

How Lamenting Can Help Us:  
*A Devar Torah on Parashat Devarim and Tish'ah B'Av*  
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I normally avoid speaking about sad or difficult topics on Shabbat, as Shabbat is a time for joy and rest. However, this is my main opportunity to speak to you about *Tish'ah B'Av* - the most important day of communal mourning in the Jewish calendar, on which we recall various disasters that befell the Jewish People around this time, including the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. The end of Shabbat tonight will mark the beginning of *Tish'ah B'Av*, and the world seems to be setting the mood all too willingly.

Violence and persecution around the world continue to force refugees to flee their homes. The 9th of Av reminds us strikingly of the global refugee crisis. As Rabbi David Seidenberg says, “the observances of *Tish'ah 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'ah B'Av* is not primarily about the Temple – the rabbis of the Talmud figured out how to live without the Temple long ago. Rather, *Tish'ah 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, [and] to confront” difficult realities.

So what can we do when the world that we love causes us to feel sad, angry, or afraid?  
How might we handle the invitation of *Tish'ah B'Av* to not only to face but to share in, to

attempt to experience, the suffering in our world? When we we experience grief, we must lament.

In his book *Risking Truth*, Bible scholar Scott A. Ellington says that “prayers of lament arise from experience of loss” of any kind. The Biblical Book of Lamentations contains 5 chapters of lament - expressions and descriptions of pain and suffering.

The reading of *Eikhah*, the Book of Lamentations, is one of the central observances of 9th of Av. Traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah, who is believed to have witnessed the destruction of the First Temple, the Book of Lamentations describes, sometimes in graphic detail, the terrible things that happened to the People of Israel during the destruction of Jerusalem. Overall, it is a grim piece of literature. But it also depicts a way that we can journey through suffering and grief and eventually back towards hope. And that is to name and witness our painful experiences, rather than hiding behind them in anger or hate.

This week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Devarim*, might not seem connected to the Book of Lamentations. Both this Torah portion and all of *Sefer Devarim*, the Book of Deuteronomy, is, in effect, one long farewell speech from Moses, in which he shares his version of the story of the Israelite people and their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. One *midrash* (*Eikhah Rabbah* 1:1) notes a connection between *Parashat Devarim* and Lamentations. The Book of Lamentations is called “*Eikhah*” in Hebrew because that is the opening word of the book. The *midrash* notes that there are three people in the Bible who used the word ‘*eikhah*’: Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Let’s focus on Moses. In recounting the story of their journey through the desert to the new generation of Israelites, Moses describes how he said to a previous generation of Israelites (Deuteronomy 1:12), ‘How (*eikhah*) can I carry alone the trouble of you, and the

burden, and the bickering!” The Book of Lamentations begins similarly: “*Eikhah* - how the city, once full of people, sits alone!” Both open with an expression of suffering and aloneness. But the opening of the Book of Lamentations also notes that the city of Jerusalem was once “full of people.” It recollects a better time that lives in our memory. As Scott A. Ellington says, “our memories bring context and significance to the [otherwise] ‘meaningless moments’ of suffering, isolation, and loss that we encounter in our lives. Lament is both anchored and energized by the memory of wholeness and belonging.” In this week’s Torah portion, Moses, too, is remembering and speaking about his experiences. Perhaps the entire book of *Devarim* is Moses’s lament.

The Book of Lamentations rightly diagnoses the fundamental problem as a crisis of relationship and trust. In the case of both the Biblical Book of Lamentations and the Book of Deuteronomy, these crises of relationship are with God. Bracketing our relationships with God, or the lack thereof, we must recognize the crises in relationships that we have today. Our relationships with our politicians, our fellow citizens, our fellow residents who might not be citizens, our fellow Jews in America and in Israel, our fellow human beings around the world, and even our planet are all, on some level, in crisis. The first step to healing, however, is not in approaching others and taking action, but in naming this reality ourselves, on our own terms, and allowing ourselves to experience the pain of acknowledging this reality. We must boldly declare that everything is not all right. Like Jeremiah in the Book of Lamentations, we must offer an honest and impassioned expression of the experience of the hiddenness of goodness in the midst of chaos. In order to grieve truly and fully, we must recognize and name our lack of security and loss of confidence. As Ellington says: “in order to lament, one must first turn loose of illusory certainty.” Acknowledging what is wrong is painful and hard and scary because we don't know

what will happen. And we don't want to admit that things are bad, because we can pretend that things are fine.

But the purpose of naming our grief is not only to cause ourselves pain. Ellington reminds us that lament “is also an act of hope. It will not accept as final the mere testimony of the eyes and ears. It refuses to answer the silence of [the world] in kind. ... While lament may explore dark places and journey to extreme frontiers in” our relationships, “by its very nature it refuses to step back from that relationship with silence. ... Ultimately, while the prayer of lament involves a degree of risk, to remain silent in the face of” the silence of others “is to accept and embrace the certainty of hopelessness.”

If we do not grieve, our pain will consume us in the forms of fear, anger, and hate. But if we do lament, we just might find strength. As author, researcher, and social worker Brene Brown says: “Courage is forged in pain, but not in all pain. Pain that is denied or ignored becomes fear or hate.” Indeed, as James Baldwin said: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.” We must name our pain, lest it turn into fear, anger, and hate.

Ellington teaches us that “lament allows us to resume [our] journey ... in the midst of profound loss and divine silence.” Like Moses and Jeremiah, when we feel pain, when we experience loss, when we suffer, and even when we are just feeling sad, we must allow ourselves to lament, so that we can continue our journeys towards healing and wholeness in our relationships with each other and with the entire world. *Shabbat shalom.*