Lamentations Chapter 1

1. How lonely sits the city, that was full of people! She has become like a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, has become a vassal!

Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations Prologue XXXIII

This Midrash attempts to show that 9 Av was supposed to be a day of celebration, but after Israel sinned, it became a day of mourning instead. Our tradition teaches that in the Messianic age, 9 Av will again be a day of celebration...

R. Zera opened his discourse with the text, Therefore is my harp turned to mourning, and my pipe into the voice of them that weep (Job 30:31). Elsewhere we have learned: R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: The Israelites had no greater holidays than the fifteenth of Ab and the Day of Atonement, on which occasions the maidens of Israel used to go out in white garments, borrowed for the event in order not to put to shame them who possessed none of their own. All these garments required to be dipped; and in them the maidens of Israel used to go out to dance in the vineyards.

It was taught: The unmarried man would repair there, and what did the maidens say? Young man, lift up your eyes and see whom you will select. Pay no regard to beauty but to family descent. Similarly it states, Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and gaze upon king Solomon, even upon the crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart (Shir III, 11). In the day of his espousals alludes to the giving of the Torah; and in the day of the gladness of his heart alludes to the building of the Temple, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days!

It is quite right that the Day of Atonement should be an occasion for dancing since it was a day of forgiveness and expiation for Israel, and the day upon which the second Tablets were given.

But what is the reason of the fifteenth of Ab? R. Jacob b. Aha said in the name of R. Assi: On that day begins the favorable season for cutting down trees for the fuel required in the Temple, because all timber cut down then does not become grub-eaten, while it has been taught: Any wood in which a worm or grub is found is unfit for use upon the altar.
R. Abba b. Kahana and R. Assi said in the name of Ulla who derived it from Rabbi [Judah the Prince]: On that day Hosea the son of Elah abolished the guards whom Jeroboam the son of Nebat had set upon the roads. R. Kahana asked Rab: Is it possible that Hosea can have accomplished so much good, and yet it is reported of him, Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria, etc. (II Kings 17:3)? But this happened to him because he removed the chain from off his own neck and set it round the necks of the masses, and he did not say, Let all the people go up and pray, but 'Let whoever wants to go up do so.’

R. Samuel b. Nahmani (others state this in the name of R. Samuel b. Isaac): It was the day on which the tribes were permitted to intermarry, for it is said, And every daughter, that possesses an inheritance in the tribes of the children of Israel, etc. (Num. 36:8), and it is written, So shall no inheritance remove from one tribe to another tribe, etc. (ib. 9). Is it then possible for a daughter to inherit land belonging to two tribes? Deduce from this statement that her father was of one tribe and her mother of another. The Rabbis say: It was the day when the tribe of Benjamin was allowed to re-enter the Community; for it is written, Cursed be he that giveth a wife to Benjamin (Judg. 21:18).

R. Johanan said: They cited a text in virtue of which they brought the tribe near, and they cited a text in virtue of which they repelled it. They cited a text in virtue of which they brought it near, viz. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you (Gen. 35:II) and they cited a text in virtue of which they repelled it, viz. Ephraim and Manasseh, even as Reuben and Simeon, shall be mine (ib. 48:5), showing that the Benjamites were not to be reckoned with their brethren. R. Judah said in the name of Samuel: It was the day when permission was given to the tribes to intermarry. R. Mathna said: It was the day when they allowed the slain of Bethar to be buried.

R. Eliezer the Great said: It is quite right [to cut the wood for the altar] on the fifteenth of Ab; but from then onward the power of the sun declines and they do not cut wood for the altar. R. Menasia remarked: The day was called ' the day of breaking the axe. From the day onward, whoever increases study increases [his years], and whoever does not increase study decreases [the duration of his life].

R. Abin and R. Johanan said: It was the day when the grave-digging ceased for those who died in the wilderness. R. Levi said: On every eve of the ninth of Ab Moses used to send a herald throughout the camp and announce, Go out to dig graves; and they used to go out and dig graves in which they slept. On the morrow he sent out a herald to
announce, Arise and separate the dead from the living.’ They would then stand up and find themselves in round figures 15,000 short of 600,000. In the last of the forty years, they acted similarly and found themselves in undiminished numerical strength. They said, It appears that we erred in our calculation; so they acted similarly on the nights of the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th. When the moon was full they said, It seems that the Holy One, blessed be He, has annulled that decree from us all; so they proceeded to make [the fifteenth] a holiday. Their sins subsequently caused it to become a day of mourning in this world, in the twofold destruction of the Temple. That is what is written, Therefore is my harp turned to mourning, and my pipe into the voice of them that weep. Hence and the people wept that night (Num. XIV, 1). Since they sinned they were exiled; and since they were exiled, Jeremiah began to lament over them, How sits solitary.

_Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations I:1_

In this Midrash, the rabbis begin to grapple with the difficult task of finding understanding in tragedy, to find clues in our history about how the destruction was set into the DNA of our people through the various misdeeds we read about in Tanakh. There is a tendency today to avoid “blaming the victim”. Our tradition clearly teaches that the Two Temples were destroyed because of Israel’s misdeeds. This is, of course, the theme of the Books of Prophets, which continuously warn Israel. The destruction, according to such interpretation, comes from Israel spurning God and voiding ritual requirements…


R. Levi said: It may be likened to a matron who had had three groomsmen: one beheld her in her happiness, a second beheld her in her infidelity, and the third beheld her in her disgrace. Similarly, Moses beheld Israel in their glory and happiness and exclaimed, ‘How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance?’ Isaiah beheld them in their infidelity and exclaimed, “How the faithful city has become a harlot!” Jeremiah beheld them in their disgrace and exclaimed, ”How the city sits solitary!”
[The disciples] requested Ben Azzai saying, 'Master, expound to us something connected with the Book of Lamentations.' He said to them: 'Israel did not go into exile until they had repudiated the Divine Unity, circumcision which had been given to the twentieth generation, the Decalogue, and the Pentateuch.' Whence have we this? From the letters constituting the word Eikhah איכה. 1, 2

R. Levi said: Israel did not go into exile until they had repudiated the thirty-six ordinances in the Torah for which the penalty is excision, and also the Decalogue. Whence have we this? From the numerical value of the letters constituting the words Eikha and badad (solitary). 3

R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Abdimi of Haifa: It may be likened to a king who had a son. So long as he obeyed the will of his father he clothed him in garments of fine wool, but when he disregarded his will he clothed him in exiles’ garments. Similarly with Israel. So long as they obeyed the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, it is written, I clothed thee also with richly woven work (Ezek. XVI, 10). (R. Sima said: The word means 'in purple garments', and Onkelos renders by 'embroidered garments.') But when they disregarded the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, He clothed them in exiles’ (bedadin) garments, as it is written, HOW DOTH THE CITY SIT SOLITARY--BADAD!

R. Nahman reported that Samuel said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: The Holy One, blessed be He, summoned the ministering angels and said to them: 'If a human king had a son who died and mourns for him, what is it customary for him to do?' They replied, He hangs sackcloth over his door. He said to them, I will do likewise. That is what is written, "I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackloth their covering" (Isa. 50:3). [He again asked them,] What does a human king do [when mourning]? They replied, He extinguishes the lamps. He said to them, 'I will do likewise; as it is said, “The sun and the moon are become black, and the stars withdraw their shining” (Joel 4:15). 'What does a human king do? They replied, 'He overturns his couch.' He said to them, I will do likewise; as it is stated, "Until thrones were cast down, and One that was ancient of days did sit" (Dan. 7:9)--if it is possible to say so, they were overturned. What

1 The א indicates one (the Divine Unity), the י ten (the Decalogue), the כ twenty (circumcision), and ה five (Torah/Humash)

2 Twenty generations from Adam to Abraham – כ

3 איכה – 36, בדד – 10

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does a human king do? They replied, He walks barefoot. He said to them, 'I will do likewise; as it is stated, “The Lord, in the whirlwind and in the storm is His way, and clouds are the dust of His feet” (Nahum 1:3). What does a human king do? They replied, He rends his purple robes. He said to them, I will do likewise; as it is written, The Lord has done that which He devised (bizza emrato) He hath performed His word (Lam. 2:17). R. Jacob of Kefar-Hanan explained: What means bizza emrato? He rent His purple. What does a human king do? They replied, ‘He sits in silence.’ He said to them, I will do likewise; as it is stated, He sits alone and keeps silence (ib. 3:28). What does a human king do when mourning? They replied, ‘He sits and weeps.’ He said to them, ’I will do likewise; as it is written, And in that day did the Lord, the God of hosts, call to weeping, and to lamentation, and to baldness (Isa. 22:12).

Another interpretation of ‘How the city sits solitary!’ Jeremiah said to Israel: What do you see in an idol that you so yearn for it? If it possessed a mouth so as to be able to argue, we would have spoken thus and thus. Since, however, it is incapable of speech, let us state its position and let us state His. Let us state its position: Thus says the Lord: Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the nations are dismayed at them (Jer. 10:2). And let us state His: Thus shall ye say unto them: The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, these shall perish (ib. 11). But not like these is the portion of Jacob; for He is the former of all things, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; the Lord of hosts is His name (ib. 16).

R. Judah and R. Nehemiah comment. R. Judah says: The word איכה implies nothing else than reproof; as it is stated, How (איכה) do you say: We are wise, and the Law of the Lord is with us? (ib. 8:8). R. Nehemiah says: The word איכה implies nothing else than lament; as it is stated, And the Lord God called unto the man, and said unto him: Where art thou—ayyekah אַיְּאָכָה (Gen. III, 9), meaning, woe unto thee (oi lekhah אוי לך).
Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations I:23

2. She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.

R. Simeon b. Yohai said: The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to Israel: “You are weeping now with a frivolous weeping, but in the end you will weep with a real weeping. Where did Israel weep with a frivolous weeping? And Moses heard the people weeping, family by family (Num. 11:10), ‘And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried (ib. XIV, 1).’

And where did they weep with a real weeping? R. Aibu and R. Judah b. R. Simon give answers. R. Aibu said: Once in Ramah and once in Babylon. In Ramah, for it is written, A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping (Jer. 31:15); in Babylon, for it is written, By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept (Ps. 137:1).

R. Judah b. R. Simon said: Once in the province of Judah and once in Babylon. In the province of Judah it is said, she weeps sore in the night (Eikha 1:2); in Babylon it is said, By the rivers of Babylon, etc. (Ps. 137:1)

R. Aibu said: The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to Israel: ‘As a reward for weeping I will restore your captivity; for is it not written, Thus says the Lord: Refrain thy voice from weeping... and there is hope for thy future, says the Lord (Jer. 31:16 f.).

Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations II:11

11. The Lord has cast off his altar (Eikha 2:7). R. Haggai said in the name of R. Isaac: It may be likened to the inhabitants of a province who set tables for the king. They
provoked him to anger, but he bore with them. When they had done this several times, he said to them: 'Do you not provoke me because you rely on the tables which you set before me? Here, have them, they are thrown in your face!’ Similarly spoke the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Do you not provoke Me because you rely on the sacrifices which you offer to Me? Here, have them, they are thrown in your face!’ That is what is written, The Lord has cast off His altar, He has abhorred His sanctuary.

(Eikha 3:22).

R. Simeon b. Lakish said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, despairs of the righteous in this world, He relents and has compassion upon them. That is what is written, “Surely the Lord’s mercies are not consumed.”

Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations III:8

Surely the Lord’s mercies are not consumed; surely His compassions do not fail. (Eikha 3:22).