniency, God will not allow it. Nothing untoward can happen without His command or implicit approval.

³² Nothing happens by coincidence or by the designs of other people, neither evil nor good, unless God has approved it.

39. How then should a living person lament?

Each man should consider his own sins.³³

40. Let us scrutinize and examine our ways,
and let us return to God.

41. Let us lift up our hearts in our hands
to the Lord in Heaven.³⁴

42. We have sinned and rebelled,
You have not forgiven.

43. You set anger as a barrier between us,
pursued us and killed without mercy.³⁵

44. You made Yourself a cloud barrier
so that prayers should not pass through.³⁶

45. You have rendered us phlegm and rubbish
in the midst of the peoples.

46. They opened their gaping mouths

³³ A person experiencing tragedy and suffering should not lament over his situation. It is all from God. Rather, he should lament over his own sins that led to his situation.

³⁴ When we lift our hands in prayer, we should place our hearts in our hands and thereby cleanse them of their defilement, and we should pray with sincerity and emotion.

³⁵ When we turn to God we encounter His anger, meaning strict justice, rather than His mercy and kindness, and therefore, we are pursued and killed without mercy.

³⁶ But the barrier of anger in itself would not prevent our prayers from reaching God. No matter the situation, God hears our prayers. But God wanted to punish us for our grievous sins. He did not want to give us the opportunity to escape punishment by praying to Him in our moments of extreme distress. Therefore, He also surrounded Himself with a cloud barrier. This probably means that He befogged our perception so that we would not have the clarity to know how to pray and where to direct our prayers.

against us, all our enemies.
47. We faced terror and hazards,
ruin and devastation.³⁷
48. My eyes shed torrents of water
over the devastation of my people.
49. My eyes gush, they do not stop,
there will be no respite
50. until God gazes down
and pays heed from Heaven.
51. My eyes have sullied me
beyond all the daughters of my city.³⁸
52. They, my unwarranted enemies,
have hunted me down like a bird.
53. They confined my life to the dungeon,
and they hurled stones at me.³⁹
54. The waters inundated my head,
and I thought I was lost.
55. I called out Your Name, O God,
from the nethermost dungeon.
56. You heard my voice, do not close Your ear
to my welfare, to my outcry.⁴⁰

³⁷ Disoriented by terror, we could not avoid the hazards.

³⁸ Jeremiah decries the calamity that affected his own family more deeply than it did the other families of Anathoth, “the daughters of my city.” Jeremiah was a member of a highly respected family of priests, who would no longer be able to perform the divine service in the Holy Temple.

³⁹ Jeremiah’s enemies put him into a dungeon, but he was not disheartened until they threw stones on his head.

⁴⁰ A person does not despair as soon as he feels water rising around him. He still hopes for deliverance. He tends to despair, however, when the water reaches his

57. You used to draw close on the very day
I called You, You said, “Do not be afraid.”
58. You used to fight my battles, O Lord,
You would save my life.
59. You have now seen my persecution,
O God, deliver justice in my case.
60. You have now seen all their vengeance,
all their schemes against me.
61. You have heard their invective, O God,
all their schemes about me.
62. My assailants’ lips and their thoughts
are against me all through the day.
63. When they lie down and when they rise,
look closely, I am their object of derision.
64. Give them their recompense, O God,
in keeping with their handiwork.
65. Give them heartbreak,
addle their wits.
66. Give angry pursuit and destroy them
from under God’s heavens.

head, but Jeremiah declares that even in such dire straits he did not despair. He called out to God, and God heard him.

Chapter 4

1. How can it be that gold should pale,
that fine gold jewelry should lose its color,
that sacred gems should be scattered
on every street corner?⁴¹
2. The precious people of Zion,
who were compared to pure gold,
how did they become likened to earthen jugs,
the handiwork of a potter?
3. Even jackals uncover their breasts,
they suckle their cubs,
but my people's daughters have become
ruthless like ostriches in the wilderness.⁴²
4. Sucklings' tongues stuck to their palates
in thirst, young children asked for bread,
there was no one to give it to them.
5. Those that used to eat delicacies

⁴¹ During Jeremiah's early days as a prophet, the righteous King Josiah fell in battle against Pharaoh Necho and the Egyptians who were attempting to pass through the Kingdom of Judah to do battle with the Assyrians at Carchemish in Asia Minor to the north. Jeremiah eulogized him with these words, as indicated in II Chronicles 35:25. He now borrowed his earlier cry of lament and applied it to "the precious people of Zion" in the Book of Lamentations.

⁴² Jackals are notoriously cruel to their young. Nonetheless, the she-jackal uncovers her breasts when she sees her young approaching so that they will know their food awaits them. During the destruction of Jerusalem, however, the Jewish mothers caught in the desperate throes of extreme hunger placed their own survival before that of their children, a behavior unnatural for mothers, especially Jewish mothers. They became like ostriches who lay their eggs in the wilderness where the emerging fledglings will find no food.

lay desolate in the streets,
those raised in scarlet finery
sprawled on the dung heaps.

6. The sins of my people's daughters grew
greater than the sin of Sodom,
which was overturned in an instant,
untouched by human hands.⁴³

7. Her princes used to be purer than snow,
more white-complexioned than milk,
their color rosier than rubies,
their figures perfect as sapphires.

8. Their faces became blacker than charcoal,
they were not recognized in the streets,
their skin, shriveled onto their bones,
became as withered as wood.

9. Happier were those that died by the sword
than those that died of hunger,
for those became diarrheic, distended
by the yield of the fields.⁴⁴

10. The hands of merciful women

⁴³ The interminable and excruciating punishments the Jewish people endured revealed the extent of their sins. The people of Sodom, however, did not suffer long. The angels overturned their city, and they perished in an instant.

⁴⁴ The enemy gathered grasses from the field and built fires outside the city walls upon which they roasted meat. The overwhelming smell of roasting meat wafted into the city, and the beleaguered inhabitants inhaled them. Their stomachs became distended, their bowels released their excrement, and they died a death more revolting than had they been run through by swords.

In an alternate interpretation, starvation forced them to eat the thistles of the field, which produced revolting excrement but did not nourish them.

cooked their own children,
they became nourishment for them
during the devastation of my people.

11. God has spent His fury,
spilled out His burning anger,
He ignited a fire in Zion,
which consumed her foundations.⁴⁵
12. The kings of the earth could not believe,
nor the inhabitants of civilization,
that oppressors and enemies
would enter the gates of Jerusalem.⁴⁶
13. It is for the sins of her false prophets,
the iniquities of her priests,
who had shed righteous blood within her.
14. The blind stumbling through the streets
became so drenched in blood
that none could touch their garments.⁴⁷
15. “Away, unclean ones,” they yelled at them,
“away, away! Don’t touch!”
for they were befouled and bespattered;
it was said among the nations,

⁴⁵ God’s fury was simmering for many years before it erupted.

⁴⁶ After Sennaherib and his vast Assyrian army were forced into ignominious retreat when they besieged Jerusalem during the time of King Hezekiah, everyone considered Jerusalem impregnable. They could not believe it had been breached and destroyed.

⁴⁷ The enemies slaughtered their victims in the streets and left them there, their blood draining onto the ground. Puddles of blood covered the streets so densely that the blind stumbling through them could not avoid being drenched in blood.

“They shall live here no more.”⁴⁸

16. God’s glare has dispersed them,
He shall no longer look closely at them,
they who disrespected the priests,
nor were they gracious to the elders.

17. Our eyes yet looked with longing
to our fickle supporters,
in our hopefulness, we placed our hope
in a nation that would not save us.⁴⁹

18. They hounded our footsteps
so that we could not walk on our avenues,
the end drew near, our time has run out,
for the end has arrived.

19. Our pursuers were fleeter
than the eagles in the sky,
they chased us over the mountains,
they ambushed us in the wilderness.

⁴⁸ The survivors nearby recoiled from the blood-spattered clothes of the unfortunate blind. “Get away from us,” they shouted, while the enemies who occupied the city assured each other that these befouled people would soon be long gone.

⁴⁹ Even as the tragedy around them unfolded, they still sought deliverance from the wrong places. They thought the Egyptian armies would come to their rescue. The Egyptians were approaching by sea, and the Almighty caused them to see images of dead Egyptians floating in the Sea of Reeds in the aftermath of the Exodus. “Look!” they said to each other. “These are the bodies of our ancestors who perished because of the Jews. Should we now come to their rescue?” They turned around and sailed back to Egypt.

20. Our nostrils' breath, God's anointed,
was entrapped in their pitfalls,
and we'd thought that in his shelter
we could live among the nations.⁵⁰
21. Exult, rejoice, O daughter of Edom,
who lives in the land of Utz,
the cup will pass on to you as well,
you will drink your fill and vomit.⁵¹
22. Your sin is redressed, O daughter of Zion,
He will banish you no more;
your sin is remembered, O daughter of Edom,
He will expose your guilt.⁵²

⁵⁰ Once again, Jeremiah recalls his eulogy for King Josiah, as he did in the beginning of this chapter, and connects it to the destruction of Jerusalem.

⁵¹ Jeremiah prophesies about the future destruction of the rebuilt Jerusalem five centuries later by the hands of the Romans, descendants of Edom. They will come, from the land of Utz, another name for Rome also used by the historian Josephus, who lived through the Second Destruction. "Rejoice over your victory," he addresses the Romans of the future, "but know that it is only temporary. The cup of retribution awaits. You will drink from it and vomit."

⁵² "You are being exiled by the Babylonians," Jeremiah tells the Jewish people. "But your sin will be forgiven, and you will return and rebuild Jerusalem. You will then be exiled by the Romans, and that will be the last time you are ever exiled."

Chapter 5

1. Remember, O God, what has befallen us,
look closely, see our humiliation.
2. Our heritage was ceded to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
3. We have become orphans, fatherless,
our mothers are like widows.
4. We paid money to drink our water,
our wood came to us for a price.⁵³
5. We bore pursuit upon our necks,
we strove but were left with nothing.⁵⁴
6. We reached out to Egypt,
and to Assyria to supply us with bread.⁵⁵

⁵³ The Jewish people feared they would be attacked if they went down to the riverside to draw water. They had no choice but to buy water with the meager funds they had.

⁵⁴ They had to work hard to acquire the barest minimum of nourishment and possessions, but it was to no avail. Their enemies confiscated everything by imposing punishing taxes and tariffs.

⁵⁵ Literally, we stretched out our hand to Egypt, as a floundering person extends his hand to those nearby who can prevent his fall. Apparently, Jeremiah is reporting the frustration of the starving people who reached out to Egypt and Assyria to supply them with bread, but none was forthcoming. The mention of Assyria is puzzling, because at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, Assyria had long since been absorbed into the Babylonian Empire.

According to the Midrash, this verse refers back a time more than a century earlier when the ten Tribes in the northern Kingdom of Israel sent oil to Egypt in exchange for surplus wheat, which they then sent to Assyria as tribute in an attempt to gain their support. This was considered an affront to God upon whose

7. Our fathers sinned, and they are gone,
while we have borne their sins.
8. Slaves have reigned over us,
there is no liberator from them.
9. We risked our lives to get our bread,
because of the sword in the wilderness.⁵⁶
10. Our skin became heated like an oven
because of the burning hunger.
11. They have ravished women in Zion,
maidens in the cities of Judah.
12. Princes were hanged by them,
the elders were shown no respect.
13. Young men hauled millstones,
youths staggered under logs.⁵⁷
14. The elders are gone from the courts,
young men from their music halls.
15. The exultation of our hearts is gone,
our dance has turned into mourning.
16. The crown of our head has fallen,
woe is to us, for we have sinned.
17. For this our hearts despaired,
for these our eyes were dimmed.⁵⁸
18. For Mount Zion that lies desolate,

protection they should have relied. Rashi, however, does not seem to follow this interpretation of the verse.

⁵⁶ They brought food from the fields at great risk to their lives, because armed bandits roamed the countryside.

⁵⁷ The enemy forced the young people to carry heavy loads, such as millstones and logs, while being led off into captivity in shackles, perhaps to ensure their docility.

⁵⁸ The “this” is revealed in the following verse.

foxes walk upon it.

19. You, O God, are enthroned forever,
Your throne endures for all generations.⁵⁹
20. Why do You forget us eternally?
why abandon us until the end of time?⁶⁰
21. Bring us back to You, O God,
and we will return,
renew our days as of old.⁶¹
22. For even if You have so rejected us,
you have been much too angry with us.⁶²
Bring us back to You, O God,
and we will return,
renew our days as of old.

⁵⁹ We know that You are enthroned forever.

⁶⁰ Therefore, we have a right to expect that your promise to us is equally permanent.

⁶¹ Help us repent so that we can return to You, because that is what we want.

⁶² This is the last verse of the Lamentations. Jeremiah, in the name of the people, complains to God for dealing with us with such a strong midas hadin, strict justice, when He should have tempered it with some mercy. He felt, however, that it would be inappropriate to conclude this book on a note of complaint to God. Therefore, he repeated the penultimate verse to end the book on an uplifting note.

The following five lamentations, composed as extensions to the Megillah, are read immediately after the completion of the Megillah reading.

Remember, O God

Remember, O God, what has alas befallen us,
look and see our disgrace.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Our birthright was alas usurped by strangers,
our homes by foreigners.

Alas, what has befallen us.

We were orphaned, alas with no father present,
our mothers in the month of Av lament.

Alas, what has befallen us.

We are forced alas to pay for vital water,
for we debased the holy water.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Our pursuers were alas ever in striking distance,
for we pursued hatred devoid of any sense.

Alas, what has befallen us.

We reached out alas for aid from Egypt,
yet by Assyria we were hunted and trapped.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Our ancestors sinned, and alas they are gone,
but for their sins we suffer on.

Alas, what has befallen us.

We were alas by slaves dominated,
for our own slaves were unemancipated.

Alas, what has befallen us.

At great risk, we alas bring bread to our door,
for we refused to give alms to the poor.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Our skin is alas shriveled as if by a furnace,
for they exchanged honor for disgrace.

Alas, what has befallen us.

The women of Zion were alas excruciated,
for men with each other's wives copulated.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Lords by their hands were alas left hanging,
for they robbed the poor of their belongings.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Young men were alas with millstones encumbered,
because of the brothels where they were discovered.

Alas, what has befallen us.

Elders were from the courthouses alas expelled,
for justice for orphans and widows they withheld.

Alas, what has befallen us.

The joy in our hearts has alas been eradicated,
for our pilgrimages have been terminated.

Alas, what has befallen us.

The crown of our heads has alas fallen down,
for our holy Temple was burned to the ground.

Alas, what has befallen us.

For this our hearts are alas ever sore,
our cherished House's honor is no more.

Alas, what has befallen us.

For Mount Zion that alas lies desolate,
for the ghastly abomination placed upon it.

Alas, what has befallen us.

You, O God, are enthroned forever,

Your throne endures for all generations.
why do You forget us eternally?
why abandon us until the end of time?
bring us back to You, O God,
and we will return,
renew our days as of old.
for even if You have so rejected us,
you have been much too angry with us.
bring us back to You, O God,
and we will return,
renew our days as of old.

(on Motzei Shabbos)

May the Pleasantness Is Omitted

How can it that voices of the young generation
resound with abundant lamentation
instead of songs and jubilation?

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

Alas, an evil decree has been issued
with burning anger and also wrath imbued,
His anger against us ignited,
His rage like a blaze erupted.

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

Alas, our homes are confiscated,
our maidens excruciated,
our faces severely altered,
like skillets black and battered.

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

Alas, the foes have plundered us,

mortally wounded us,
the people of Zion treasured,
once like pupils of the eyes secured.

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

Alas, the crown was felled,
rebellious shoulders have prevailed,
grace and beauty have failed,
the loving Presence has been curtailed.

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

Alas, the candelabrum was appropriated,
and the frankincense incense unadulterated,
the esteemed stones lie humiliated,
the once bountiful land is degraded.

May the Pleasantness is omitted at the departure of the Sabbath.

On This Night

My children cry, they wail on this night,
My holy Temple was destroyed on this night,
My palaces were set alight,
all households of Israel voice My sorrowful plight,
they bewail the fire that God did ignite.

My children cry, they wail on this night.

On this night, the derelict woman's sobs are bitter,
expelled for life from the house of her father,
she is out of his house, the door locked behind her,
taken into captivity for every mouth to devour
from the day she was expelled by raging, hungry fire,
the smoldering coal that came from God.

My children cry, they wail on this night.

On this night, the sphere toward guilt rotated,
my first and also second Temples were devastated,
and yet the wayward daughter is not reinstated,
given bitter water, her stomach was inflated,
banished from His house, her goodness terminated,
loved in the past, she has become even more hated,
like living widowhood, like a woman dislocated,
Zion declared, "God has forsaken me."

My children cry, they wail on this night.

On this night, I sat in gloom with lights diminished,
my Temple destroyed, the watches finished,
on this night, I was engulfed in calamity and vanquished,
and five evil decrees were justly established,
their baseless tears for generations unfinished,
because this was ordained by God.

My children cry, they wail on this night.

This night to five episodes bears witness,
our fathers were banished to stay in the wilderness,
then it became a time of tragedy and evilness,
a day predisposed to suffering and sadness,
He invited the foe and spoke with great loudness,
"Arise, for this is the day of which God spoke."

My children cry, they wail on this night.

Ahalivah and Ahalah⁶³

⁶³ This lamentation is a contest between the northern Kingdom of Israel, also called Shomron, and the southern Kingdom of Judah, each claiming to have suffered more. They are represented in Ezekiel 23 in a parable of two wayward sisters, Ahalivah and Ahalah.

Shomron calls out, "My sins have overtaken me,
my children are gone abroad, away from me."

And Ahalivah cried out, "My palaces were burned."

And Zion declared, "God has forsaken me."

For you, Ahalivah, it is improper,
to consider our suffering similar,
would you compare your ruin
to my ruin and my affliction?
I, Ahalah, the itinerant,
have been stubbornly defiant,
my perfidy rose up against me,
my defiance testified against me,
in a short time, I paid for my infidelity,
Tiglath-pileser consumed my progeny,
he stripped me of my property
and seized my jewelry,
and to Chalach and Chabor
he carried off my prisoners,
be still, Ahalivah, do not weep as I do,
you stayed many years, but I just a few.

And Ahalivah cried out, "My palaces were burned."

And Zion declared, "God has forsaken me."

Ahalivah responds, I was similarly obfuscated,
like Ahalah, the Lord of my youth I desecrated,
be still, Ahalah, as my torment is reevaluated,
you were once expelled, but I was often extricated,
twice was I by the Chaldeans subjugated,
I was a wretched captive to Babylon designated,
the Temple, where I found honor, was immolated,
after seventy years in Babylon, I was reinstated,

I returned to Zion, the Temple rejuvenated,
but once again, I was not long situated
before Edom took me, I was almost obliterated,
my multitudes to all the lands dissipated.

And Ahalivah cried out, "My palaces were burned."

And Zion declared, "God has forsaken me."

The One who takes pity on the indigent,
take pity on their impoverishment,
take note of their impairment,
and the length of their banishment,
do not be angry to an extreme extent,
take note of their steep descent,
please heal them from their impediment,
console them in their bereavement,
for You are their hope, their empowerment,
renew our days as in their commencement,
as You said, "God, the Builder of Jerusalem."

How Long Must Zion Weep

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?

take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

For our sins, the Temple was then devastated,
for our iniquities, the Sanctuary was immolated,
the affected earthlings mourned in desperation,
even the heavenly hosts cried out in lamentation.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?

take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The tribes of Jacob also bitterly bellowed,
even from the constellations copious tears flowed,
the banners of Jeshurun, heads hanging down,

the Pleiades and Orion, faces framed in frowns.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The Patriarchs pleaded, but the Lord paid no heed,
the children cried out, the Father did not intercede,
in Heaven, the turtledove's voice rang out clear,
but the Faithful Shepherd did not lend an ear.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The holy descendants were in sackcloth attired,
even the heavenly hosts for sackcloth aspired,
the sun grew dark, the moon fell to blight,
stars and constellations withdrew their light.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

First, Aries wept with bitterness utter
when his lambs were led to the slaughter,
the wails of Taurus up Above resounded
when we were all relentlessly hounded.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Gemini seemed to be split asunder
as the blood of brothers ran like water,
Cancer nearly tumbled down to earth
when we were prostrated by thirst.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The heavens were by Leo's outcry intimidated
when our shouts were not to Heaven elevated,
maidens were killed, and also young men,

and Virgo's face took on a blackened mien.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Libra turned and beseeched with supplication
when death instead of life was a better situation,
Scorpio was clothed in fear and trepidation
when our Creator sent us to sword and deprivation.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

They shed torrential waters, tears in a flowing stream,
when the sign of the rainbow was nowhere to be seen,
our heads were by water inundated,
the bucket was full, yet we were dehydrated.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

We brought sacrifices, but they were rejected,
Capricorn rued the goat offerings neglected,
as merciful women cooked their own offspring,
Pisces could not endure what it was seeing.

How long must Zion weep, Jerusalem lament?
take pity on Zion, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

We forgot the Sabbath, wayward were our hearts,
the Almighty chose our righteousness to disregard,
but avenge now Zion with immense retaliation,
illuminate the city with Your bright illumination.

Have mercy on Zion, as you have said, and establish her, as you have
spoken. Hasten salvation, hurry redemption, and return to Jerusalem with
great mercy. As was written by Your prophet, "Therefore, so said God, 'My
return to Jerusalem will be merciful. My house will be built there, by the

word of the God of Hosts, and a line will be stretched over Jerusalem.' God will again comfort Zion, and He will again choose Jerusalem." And it is also written, "For God will comfort Zion. He will comfort all her ruins and make her deserts like Eden and her wasteland like a garden of God. Joy and happiness are to be found there, gratitude and the sound of song."