

## Psalm 126

- 1 A Song of Ascents  
When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
And our tongue with shouts of joy;  
Then it was said among the nations,  
'The LORD has done great things for them.'
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us,  
And we rejoiced.
  
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
Like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- 5 May those who sow in tears  
Reap with shouts of joy.  
Those who go out weeping,
- 6 Bearing the seed for sowing,  
Shall come home with shouts of joy,  
Carrying their sheaves.

Last week, I wrote about Psalm 137 (“By the Rivers of Babylon”) to help give some perspective to our present moment. We are not the first group to have experienced a loss of our social institutions. This week, I would like to turn to Psalm 126. I hope that you will continue to see in our ancient poetry expressions of emotion that resonate with you and that help you to contextualize the many conflicting emotions that most of us are experiencing these days.

Psalm 126 is another famous psalm in our liturgy. We use it to introduce *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessings after meals, on Shabbat and on holidays. You may recall my mentioning last week that Psalm 137 is the introduction on Weekdays, so the two make for an interesting pairing. This psalm has also produced such book titles as *Like Dreamers* by Yossi Klein HaLevi, which is about the paratroopers responsible for the conquest of Jerusalem in 1967.

The psalm opens with a phrase that appears at the beginning of the 15 psalms numbered 120-134. The editors of the Book of Psalms seemed to think that these psalms should be recited upon making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, and its Temple, are situated on the top of a hill, so going there requires ascending; moreover, the act of pilgrimage was considered a spiritual ascent, analogous to our *going up* for an aliyah to the Torah. While many of these 15 “Songs of Ascents” are not clearly associated with pilgrimage, this psalm does seem to fit that context because it twice mentions returning to Zion.

Like Psalm 137, this psalm opens with a specific historical moment: “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion.” Almost certainly, this psalm was written after the exiles

from Babylon began returning to Judea and Jerusalem. The feeling – “like those who dream” – is in response to this one particular historical event. This is reflected in the New Revised Standard Version translation above. What is nice about the Hebrew in this case, however, is that this restoration is tenseless! The Hebrew uses an infinitive construct, something akin to our –ing forms in English. An overly literal translation could be ‘At the LORD’s restoring of the fortunes of Zion.’ This could just as easily describe a restoration in the past as a restoration in the future. Several other translations, including the JPS, put the whole first half of the psalm in the future tense. This feature of Hebrew is one of the nitty-gritty details that allow us to understand the psalms as continuing to apply to our own time period. After all, despite the fact that the Exile about which the poet writes came to an end, we, today, find ourselves again in exile. We hope for that long-awaited restoration.

In several literary sources, we, as a people, seem to be very insecure. We never seem to recognize the good we have, and we need to rely on what *other people* say about us. Perhaps this is a characteristic of us as a people, but more likely of each of us as humans: we have trouble seeing what is going well for us. We tend to focus on the bad, the hard times, the difficulties, and we never seem to notice how often our good fortune outweighs all of these negative experiences and perceptions. We often need others to point it out to us. The other nations, in verse 2, need to tell us, “The LORD has done great things for us.” Only then, can we realize how true it is: we actually repeat almost exactly what the other nations had said!

In that original historical moment, restoration did not happen all at once. Our records of the time in the Bible describe a process that was disappointingly slow. Slow is not enough. Slow is not convincing. The psalm asks God to restore Zion like the watercourses in the Negeb. The Negeb is the arid region in the south of Israel. The watercourses are the wadis that are dry most of the year but are subject to violent flash floods. Often, I am told, the flood can occur without any indication there that it had rained upstream. The suddenness and the power of these floods represent the wish that God’s hand in history be powerful and as distinct and noticeable as the zero-to-sixty of the flood.

The imagery of suddenness then takes over with the repetition of a tears-to-joy image. We have ample sources that describe God reversing fortunes. Many of these involve barren women conceiving or those who are downtrodden being raised up. We see this in Psalm 113 – the first psalm of Hallel, and in the Song of Hannah, which is the haphtarah from the first day of Rosh Hashanah. If God can effect such amazing transitions as toppling the proud and raising up the lowly, surely God can restore the fortunes of Zion. But, as I mentioned above, we often do not notice when good things happen to us: we need this to happen miraculously fast!

The second mention of weeping to joy is accompanied by an image of farming. The person weeping is planting and the person singing with joy is harvesting sheaves of wheat. From planting to harvesting is a dramatic change – especially when it is a bountiful harvest. If we leave out the whole middle period of tending the crops while

they are growing, it would seem even sudden and miraculous. There is more to this image, though. The return to Zion means that cultivation is happening anew for the first time in decades. This would involve a lot more work to prepare the ground for agriculture than it would to plant in a plot that had been under cultivation in the previous seasons. Agriculture is not what the soil wants to do naturally; it is a manipulation of the soil. Preparing a plot of land requires making sure the ground is clear of rocks and obstacles, that the soil has the proper nutrients, that whatever weeds had been growing there do not have roots that will impede planting of your crop and that they will not come back and strangle your plants while they are growing. Therefore, the change from planting to harvesting is even more dramatic and reflects the respective emotional reactions of tears and songs of joy.

Between the growing season of the wheat and the flash floods in the Negeb, this psalm seems to be alluding to the onset of winter. Winter in the Land of Israel is not like our winter: we worry about dry weather, about terrible cold, and about snow and ice and their associated dangers. Winter in Israel is the wet season, but the vast majority of that moisture comes in the form of rain. It is cold, but the temperature stays above freezing most of the time. What the two winters have in common are darkness and uncertainty. (I think that these are the reasons that we Jews are so excited to celebrate such a minor holiday like Hanukka!)

We all face uncertainty differently, but very few of us do so cheerfully. Most of us, I would venture to say, try to ignore it. We do not wish to cloud over our delusions of a sunny day. This psalm is encouraging us to embrace the uncertainty. We (should) know that uncertainty is a part of life, but that it is temporary and balanced out by moments when we are comfortable and certain. The comfort and certainty, too, are temporary and are replaced periodically with uncertainty. We know that, eventually, the winter will warm and lighten into spring and summer, and we also know that summer will soon turn again into winter. In the same way, we can be confident that the uncertainty of exile will one day be replaced with the comfort and excitement of restoration.

Of course, we are all trying to muddle through our own crises of uncertainty. How long with this lockdown last? How many people that we know will contract this scary virus? How long will it be before our medical researchers are successful at discovering a treatment or cure for it? As dark and scary a time as this is, our psalm encourages us to cheer up: This too shall pass!