Laments אולים
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/zman/tisha_bav/.

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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 befall 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 have flooded 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 Mevorach 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;

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

8 Sinning she sinned, Jerusalem.

Hashiveinu
Adonai elekha
v’nashuvah
Chadesh yamenu
k’kedem

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’tsiroha
v’khivtulah chagurat sak
al ba’al n’ureha
My God, Zion and her towns, like
a woman in travail, like a virgin
wearing sackcloth for the
husband of her youth

Turn us,
YHVH, toward you,
and we will turn.
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 to 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.
This work is dedicated to all refuges fleeing war and upheaval, and to our remembering their needs.
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1 YHVH, remember what was ours. Look, and see our abuse / our shame!

2 Our inheritance overturned to strangers, our houses to foreigners.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11 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,
This work is dedicated to all refuges fleeing war and upheaval, and to our remembering their needs.

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, 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.

kings of the earth 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 / none 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.
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10 Better were the sword-slain
than the famine-slain,
for those drain away, stabbed through
from (want of) produce of the field.

9 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,
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 in stretched taut over their bone,
it was dried out like a stick.

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.

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.

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.

Adonai was like an enemy;
He devoured / swallowed Israel.
He devoured all her citadels,
undermined His fortifications;
And He multiplied in daughter Zion
grief and groaning.

6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 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.

CHAPTER 4

1 Eikhah! How can it be –
gold becomes dull,
the best gold transmuted,
stones of the holy poured / dumped out
at every street head;

2 Zion’s children, precious ones,
weighed against the purest gold –
how can it be that they are counted
as clay jars,
work of a maker’s hands?

3 Even jackals draw out a breast,
would give suck to their cubs.
(But) my daughter people – so cruel,
like ostriches in the wilderness.

4 A suckling’s tongue, stuck
to its palate with such thirst;
babes sought bread –
none break it off for them.

5 The ones who eat for delicacies
were wasted in the streets,
the ones nursed on scarlet
were hugging trash heaps.

6 And my daughter people’s iniquity
This work is dedicated to all refuges fleeing war and upheaval, and to our remembering their needs.

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
to their mothers' chest.

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,
my guts churned up,
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
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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, He broke my bones;

5 He built against me and surrounded – gall and wormwood.

21 Laid down to the earth (in the) streets, young and old, my girls and my boys, they fell by sword;

22 You would call, like a festival day, (for) my neighbors from all around;

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 if He aggrieved and showed mercy, it is 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, maybe there is hope;

35 to make bent a man’s judgment, right to the face of the Highest,
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 Remembering, she will remember, my soul, and 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 bronze (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;

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