Laments

Translations of Eikhah for our world

This translation of Laments, the book of mourning poems read on Tish’a B’Av, uses principles of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible. It strives to be “concordant”, translating related Hebrew words with related English words and following the order and syntax of the Hebrew where possible. It also focuses on the more physical, earthy meaning of words, in order to draw the modern reader towards more ancient ways of seeing and feeling. Sometimes alternate translations are given, indicated by a slash. (When reading aloud, simply pick one of the translations. For YHVH, you can read Adonai or Hashem or “the Eternal”.) James Moffat’s 1922 translation was consulted. As a somewhat literal translation, Laments uses “He” and “His” as pronouns for God, though Torah and common sense command us not to make an exclusively male or female image of God. If you are using Laments liturgically, please feel encouraged to change the pronouns. For brief essays on the theology of Eikhah, refugees, the Earth, and more, see the end of this booklet.


Find more Tisha B’Av resources, songs, and teachings online at: theshalomcenter.org/node/1733 and neohasid.org/zhman/tisha_bav

Laments ©2018 (v.4.2) by David Mevorach Seidenberg. First published by neohasid.org in 2007, based on translations for the Aleph Kallah and National Havurah Institute in 2002 and 2003; translation begun 1993. Layout based on 2003 design by Mark Frydenberg. This booklet contains the sacred name in Hebrew for God. Please do not destroy or dispose of improperly. Download this booklet at: neohasid.org/resources/laments

This work is dedicated to all refugees fleeing war and upheaval, and to our remembering their needs.

neohasid.org

8. What does this mean? The Torah portrays the land as a subject with rights and interests that take priority over our needs. Especially in the flood story and the laws of Jubilee and sabbatical years (Lev. 25)—and in the consequences that are supposed to befal the people if they do not observe these laws (Lev. 26)—the Torah teaches that God will take the side of the land against the people if forced to. The land will “enjoy her Sabbaths” (Lev. 26:34,43) – even if that means the people are exiled or wiped out. From the divine perspective, the land can sue for justice. What has intrinsic value is not humanity but justice, which is humanity’s potential. See: neohasid.org/torah/genesis-shmitah

9. The Torah outlines six curses for not observing the sabbatical year that describe an unraveling relationship between people and land. Two curses involve children being eaten – by wild animals (v.22), then by their parents (v.29). That image is repeated in Eikhah (2:20, 4:10) and it is the main connection between Eikhah and Leviticus. The final curse in Leviticus is that “you will be lost in the nations and the land of your enemies will eat you” (v.38). The last curse does not sound like the worst. But if the land eats us, this represents a complete reversal of the right relationship between the people and the land.

10. In ancient times, people believed that the Temple existed to promote fertility and abundance. Temple rituals were performed for the sake of the land and for all life, not just for the Jews or even for all humanity. The Temple’s purpose had already been destroyed by the way people treated the land.

11. The idea that destruction came because of how the Jewish people treated the land is not found in Eikhah, where identification of the land with the people is total. Instead, Jerusalem’s downfall results from the moral downfall in relationships between human beings. In Jeremiah too, the fate of Jerusalem is sealed only after the rich, who briefly set their slaves free, re-enslave them when it looks like the danger has passed. (Jer. 34) How we treat the stranger, the poor, the refugee, is what determines if we have the right to be in the land.

12. Creation is compared to a sacred Temple (Tanchuma Pekudei, P’ri Eitz Hadar). In an age when our ecological “sins” are coming home to roost, the connection between natural disaster and divine retribution is not farfetched. However, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, there were other lands to flee to. If we destroy the Temple that is this Earth, there will be no place to flee. (Cantor Richard Kaplan’s Kinah L’churban Gan Eden, on neohasid.org, can help you focus on this theme.)

13. We can expect more wars over resources, as well as people fleeing areas that havelooded or become deserts, as climate change puts more pressure on our ecosystems and our social systems. We need all the spiritual resources we can muster to stay open to the humanity of the refugee and the stranger while also taking care of each other. Eikhah is an invitation to move towards justice for all people, for all species, and for the land herself.

Rabbi David Mevorah Seidenberg 2018/5778. Some of this material is taken from Kabbalah and Ecology.
Some notes on the theology of Eikhah:

1. Tish’a B’Av could not be more relevant than it is today, when the crisis of war refugees and fear of terrorism have overwhelmed the political process in so many countries. We think of Tish’a B’Av as a time of mourning, but it is more importantly a call to identify with the experience of refugees who are forced to risk their lives and even their children’s lives in order to escape violence, hunger, devastation. That’s what the Jewish people went through when the Temple, and the nation and society it stood for, were destroyed, when they became “like deer, not finding a place to graze, walking without strength before a pursuer.” (1:6)

2. The idea that tragedy and disaster are punishment for sins seems alien to many modern Jews. This is also why it can be hard to connect the Holocaust with Tish’a B’Av. But this theology can also be consoling, because it allows people to find meaning in tragedy.

3. The author(s) of Eikhah (traditionally Jeremiah) believed that what happened to Jerusalem expressed divine judgment. For our ancestors, the choice was to believe either that the destruction was God’s punishment, or that God no longer cared about what happened to them. It is easy to imagine people choosing a punishing God over an uncaring God (though the latter possibility is also suggested in the last verse of Eikhah). Even though Eikhah sounds like it’s about God punishing us, it’s not really a theodicy, a justification of God. Rather, it expresses the hope that tragedy proves that God cares about us, instead of proving the opposite.

4. That doesn’t mean we need to accept that theology – even in Eikhah itself, this idea is questioned. Only in chapter three is Zion’s destruction consistently seen as fair and just punishment. In all the other chapters, the degree of divine punishment is described as excessive and abusive. In every chapter, the poet begs God to pay attention: “See, YHVH, and look: to whom did You deal thus? If women will eat their fruit, coddled babes – !” (2:20; also 1:9, 1:11, 1:20, 3:63, 4:16, 5:1). It’s as if other people could see and understand the tragedy that unfolded (1:12), but God could not.

5. This suggests one way to confront the images of sexual abuse in Eikhah: “All who honor her despise her, for they saw her nakedness.” (1:8; also 1:10, 4:21, 5:11) In the prophets, such abuse is a metaphor for the “just” punishment that follows Israel’s “adulterous” pursuit of other gods. But in Eikhah, the metaphor is used to hold up a mirror to God, to show that the punishment was intolerably abusive.

6. The real theology of Eikhah is summed up in the verse, “What can I compare to you, daughter Jerusalem, that I may comfort you?” (2:13) What images, what words, can help people bear the memory of tragedy? The poet is willing to say whatever is needed to enable the people to find meaning.

7. There is another way to understand the destruction of Jerusalem. According to Jeremiah, the reason for the exile was that Israel did not let the land rest every seven years after they entered the land. (2 Chron. 36:21) Since 490 years had passed without a sabbatical year, Israel had to go into exile for 70 years.

CHAPTER 1

1 Eikhah! How can it be – she sat alone, the city so great / so swelled with people? She was like a widow. The one great among the nations, ministering among the states, became a slave caste.

2 Crying, she will cry in the night, her tear upon her cheek There is none for her, no comforter, from all her lovers. All her companions played traitor with her. They became for her enemies.

3 She, Judah, was exiled, by poverty, and by (so) much hard labor She sat among the nations, not finding any rest; All her pursuers caught up with her between the confined places.

4 Zion’s roads are mourning from being without festival-goers, all her gates desolated;
8 Sinning she sinned, Jerusalem.
Her priests are moaning,
her girls grieving;
And she – it is bitterness for her.

5 Her tormentors were at the head,
her enemies had ease
For YHVH / the Eternal aggrieved her
for the greatness of her sins.

6 and all her splendor went out from
daughter Zion!
Her ministers were like deer,
not finding a place to graze;
and (so) they walked, without strength,
before a pursuer.

7 Jerusalem remembered
the days of her poverty / affliction
and her downsiding,
all her precious things
which were from days long ago,
while her people fell into a foe’s hand;
and there is no help for her.
They saw her, her tormentors,
laughing over her becoming stilled.

Some more songs:
Shifkhi kamayim libeikh
nokhach p’nei Hashem
Pour out your heart like water
right before Hashem

Yehudah l’olam teishev
Yerushalayim l’dor vador
Judah will dwell for all time,
Jerusalem for generations

By the waters of Babylon we sat
down and wept for thee Zion
We remember thee Zion

Nachamu ’ami.
Anokhi hu m’nachemchem
Take comfort my people
I am the one who comforts you

Eli Tsiyon v’areha
k’mo ishah v’tsireha
v’khivtulah chagurat sak
al ba’al n’areha
My God, Zion and her towns, like
a woman in travail, like a virgin
wearing sackcloth for the
husband of her youth

Make our days new again,
like dawn / long ago.

The observances of Tish’a B’Av
The observances of Tish’a B’Av—not wearing fresh clothes, not washing, fasting from eating and drinking and sexual contact, not greeting each other, not sitting anywhere except on the ground—are closer to the experience of being a refugee than to being a mourner. The destruction of the Temple stands not just for the destruction of Jerusalem, but for the city being turned into a war zone, and the people becoming prey to hunger, violence, and death. Tish’a B’Av is not primarily about the Temple – Chaza”l, the rabbis, figured out how to live without the Temple long ago. Rather, Tish’a B’Av is about homelessness, fleeing from war into famine, being thrown into a hostile world without shelter or protection – things all too present in our world. It’s an opportunity empathize, to confront the ways we abuse our power, as individuals, as a society, as a people, and as a species, turning other people and other species into refugees.
12 Ministers by their hand were hung. Elders’ faces shown no majesty / respect.

13 Boys would carry a millstone, and youths, stumbling with wood.

14 Elders ceased from gate, boys from their play.

15 Our heart ceased / stopped any joy, our dance overturned into mourning.

16 The crown on our head is fallen; Oy for us! For we sinned.

17 For this our heart was sickened. For these our eyes darkened.

18 For Mount Zion, that was desolated, foxes went through her.

19 You, YHVH will sit for all world-time, Your throne (lasts) for generations.

20 Why would you forget us forever? Abandon us for the span of time’s days?

21 Turn us, YHVH, toward you, and we will turn.

22 except if rejecting you did reject / loath us, were enraged over us, so very much—!

For this an outcast / nidah she became.
All who honor her despise her, for they saw her nakedness.
Also her, she is moaning, and turned around backward.

9 Her blood / tum’ah in her skirts, she didn’t remember her end after, she descended wondrously. There is no comforter for her. YHVH, see my poverty / my humiliation, for an enemy became great.

10 A foe / Trauma spread out his hand over all her precious things; She saw other nations come within her holy place, which You commanded her:

“They won’t come in with the community to you.”

11 All her people are moaning seeking bread; They gave up their precious things for food to restore life.

See, YHVH, and look (at how) I was despised.

12 Never to you,
13 From a height He sent fire
in my bones and overwhelmed them.
He spread out a net for my feet;
He turned me / repelled me backward;
He made me desolate,
all day – sickness.

14 The harness of my sins lashed on,
they were tied down by His hand,
brought up onto my neck,
making my strength fail.

15 Adonai gave me over into (such) hands
that I am unable to stand up.

16 Over these, I am crying;
(All of you) look, and see –
could there be pain like my pain
which was doled out to me,
which YHVH caused to grieve
in the day of His furious anger?

17 Over these, I am crying;
(All of you) look, and see –
our abuse / our shame!

20 Our skin like a furnace, glowing,
our inheritance overturned to strangers,
our houses to foreigners.

21 We were orphans, there is no father,
our mothers like widows.

22 Our water we drank for money;
our wood came (only) with a price.

23 On our neck were we pursued,
weary, and none would let us (rest).

24 Egypt, we stretched a hand,
Assyria, to satisfy bread.

25 Our fathers sinned and are not,
and we shouldered their iniquities.

26 Slaves ruled us.
None can break us out from their hand.

27 For our lives we bring our bread,
from before the wilderness’s sword.

28 Our skin like a furnace, glowing,
from before the delirium of hunger.

29 Women in Zion were victimized,
girls, in Judah’s towns.
In our seeking, we sought / we peered toward a nation not (able to) save.

18 They hunted / tracked our steps, (driven) from going in our squares.
Our end draws close, our days filled, for our end has come.

19 Swift were they, our pursuers, more than eagles of the heavens.
Over the mountains they chased us, in the wilderness they laid ambush for us.

20 Breath of our nose, YHVH’s anointed, he was trapped by their destructions, (the one) whom we said, “In his shade we will live with the nations.”

21 Rejoice and be happy, daughter Edom, dwelling in the land of Utz – a cup will also pass over (to) you, you will drink and strip yourself naked.

22 Complete be your iniquity, daughter Zion, no more to be exiled / exposed.
He has charged your iniquity, daughter Edom, exposed (you) for your sins.

my eye, my eye, she drops water.
For so far from me is any comforter, a restorer for my life.
My children were decimated, for an enemy overwhelmed / triumphed.

17 Zion spread out with her hands, there is no comforter for her.
YHVH commanded for Jacob, surrounding him, his tormentors.
Jerusalem became outcast / nidah between them.

18 Righteous is YHVH, for His mouth I rebelled (against).
Listen, please—all peoples—and see my pain!
My girls and my boys walked captive / into captivity.

19 I called to my lovers.
Those deceived me.
My priests, and my elders, they wasted away in the city, while they sought food for themselves (that) would bring back their life / soul.

20 See YHVH – for mine is torment, my guts were churning,
my heart overturned within me,  
for rebelling I rebelled.
From outside sword bereaving;  
In the house, like death itself.
21 They listened – for I am moaning,  
there is no comforter for me.
All my enemies listened  
for my evil (doom).
They rejoiced, for You did it,  
You brought the day You called for –  
and let them be(come) like me.
22 May all their evil come before You,  
and deal to them as  
You dealt to me for all my sins.  
For so much are my sighs,  
and my heart is sickened.

CHAPTER 2

1 *Eikhah!* How can it be –  
in His anger Adonai / the Lord  
clouded over daughter Zion.
He cast down, from skies (to) earth,  
Israel’s glory,

crossed all the inhabitants of the world,
that tormentor and enemy would come  
into the gates of Jerusalem –
13 because of her prophets’ sins,  
her priests’ wrongs / iniquities,  
the ones who poured out inside her  
the blood of righteous people.
14 They were shaking / staggering, blind  
in the streets, defiled with the blood,  
with none able / willing (to)  
come in contact with their clothes.
15 “Get out! Contaminated! / *Tamei!*”  
they would call to them,  
“Get out! Get out! Don’t touch!”  
For they fled, even staggered.
They said in the nations,  
they will no more (be allowed) to dwell.
16 *YHVH*’s presence / face  
divided them, He would no more  
look at them / notice them –  
(for) priest’s faces they did not lift up,  
and (to) elders they did not show grace.
17 Still will our eyes be used up / failing,  
toward our help, (which is) emptiness.
grew great, beyond the sin of Sodom, the one overthrown, as (in) a moment, and no hands were laid on her.

7 Her Nazirites were pure beyond snow, clearer than milk, red of bone, more than rubies, their cut shape sapphire crystal.

8 (Now) darkened beyond black soot is their form, they are not recognized in the streets, their skin stretched taut over their bone, it was dried out like a stick.

9 Better were the sword-slain than the famine-slain, for those drain away, stabbed through from (want of) produce of the field.

10 Merciful hands of merciful women stewed their children – they became provision for them in the shattering of my daughter people.

11 YHVH used up His fury, poured out His burning anger, and He kindled a fire in Zion, and she consumed her foundations.

12 They would not have believed, and didn’t remember His foot’s resting place in His day of anger.

2 Adonai devoured—He had no pity—all of Jacob’s pastures. He tore down with His burning daughter Judah’s fortifications; He reached to the very ground. He violated kingdom and her ministers.

3 With ferocious anger He hacked off all of Israel’s horn. He turned His right hand backward before the enemy. Burning into Jacob, like fire flaming, consuming (all) around.

4 He worked His bow like an enemy, He stood firm His right hand as a foe / a tormentor and He murdered everything precious to the eye; In daughter Zion’s tent He poured out His wrath like the fire.

5 Adonai was like an enemy; He devoured / swallowed Israel. He devoured all her citadels,
They drowned in the earth, her gates.

He smashed and broke her bars.

Her king and her ministers in the nations,

there is no Torah / no teaching.

And He multiplied in daughter Zion
grief and groaning.

Like a garden, He tore apart His sukkah,
destroyed His feast.

YHVH caused Shabbat and festival
to be forgotten in Zion,

by the rage of His anger

king and priest.

Adonai abhorred His altar,
disdained His holy place.

He made shut with an enemy’s hand
the walls of her citadels.

They gave a shout in YHVH’s house
like a festival day.

YHVH plotted to ruin
daughter Zion’s wall, stretched a line,
didn’t turn back His hand
from swallowing up,

and He made rampart and wall mourn,
together made wretched.

They drowned in the earth, her gates.

He smashed and broke her bars.

Her king and her ministers in the nations,
Don’t hide / conceal your ear

to my (plea for) relief, to my cry.

57 You were near the day I would call,
You said, “Don’t fear.”

58 Adonai, You struggled (in) my soul’s
struggles; You saved my life.

59 You saw my twisting;
(now) judge my judgment!

60 You saw all their vengeance
all their designs for me.

61 You heard their shaming, YHVH,
all their designs against me,

62 the speech of those rising at me,
their obsession over me every day,

63 (whether) sitting or rising up –
Look! I am their singsong!

64 You will pay them back, YHVH,
according to the work of their hands;

65 You will make theirs a heart walled
up – let Your curse be for them!

66 Pursue in anger and destroy them
from under YHVH’s heavens.

Also her prophets,
They found no vision from YHVH.

10 They sat down to the earth, they
stayed silent, daughter Zion’s elders,
they lifted dust over their head,
tied on sackcloth.
They let their head down to the earth,
Jerusalem’s girls.

11 My eyes were used up by the tears,
my liver poured out to the ground
over the shattering of
my daughter people,
with exhaustion of babe and suckling
in the town’s squares.

12 To their mothers they would say,
“Where is grain and wine?”,
stretching themselves out,
like a corpse, in city streets,
with their life-force pouring itself out
onto their mothers’ chest.

13 What can I make testify?
What will I liken to you?
O daughter Jerusalem!
What can I compare to you
11 They struck their hands over you, daughter Zion’s girl?
For great, like the sea, is your shattering – who will bring healing to you?

14 For you did your prophets envision deception, and irrelevance, revealing nothing for your wrong to turn back your destiny / your captivity, and they envisioned for you a burden of deceit and dejections.

15 They struck their hands over you, all who passed on the road, they hissed and they shook their head over daughter Jerusalem: “Is this it? The city they said (was) beauty’s completion, joy’s source for all the earth?”

16 They crack open their mouth over you, all your enemies. They hissed, and they grit teeth. They said: We swallowed; Akh! This day that we hoped for, we found, we saw!

17 YHVH did what He conspired; He pushed through His saying (that) I may comfort you, daughter Zion’s girl?

46 All our enemies crack open their mouth against us;
47 Trepidation and trap were ours, the ruination and the shattering.
48 My eye drops floods of water for my daughter people’s shattering;

49 My eye streams and won’t silence herself, (she cries) with no breaks / no stutters,

50 until YHVH would look down and see from heaven.

51 My eye doles sorrow to my soul over all my city’s daughters.

52 Hunting, they hunted me, like a bird, (becoming) my enemies for no reason;

53 they sealed off my life in the pit, and cast stone against me;

54 waters flowed over my head, “I am cut off,” I said.

55 I called Your name, YHVH, from a pit far underground.

56 You heard my voice:
struggle – wouldn’t Adonai see (that)?

37 Who is this who spoke and it was
– didn’t Adonai so command?

38 From the mouth of the Highest
don’t the evils and the good come out?

39 How could a living person complain,
a man, (if punished) for his sins?

40 Let us search our ways and dig deep,
and let us return until YHVH,

41 Let us lift our hearts
up to our hands (stretching them)
toward God in the heavens.

42 Us, we sinned and rebelled.
You – You did not pardon.

43 You took shelter in such anger,
and You would pursue us,
You murdered without pitying;

44 You sheltered Yourself within a
cloud, far beyond prayer;

45 Scum and refuse
You would make us
in the midst of the peoples.

which He commanded from early days.
He tore down and showed no pity.
He made an enemy rejoice over you;
your tormentors’ horn was exalted.

18 Their heart screamed out to Adonai.
Wall of daughter Zion,
let down a tear like a torrent,
day and night.

Don’t give yourself any break;
Don’t let your daughter eye fall silent.

19 Get up! Sing out in the night
to the first of the nightwatches:
Pour out your heart like water
right before Adonai!

Lift your palms toward Him –
for the life of your babies
stretched out by famine
at every street head!

20 See, YHVH, and look:
to whom did You deal thus?
If women will eat their fruit,
coddled babies—!
If priest and prophet are murdered
in Adonai’s holy place—!
21 Laid down to the earth (in the) streets, young and old, my girls and my boys, they fell by sword; You murdered in the day of Your anger. You slaughtered, You had no pity.

22 You would call, like a festival day, (for) my neighbors from all around; and (so) in YHVH’s day of anger there weren’t any escaped or remaining which I had nursed and raised – my enemy finished them all.

CHAPTER 3

1 I am the man who saw affliction through the rod of His burning anger.
2 Me did He drive and He led – darkness and no light;
3 Akh – Even against me He turned upending His hand, all the day.

4 He wore away my flesh and my skin, broke my bones;
5 He built against me and surrounded – gall and wormwood.

6 to a soul / person that would seek Him.
26 Good – and he should wait and be silent, wait for YHVH’s salvation.
27 Good it is for a man that he carry a yoke in his youth.

28 Let him sit alone and be silent, since He laid (it) on him;
29 he should put his mouth in the dust – maybe there is hope;
30 Put out his cheek for the one who strikes, be satiated with shame.

31 For Adonai would not spurn forever;
32 for He aggrieved and showed mercy, according to His love’s abundance;
33 for He did not afflict from His heart and aggrieve human beings.

34 To crush under His feet all imprisoned of the land,
35 to make bent a man’s judgment, right to the face of the Highest,
36 to twist / wrong a person in his
16 He broke my teeth with gravel, 
and pressed me into the ashes.
17 My soul was spurned from peace; 
I forgot goodness, 
18 and I said, “I have lost from YHVH 
my endurance and my hope!”
19 Remember my affliction and 
my scattering – wormwood and gall; 
20 Remember, my soul will remember, 
and she will sink down upon me.
21 (Still) this will I turn toward my heart, 
for so will I hope:

22 YHVH’s love / kindnesses 
– they are never done, 
for His mercies were not used up.
23 They are new by every morning; 
great is Your trust / faithfulness!
24 My portion is YHVH 
—said my soul— 
therefore so will I hope for Him.
25 Good is YHVH 
to those waiting for Him,
6 In darkening-nights He made me dwell 
like those ever dead;
7 He barricaded against me, 
and I cannot go out / get away, 
He weighed down my brass (shackle).
8 Even when I would cry and plea, 
He stopped up my prayer;
9 He barricaded my ways with 
stone blocks; my paths He twisted.
10 For me He was a bear ambushing, 
a lion in hiding places / stalking;
11 My ways He diverts and He would tear 
me up; He made me desolate.
12 He worked His bow and made me 
stand as the target for the arrow;
13 He guided into my kidneys 
what came from His quiver,
14 I was a laughingstock for all my 
people, their song all the day.
15 He sated me with bitter herbs, 
and overfilled me with wormwood;