

Psalm 137:

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we thought of Zion.
- 2 There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,
- 3 for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
- 4 How can we sing a song of the Lord
on alien soil?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
- 6 let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.
- 7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall;
how they cried, “Strip her, strip her
to her very foundations!”
- 8 Fair Babylon, you predator,
a blessing on him who repays you in kind
what you have inflicted on us;
- 9 a blessing on him who seizes your babies
and dashes them against the rocks!

Psalms have long been a comfort to our people, as we struggle with both personal and national crises. While their messages are varied, it seems that we might always find one that fits our situation, whether we be confident or unsure, triumphant or downtrodden, full of gratitude or full of need. For the time being – in addition to my Tuesday 1pm class on Psalms, we thought we might present a psalm each week before Shabbat to consider and meditate on during this time.

I have chosen for this week, Psalm 137. This psalm is relatively well-known for a number of reasons. It is the preface to *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessings after a meal, on weekdays, and it became even more famous when it became a Rastafari song released by the Melodians in 1970.

The psalm opens with a description of the ultimate disgrace. The speaker is in exile, hundreds of miles from home, from Jerusalem. The Temple has been destroyed: the political and ritual center of Judean culture is gone, and the speaker and his people are removed from that place, so that they may not even try to pick up the pieces. Sitting emphasizes this disgrace because among their other losses is their livelihood: they have lost their farms and their jobs, and now have nothing to do but sit.

The disgrace is further amplified in verse 2-3 by the taunting of the captors. They wish to hear a song of the homeland; they wish to make their exiles feel homesick, so they remind them of their loss. (This reminds me of a scene in *Blazing Saddles*, where the members of the work gang building the railroad are told to sing a work song like they used to sing when they were slaves. If you do not know what I am talking about, look on YouTube for “Blazing Saddles work song.” In ironic fashion, Bart (Cleavon Little) and his group outdo their bigoted tormentors! WARNING: Some parts of that movie have not aged well!) In verse 4, this torment is made explicit: “How can we sing a song of the LORD on alien soil?” How can we behave like nothing has changed? But also: How can we take what we used to do there in our place of holiness and do it here in a place that is utterly profane.

At the point when this psalm was written (probably early in the 6th century BCE), the use of Zion and Babylon was limited to specific geographic places. As the centuries wore on and probably as a result of the familiarity of this psalm, Zion and Babylon took on additional meaning. Zion became that place that we long to return to; the home we may never have experienced, but that we know. Babylon takes on the identity of the evil of evils. In the book of Revelation, Babylon is described as a whore and as a demon, and it stands as a symbol for Rome. In Rastafari music of the 20th century, Babylon often represents the police!

In verses 5-6, the speaker utters a curse upon himself, should he forget Jerusalem, his home. His right hand and his tongue as the victims of this curse represent his whole range of activities. The right hand, the seat of strength, stands for everything he might do physically, and his tongue stands for everything he might say. While our translation has the right hand ‘wither,’ the Hebrew has the same word as is used for ‘forget.’ If I forget Jerusalem, says the speaker, let my right hand forget [its abilities, dexterity, etc.] too: a punishment that would fit the crime.

The last part of verse 6 drags out this curse to an extreme. Even if things are going well, I should have to remember this disaster and destruction. This is the source of several of our traditions; most well known of these is breaking a glass at a wedding.

But this is a person who is miserable and does not want to overcome that misery. The misery turns to a revenge fantasy in verses 7-9. The peoples who had a hand in the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonians and also (apparently) the Edomites should suffer as the Jews suffered. Without any power of his own, the speaker cannot do any of this himself and cannot hope to accomplish it in his lifetime, but he prays to God that God exact this revenge. This desire for vengeance becomes particularly harsh and

physical in the last verse, and it probably reflects something real in the life of the speaker. Infanticide is a terrible but successful way of ensuring that a conquered people will not rebel. The Greeks, for example, do this to the royal family of Troy, throwing Hector's son, Astyanax, off the battlements of the city.

We, today, find ourselves in a moment that in some ways is as catastrophic as the people of Judah after the destruction of their Temple. All of our ways of life have been disrupted. We cannot go anywhere! Especially not to places that imbue our lives with the comforts of normalcy: school, work, synagogue. The parallels are tough when it comes to the mockery, since a virus does not have agency like the captors in the psalm. On the other hand, there have been – and continue to be – unfortunate remarks directed at those who have been experiencing this virus.

Identifying a Zion for ourselves can be a powerful expression of will. We are not just sitting in resignation, but we are striving for restoration. We hope and we pray that we will be able to return to our regular lives soon. We also must keep in mind those whose jobs are evaporating as a result of the pandemic, and those who are out of work during this time and not being paid. There are always degrees of suffering: we must endeavor NOT to be among those who cause those suffering to relive their anguish again and again.

While much of psalm reflects what many of us are feeling, we should probably take the revenge fantasy of verses 7-9 as a warning. That is not healthy, and it does not really work to wish revenge on a microscopic virus!

The opening of the psalm is in the plural: “we sat,” “we wept,” and “we remembered.” The trauma is collective. The curse about forgetting is in the singular: “If I forget thee....” We are each suffering individually. Each of us experiences the trauma differently. Each one of us has an obligation to keep our eyes on our Zion – perhaps, on Har Zion – in order to help all of us who are suffering.

Shabbat Shalom