

Alphabet of Hope 5783

Rabbi Nicole Roberts

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783/2022

What a blessing it is to see you. For the past two years, on Rosh Hashanah, the rabbis looked out on a sobering scene: this sanctuary with all its chairs removed to allow for production equipment, wires, and plexiglass partitions between rooms. It was a view that always reminded me of the Book of Lamentations, whose first verses describe the abandoned city, Jerusalem, her inhabitants dwelling in exile: *Eicha yashvah vadad ha'ir rabati am*—"How she sits in mourning, the lonely city once filled with people"; *darchei Tzion avelot mibli ba'ei moed*—"Zion's roads are mourners, empty of festival pilgrims"; *kol sh'areha shomemin*—"all her gates are deserted."ⁱ

The Book of Lamentations, known in Hebrew by its first word, *Eicha*, is an alphabetical acrostic—a poem in which the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (alef), the next verse with the second letter (bet), the third verse with the third letter (gimel), and so on until the next chapter starts the alphabet all over again. We chant this acrostic lament—this "Alphabet of Woe"—7 weeks before Rosh Hashanah each year, on the mournful day of Tisha b'Av, when we commemorate the fall of the Temple and our exile that ensued.

So during our first Covid lockdown in 2020, after chanting *Eicha* from exile in our homes on Zoom, I decided that our congregation needed to build an Alphabet of *Hope* for the new year, to be shared in our High Holy Days *Together@Home* broadcast. That year, I asked you each to send in a photo of yourself holding up a placard with a word on it—a word representing a hope you had for the world. Together we spelled out a world filled from A to Z with "Amazingness," "Blessing," and "Compassion." A world of "safety," "transparency," "unity," and "vaccines." A world full of "zest." Our Alphabet of Hope became one of my favourite features of our broadcast—all of us holding up our collective vision of a better world than the lamentable one of loneliness, fear, and disruption we were living through at the time.

Since then, some of our hopes were realised. A Covid vaccine has been developed, freedoms restored, grandparents can once again hug their grandchildren, and we can travel overseas. Yet as the gates have opened to the wider world, that world has sadly taken new turns for the worse. Russia invaded Ukraine, shattering innocent lives, and nuclear disaster is once again a real threat. Teenage girls in Afghanistan lost their right to education, women in America the right to choose, and women in Australian parliament reported harassment and abuse at the hands of their colleagues. Antisemitism escalated around the globe, including in our own Sydney schools. The so-called Unity government in the State of Israel failed to hold. And the climate crisis contributed to drought and floods of near biblical proportions. The end of lockdown did not bring an end to our woes. We've merely started the next chapter of Lamentations, from A to Z, all over again.

It's demoralising, this eternal repetition of our Alphabet of Woe—this feeling that we humans just can't get it right: how to build and maintain a better world. Each year, we beat our chest in *vidui*, confession, acknowledging the flaws in human nature that may have contributed to the problem—that other Alphabet of Woe: from *Arrogance*, *Bigotry*, and *Corruption* to *Violence*, *Xenophobia* and *Zeal for bad causes*. We think, maybe if we could just fix these in ourselves, we could fix the world at large and break the endless cycle of Lamentations. Yet each year we find ourselves once again in a lamentable world of seemingly insoluble problems.

Our forebears wrestled with these feelings of discouragement even in ancient times. So their rabbis delivered sermons aimed at helping the people find a way forward—a reason to go on living and striving to build a better world, when the one around them loomed dark and threatening, and impossible to fix. These sermons would always draw on ancient Jewish stories and parables—

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what we call *midrash* or legend. And though we don't have copies of whole sermons, we do have compilations of these disparate ancient legends that appeared in them. A few months ago, studying with a colleague in the lead up to Tisha b'Av, I came across one which gave me chills.

It was a parable, in which God was likened to a human king—a generous king who gifted his beloved child a golden necklace, which he draped upon the child's neck. But it wasn't long before the child's behaviour upset the father so, that the father took away the necklace and replaced it with chains that shackled the child's feet! Likewise, says the parable, the Holy Blessed One, God, made the letters of the Hebrew alphabet into a beautiful necklace and draped it about the neck of *Yis-rael*, the children of Israel. The letters of this necklace formed the words of Torah, whose teachings and way of life were meant to be a wreath of grace upon our heads, a crown of splendour bestowed upon us. But what did we do? Ever the careless and unappreciative child, we forsook this gift—the passage says we “abandoned” it. So in anguish, God rearranged the letters of this necklace into an Alphabet of Woe—the acrostic poem of Lamentations that we've chanted every year since, on Tisha b'Av.ⁱⁱ

The suggestion, of course, was that by forsaking the Torah and its teachings, we caused the fall of God's Holy Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty. So instead of being crowned in glory in the Promised Land, we found ourselves lamenting the catastrophe each year in exile, under harsh foreign rule. Thankfully, our Progressive movement long ago rejected the theology that ill fortune and oppression were punishments for our transgressions. Yet nevertheless, something in this parable rings so true—namely, that we've been mourning the lamentable state of our world since time immemorial; that we were once given something beautiful, but we botched it up; and that we are shackled, unable to find our way out of the mess we've made of a Divine gift. A world rich in natural resources, our intellect and ingenuity, our communal mindedness... all of these are Divine gifts we've used for good, but also for ill. Nuclear technology for energy, but also the atom bomb. Scientific knowledge for vaccines, but also biological weapons. Social media for charitable “crowd-sourcing,” but also for incitement of violence. Armies for helping flood and earthquake victims, but also for crushing peaceful protest and invading democracies. No wonder we can't seem to shake off the chains of 'status quo.' Like the distorted alef bet, all the letters are there for us. The gift has been given. But what we make of it, crown or shackle, is up to us, and because we are human—flawed and confounded—we always land up in lament.

I've often wondered how the sermon that contained this midrash concluded. Even the scholars don't know, because the passage that follows the parable is missing!ⁱⁱⁱ But we do know that ancient sermons always ended on a hopeful note. That was, and remains, the tradition. So how were the letters of *this* preacher's lament rearranged in the end, to help the people see a way forward? To motivate them to go on putting one foot in front of the other, waking up each morning, and bringing children into the world? The problem the ancient preacher raised remains unsolved, and all we can do is search Judaism's treasure trove of legends for another that might provide direction. I've made this my task in the weeks since Tisha b'Av.

I began with the prophet Isaiah, who composed the haftarah passages we read in shul each Shabbat between Tisha b'Av and today. Isaiah's words are a response to the despair of Tisha b'Av, each week ushering us toward Rosh Hashanah—our celebration of the world's birth. This spiritual journey, from lament to renewal, is also depicted in a midrash where Isaiah counters every alphabetical verse from Lamentations with a statement of hope for the future! Lamentations says

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Jerusalem weeps; Isaiah responds that God will grant her grace. Lamentations says her people are in exile; Isaiah responds, God will gather up the dispersed. Lamentations says God is righteous and we've disobeyed; Isaiah says the people are righteous too.^{iv} Isaiah's message is simple: *Don't give up. There's good in us and good in our future. Have hope that things can change.* It may seem naïve, but haven't we seen it happen? Could those suffering under murderous regimes in war-torn Germany have imagined an Angela Merkel? Could those who suffered the Spanish Flu a century ago have imagined a vaccine for the next pandemic? Our world isn't perfect, but if we give up on using our strengths for good, we'll be left with a world that has no good in it at all. Were Isaiah to conclude the preacher's sermon, he would insist we continue imagining a better future, reconstructing our Alphabet of Hope each year at this season.

And what if the world's problems feel so complex that we no longer know what to hope for? Then, says another legend, we turn to prayer. *This* legend tells of a simple shepherd who couldn't read and didn't know any of the prayers. All he knew were the letters of the Hebrew alef-bet and that he desperately *wanted* to pray. So he recited the letters one by one, turned to heaven, and cried: *Dear God, I don't know what to pray. Please take my letters, and arrange them into the right words.* And with this, his prayer was accepted in heaven.^v Were the shepherd to conclude the sermon, he'd advise: We may not know how to solve the world's problems, but we must still incline our hearts toward good, and toward God.

We mustn't stop at hope and prayer, of course. Ours is also an activist tradition that teaches us to *pursue* justice and peace,^{vi} not just hope and pray for it; to till and tend the earth, not just pray for rain and hope it bears fruit. As I searched through more alphabet-themed midrashim, I came across the Talmud's teaching that each person is commanded to inscribe a letter in the Torah scroll. Later sages interpreted this command less literally, including medieval Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Paquda, who said our "*days are like scrolls; [we should] write on them what [we] want to be remembered.*" Were Rabbeinu Bachya to conclude the rabbi's sermon today, he'd charge us: *Take an active role. Take up your pen, and write a letter... to your MP. Sign a petition. Write a check to a charity of your choosing. Everything you do has consequence, so do what future generations will thank you for.*

Those generations themselves are sometimes given a voice in the midrashim. The Talmud tells the story of a remarkable day in the study hall, when the youngest children began teaching their teachers why the letters of the alef bet are shaped as they are. The *kuf* stands for the *Kadosh*—God, they said. And its opening faces the next letter *resh*, because the *re'sha'im*—those who have sinned—can still enter the world to come if they repent. The children noted that in the Torah scroll, this *kuf* was often written with a crown on top, *facing* the *resh*. They said this means that if transgressors atone for their wrongs, God will tie a crown on their heads to match God's own.^{vii} So how might the children conclude our sermon? Perhaps they'd say *Yeah, you messed up the gift that could have been ours—a beautiful world, now full of suffering. But keep trying to right your wrongs and maybe God will turn that shackle of Lamentation back into a golden crown. You have no right to give up on this world, they'd cry, because we have no choice but to live in it.*

We may be disheartened at what's become of the world under our human care. But lament is not the only response. We can hope, pray, and take action. We can keep putting good back into the world. We can put our trust in the next generation, letting them teach us and lead the way forward. And we can come here each Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, and recommit

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ourselves to restoring the Divine gift. We have no right to give up on the world that our children have no choice but to dwell in.

So what's your letter in our Alphabet of Hope for 5783, and what can you do to bring that hope about? Is it A for Aboriginal rights? Express your support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart at UluruStatement.org. Is it C for Climate Action? Get involved with the Sydney Alliance's Jewish Sustainability Initiative. Is it H for Health and Healing? Make and deliver a meal for someone in need, join our Care Team and help us reach out to those who can no longer come to shul. Is it S for Safety? Donate an old mobile phone to your nearest women's shelter. Focus on your own small corner of the world, and letter by letter, link by link, let's turn the chain back into gold.

The preacher's sermon only ends in Lamentation if we abandon the Divine gift. So let's renew our pledge to find a better way forward. "Our sins are an alphabet of woe," says the machzor. But "though your sins be like scarlet, they can turn snow-white," counters the prophet Isaiah, ever the believer in Divine alchemy. What was once a lament can become a crown of blessing, in this season of renewal. And haven't we seen it happen? God has gathered the dispersed. Lonely no more, the Temple is now filled with people, her roads with festival pilgrims. Her gates are open. And what a blessing it is to see you. *Shana tova*.

ⁱ Lamentations 1

ⁱⁱ *Midrash Pesikta Rabbati* 29/30:2, transl. Braude

ⁱⁱⁱ See Braude – the passage is incomplete

^{iv} *Midrash Eicha Rabbah* 1:23

^v <https://outorah.org/p/333/> and elsewhere

^{vi} *Tzedek Tzedek tirdof* – “Justice, justice you shall pursue” in Deuteronomy 16:20

^{vii} *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 104a