LOSS AND LONGING IN THE ZOHARIC READING OF *EICHAH*

PERDA E DESEJO DE RETORNO NA LEITURA ZOHÁRICA DO *EICHAH*

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Abstract: This essay proposes a close analysis of the introduction to the Kabbalist text known as Midrash ha-Ne'lam al Eichah, an interpretation of the biblical book of Lamentations that integrates the medieval text of the Sefer ha-Zohar. While the biblical version centers on the destruction of the First Temple in 587–586 BCE, the medieval narrative of the Midrash ha-Ne'lam opens with an anachronistic argument between the two Jewish communities historically formed with the fall of the First Temple: one in Babylon, the symbol of the Jewish diaspora, and the other in Jerusalem, the geographical-spiritual backbone of the Jewish people. Collapsing the destruction of the First Temple with the subsequent destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Midrash ha-Ne'lam intersperses literal and figurative meaning to craft a cosmic narrative of loss and longing which runs parallel to the original biblical account. By focusing on the argument between the Babylonian and Jewish communities, the present article probes into a tension that structures the Jewish condition in the diaspora: the state of spiritual homelessness induced by the combination of material distance from, and spiritual attachment to, one's sacred homeland. The Midrash ha-Ne'lam paints the "competition" for the right to mourn the loss of the Temple as a sort of family argument between those who stayed in the destroyed homeland and those who have strayed from it many generations before, a tension that reverberates to this day in the inner divide between Israeli and diaspora Jews.
Keywords: Judaism. Kabbalah. Zohar. Diaspora. Medieval mysticism.

Resumo: Este ensaio propõe uma análise da introdução do texto Cabalista conhecido como *Midrash ha-Ne'lam al Eichah,* uma interpretação do livro bíblico das Lamentações que compõe o texto medieval do *Sefer ha-Zohar*. Enquanto a versão bíblica foca na destruição do Primeiro Templo em 587–586 AEC, a narrativa medieval do *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* começa com uma disputa anacrônica entre duas comunidades judaicas formadas historicamente com a queda do Primeiro Templo: uma na Babilônia, o símbolo da diáspora judaica, e a outra em Jerusalém, o centro geográfico-espiritual do povo judeu. Colapsando a destruição do Primeiro Templo com a subsequente destruição do Segundo Templo em 70 EC, o *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* entremeia literalidade e figuração para construir uma narrativa cósmica sobre perda e desejo de retorno que corre em paralelo com o relato bíblico original. Ao focar na discussão entre as comunidades da Babilônia e de Jerusalém, o presente artigo examina uma tensão estruturante da condição judaica na diáspora: o estado de *desamparo espiritual* induzido pela combinação entre a distância material da Terra Sagrada e a ligação espiritual com ela. O *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* descreve a "competição" pelo direito de lamentar a perda do Templo como uma espécie de discussão de família entre aqueles que ficaram na terra destruída e aqueles que se afastaram dela há muitas gerações, tensão esta que reverbera até hoje na divisão interna entre judeus israelenses e da diáspora.
Palavras-chave: Judaísmo. Cabala. Zohar. Diáspora. Misticismo medieval.

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The *Midrash ha-Ne'lam al Eichah* ("Hidden Midrash on Lamentations") opens with a dispute between the "residents of Babylon" and the "residents of the Holy Land" for the right to moan the destruction of the Second Temple.[1] In line with other works in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("Book of Splendor"), a core text of Iberian Kabbalah dating back to the early 13th-century writings of Moses de León, this medieval reading of the biblical text seeps with the substance of the intradivine drama that occupies a special place in Kabbalist theosophical mythology. In the Pritzker edition of the *Zohar*, "residents" stands in for the Hebrew *bnei,* which literally means "children" or "sons". By retaining the familial undertones of the story in a latent state, the opening lines of this translation of the Hidden Midrash suggest that the text with which we are dealing consists of layers upon layers of concealed meaning. A number of relations might be adduced if we read "residents" and "children" interchangeably throughout the text, and the process by which these terms are made equivalent itself deserves a closer look.

This initial tension is but one of those that I intend to delineate in this literary rendering of some themes in the framing narrative of the *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* on Lamentations. The focus of my specific efforts here will be on one particular manifestation of longing—a dominant motif throughout the opening paragraphs of the midrash—which is that of longing for the event of *homecoming*. In this sense, I will touch on some of the other manifestations of the same feeling but will largely approach them through the aforementioned lens. What kind of idea of home does the passage conjure up? What does the hope of return consist of, and how does distance from home as well as the accompanying longing that trails after it interact with the myth of the separation of the Shekhinah (the tenth sefirah Malkut)[2] from the blessed Holy One (the sixth sefirah Tiferet)—a break in the divine that directly affects the relationship of these entities to the children of Israel?

I will divide this essay into different sections, each structured around a particular theme that called my attention in my reading of the passage. As the mode of the text is one of *association*, the tensions, connections, contrasts and contradictions that I investigate in each section flow across different sections—whose topics are somewhat arbitrarily determined—and recur in, or overlap with, those explored in other parts of my analysis. My goal here is to outline each topic in the likeness of a carp swimming downriver—discernible in the stream of the text as, ever elusive, it flows freely past our feet, its presence a mysterious glimmer underwater.

Children and residents

In the original text, *Bnei Bavel,* which literally means "children of Babylon", takes advantage of the commonplace metaphor used to refer to the natives of a nation or land as that place's children. Interestingly, the double entendre arises from a parallelism not between nativity and filiation, but rather between filiation and *residency*. As opposed to nativity, residency in a place conveys the idea of a more circumscribed kind of belonging, one bound by

[1] A collection of poetic laments in *Ketuvim* centered on the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of Holy Temple.

[2] The *sefirot* are ten divine attributes, or channels of divine manifestation in the Created world, that arrange themselves as a system. First mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Formation"), an ancient precursor to different strains of medieval Kabbalah, the sefirotic system that underpins the 13th-century literature of the *Zohar* is synthesized in the 16th -century writings of Moses Cordovero. The reformulation of the sefirotic system by Cordovero's contemporary, Isaac Luria, gives rise to a second major interpretation of this system, which is typically contrasted with the Zoharic and Cordoveran views. Within these sefirotic systems, the tenth sefirah—"Malkut" which literally means "Kingdom"—is associated with the mythological figure of the "Shekhinah" and stands for the feminine manifestation of God's presence in the world. Her companion, the sixth sefirah—"Tiferet", translated as "Splendor"—, is known in Zoharic mythology as "the blessed Holy One" and corresponds to the core masculine aspect of the biblical God.

time and limited by external circumstance. In short, the main distinction between these two criteria corresponds to different kinds of belonging. While it seems correct to conclude that the native of Babylon is *from* Babylon, one could only go so far as to say that a resident of the same nation is *in* Babylon for a period, and only in that capacity bears a connection to it. The very act of mourning the loss of Jerusalem indicates the troubled nature of this community's relationship to their home: there is a dissociation between the lost home of the *Bnei Bavel* in Jerusalem and their defining place of abode in Babylon. The qualified sense of *belonging* that provisionally ties the Babylonian Jews to diasporic land legitimates this community's mournful *longing* for their spiritual home in Jerusalem. Longing and belonging are thus revealed as two complementary facets of the diasporic identity forged by the *Bnei Bavel*, which is marked by their separation from a spiritual mother (the Shekhinah) and a material mother (Jerusalem, their "motherland").

The translated text's reference to the members of the different Jewish communities—Babylon and Jerusalem—as *residents* rather than natives, although those communities had, at that point in history, already been established in those lands for generations, opens up interesting, albeit perhaps unintended, interpretations regarding the connection of those communities to the lands they were settled in, as well as to one another. First off, no sense of rootedness goes so deep as to ensure protection against uprooting; secondly, the tension existent between the two communities seems to be based more on historical constraints than on any sort of essential distinction. The "missive" communication that makes evident the clash between the two communities is befitting of both the exegetical portion and the framing narrative of *Midrash ha-Ne'lam al Eichah*, the latter being precisely about the broken communication that ensues between two long-distanced parts of the same entity. In a way, the Shekhinah and the blessed Holy One's mutual incompleteness is formally materialized in the competing correspondences exchanged between one community and the other.

Just as the rendering "residents" distances both communities from their respective lands, the more literal reading—at once a conventional metaphor and a mythological approach—that describes the correspondents as the "children" of Babylon and the Holy Land brings each of these communities closer to the lands with which, as the text points out, they bear filial ties. Put differently, as one reading of the term relativizes (or at least makes arbitrary) the two communities' ties to their respective lands while bringing them closer together, the alternative reading grounds each to the lands from which they write, pitting them against each other and justifying the competitive tone that the text takes on. Interestingly enough, the same fraternal competition that appears as a common trope in stories of family drama is only made more intense by a reading that frames each group as the children of a different land, although the reason for the debate is their competing claims to the same filiation. In this sense, the very beginning of the *Midrash* contains a fine tension between the "House of our God" (298), elsewhere referred to as "Her household" (300)—a shared spiritual space to which both communities feel they have a claim, in which both feel they belong—and the concept of the "homeland", which in itself is a fragile designation for the physical spaces from which each community is writing.

Seeking home, seeking gods

The Babylonian Jewish community makes its argument:

> Eulogizing the destruction of the House of our God befits us since we have been scattered among the nations, like idol-worshipers. We should be the ones

> to begin the lament, and to expound the alphabetic acrostic sent by the Master of the Universe, bemoaning the destruction of His House (298).

In this long-distance argument, each of the communities lays down its claim to the interpretation of Lamentations, an activity that itself consists, on the one hand, of directing the affective-symbolic event of lamentation and, on the other, of the theosophico-mythical interpretation of the Book of Lamentations. In their claim for the worthiness of their engagement with this enterprise, the Babylonian community's train of thought is straightforward: the pain that comes from having been "scattered among nations, like idol-worshipers" seems compatible with the task of bemoaning the destruction of the Temple.

First and foremost, let us examine the comparison drawn by the Babylonian community. Their experience of the diaspora is likened to idol worshipping. The crux of the comparison lies in this community's removal from the Holy Land. Distance from the "House of our God", which translates as a form of religious homelessness, is at the root of the sense of godlessness that spurs a condition as deplorable as idolatry—a misguided search for God.[3] The negative parallel between homelessness and perceived godlessness implies a correspondence between home and God, both of which the Babylonian Jews are deprived of. More than a sin, this abject state comes across as a sign of despair—a last resource that leaves those detached from God more deserving of pity than punishment. Although God is still referenced as "our God", a sense of distance is implicit in that very reference, as the Temple is referred to first as "House of our God", and later as "His House", with no mention within the text to the Babylonian Jews' belonging to that House. All in all, the claim is to the "eulogizing" or "bemoaning" of the *destruction* of God's House rather to the House itself, and it is their being away from that space that ultimately guarantees their contender's victory.

Finally, the destruction of the Temple shakes the foundations of the household that shelters not only each individual member of the community—the Temple being akin to the private abode of each Jew—but also God Himself, together with the entire community of believers. If God is described as "Master of the Universe" as much as master of the house, then destruction of His earthly home would certainly destabilize its heavenly correspondent. Hence, the destitution of the people of Israel is so complete that it does not seem excessive to assume that the conundrum posed by the destruction of the Temple bears the dimensions of *cosmic homelessness*.

Orphans vs. runaway slaves, exile vs. diaspora

The destruction of the sacred House would in a way impact the Babylonian community more than it would the Jerusalem one. The very fact the members of this community use distance as a reason for their grief—being away from it and dispersed from one another—could be said to undermine their claim.

> It befits you to be scattered among the nations and to be outside the Holy Land. It befits you to weep for yourselves, for the very fiber of your being, for you abandoned light for darkness, like a slave leaving the house of his master. As

[3] This idea is made even clearer in a passage in the Babylonian Talmud: "Whoever lives in the land of Israel is like one who has a God; whoever lives outside the land of Israel is like one who has no God. This is as is said, *To give you the land of Canaan, to be your God* (Leviticus 25:38). Has one who does not live in the land no God! Actually, the verse comes to tell you that whoever lives outside the land may be regarded as one "who worships idols" (BT *Ketubot* 110b).

> for us, we should be the ones to weep and lament. To us the blessed Holy One sent a book of lamentations, for we are the children of the *Matronita* [Shekhinah], and we are the members of Her household. We know the glory of the Master of the Universe, thus it befits us to weep and interpret those acrostics. We are orphans, without Father or Mother! (298).

The actual destruction of their House—that is, of their religious center of gravity or organizing principle—happened much before, in the 6th century BCE, which marked the beginning of the Babylonian exile. Incidentally, the exile that demarcates the separation—and thus creation by means of division—of the two communities came precisely with the destruction of the First Temple, the original House of God. At the loss of that first house, the Jerusalem community accuses, the group that would come to establish the Babylonian community deserted the Holy Land "like a slave leaving the house of his master". The memory of that first "desertion" is then used as evidence to hold that group's successors accountable and remove from them the privilege of a first interpretation. They all lost a House, but while the first, like servants, left, the latter, in staying, not only confirmed their loyalty to the Land, but in a way revealed that they were the rightful children of the Master of the House—a sort of *retrospective becoming by means of confirming*.

This community's "abandonment" of God's abode thus precedes God's abandonment of it, manifested as the blessed Holy One's departure, and culminating in the defilement of the Shekhinah by the Sitra Ahra—Aramaic for the "Other Side", the demonic realm.[4] In this passage, a slave's desertion of her master's house is likened to abandonment of divine light for demonic darkness. From that, one might conclude that the attempt at freedom has diaspora as its punishment, and that what lies outside the master's domain—the otherness beyond the threshold of known territory—pertains to the realm of the demonic. Paradoxically, freedom as such would be borne out of subjects' sense of imprisonment and desire to escape but come at the price of perceived abandonment by God. As a Talmudic passage underscores, the difference between the child and the servant lies in the fact that the first submits to God's desire, whereas the latter resists, refuses and ultimately escapes it. [5]

At the core of the argument that the Jerusalem community puts forth is the implicit accusation that the Babylonian community's condition is better described as one of *diaspora* rather than *exile* per se. "Diaspora" derives from the Greek word *diaspeirein,* to scatter across, to disperse. Indeed, "scattered" is the precise word with which the Jerusalem Jews describe the state that they think *befits* their Babylonian counterparts. Alternative meanings to *spora* and *speirein*, to scatter, include "to sow", "to sprout", and "seed". Conversely, the near-synonym "exile" comes from the Latin *exul*, the word for "banished person". In other words, not only do these two translations of the Hebrew *galut*—which are often used interchangeably in relation to the Jewish experience of "homelessness" or foreignness—stem from different linguistic

[4] "Eikhah, Alas! She sits alone, the city once full of people (Lamentations 1:1). It is written: 'For it was a day of din and tumult and confusion to Adonai YHVH, My Lord God, of Hosts in the Valley of Vision, of battering down the wall, and of crying to the mountain' (Isaiah 22:5)" (303). The mystical reading offered by the Hidden Midrash explains these passages from *Ketuvim* and *Nevi'im* in terms of the struggle between the Shekhinah and the demonic realm—one of the main conflicts staged in the *Zohar*. In line with other Zoharic interpretations of biblical material—which employ the sefirotic system as a major conceptual and linguistic framework—the ending of the expression *Eichah*, "כה" (which is numerically associated with the 25 letters of the first line of the *Shema*), "She", "the city", "people" and "Valley of Vision" (Jerusalem) could all be read interchangeably with "Shekhinah". Similarly, "a day of din and tumult and confusion", "battering down" and "mountain" all represent the Sitra Ahra. The preposition "to" (insofar as it expresses directionality of impact and affect) and the terms "hosts" and "crying" are some of the core themes explored in this essay.

[5] "You are called both sons and servants. When you carry out the desires of the Omnipresent you are called 'sons', and when you do not carry out the desires of the Omnipresent, you are called 'servants'" (BT *Bava Batra* 10a).

origins; their original meanings belong to different semantic fields. While *exile* encloses a sense of uprootedness, *diaspora* points precisely towards its opposite—a sowing or sprouting that indicates the potential setting down of roots. In accusing the Babylonian Jews of self-banishment or, in a way, of bringing about their own condition of slavery, the Jerusalem Jews mark their experience off the Babylonians': if the destruction of the First Temple established the beginning of the Babylonian *diaspora*, the destruction of the Second Temple created the Jewish *exile* for the Jerusalem community. If the distinction between these conditions already denotes different rights to lamenting and interpreting, signifying different kinds of belonging to the Land, then it must also bear different implications for the Jewish right to return.

The kind of weeping that is permissible for the Babylonian Jews is self-contained. As the Jerusalem community puts it, they must cry "for the very fiber of [their] being". In one way, this statement means a *negation* of the Babylonians' *right* to lament anything other than their very being, such as the tragic loss of God's household—which would imply a connection to that household. In another, it places *affirmative* emphasis on the *need* to lament—not the loss of a home, but the loss (self-abandonment) of oneself to the forces of evil. In contrast, the Jerusalem Jews' belonging in the House of God grants them *knowledge* of the glory, which in turns allows them, as orphans, to reclaim the grief for something larger than themselves. In this sense, the loss of a Father or Mother is conditioned by their previous obeisance to God, which also ensured their salvation. "Legitimate" loss of one's home—the Temple—not only incurs in self-loss, but also requires not having lost oneself as its pre-condition. Hence, capture of the Shekhinah by the forces of the Sitra Ahra is already infused with hope, since those who suffer from Her demise have at least safeguarded their being, and thus their potential to save Her.

Walls and days

The Jerusalem Jews then go on to describe their pain in the face of the Temple's destruction:

> We cast our eyes upon the walls of our Mother's house, but it is destroyed, and we can't find Her—She who used to suckle us from Her soothing bosom, every day in those ancient days. She used to console us and speak to our hearts, like a mother to her son, as is said: *Like a man comforted by his mother...* (Isaiah 66:13) (299–300).[6]

In the midst of the ruins, they look up at the Temple's walls, its only remains. In this context, the "walls" signify the Lower Mother Shekhinah, and it is by this name that the Upper Mother—the third sefirah Binah—will inquire after Her Daughter (the Shekhinah) later in the text. The relationship between house and divine motherhood is overdetermined. According to one reading, the Jews cast their eyes at the Temple. This reading subdivides into two: in the first one, "Mother" is understood to be the Shekhinah, and the Temple is rendered as the Shekhinah's former place of abode, where She cannot be found anymore. In the second reading, if one reads Binah's later appearance as being hinted at in this passage, so that "Mother" is understood as Binah, then the master of the house is Binah, and when the Jews reminisce, "we can't find Her", they place themselves side by side with the Upper Mother in Her pursuit of the missing Daughter. Alternatively, the "Her" in "we can't find Her" does not refer to the object

[6] "*…so I will comfort you, and you shall find comfort in Jerusalem*" (300). Once more the community of Jerusalem identifies itself with the Holy Land and the Temple, which, too, is again associated with a mother in which a child finds her home.

of Binah's quest, but to Binah Herself. This offers us an inverted reading in which the Jews, as ravaged as the Shekhinah—the "walls" with whom they communicate through an understanding glance—align themselves, tied by their shared state of destruction, with the defiled Daughter in Her desperate search for nourishment. As the Shekhinah is banished together with Her people, and cohabits with them the experience of exile, this association seems consistent with Her relationship with Israel, which is one of interdependence and, above all, close identification.

This latter reading presents the Shekhinah as the walls of the Temple, and thus as a constitutive part of it. We circle back to the beginning of the passage, and "Shekhinah" is privileged over "Temple" as the primary signified for "the walls of our Mother's house". The people cast their eyes upon the Shekhinah, who could be both—and indeed *is* both, as all these readings are in fact simultaneous—Her own house, when She is looked at as the "Mother" of Her people and the text is read from their viewpoint, in relation to them, or Her own Mother's house. Indeed, the idea of the Daughter as the Mother's home, at first a seeming inversion, is nonetheless compatible with the experience of Motherly worry. The picture here is even more pitiful: the people of Israel (alongside Binah or not) look directly at the Shekhinah, but She, the house, is destroyed, and nowhere to be found in the eyes into which they are so miserably staring—She is not Herself. Even gloomier is the reading that presents the Shekhinah as Her own home, since not finding Herself in this case means lack of self-recognition. This is a rich picture of great trauma, and of a trauma eliciting emotions consistent with the ones being described here—dissociation, guilt, self-punishment, regret and, above all, deep sadness due to loss and lack.

We have held "walls" constant—its meaning arbitrarily designated as "Temple"— and performed readings of "Mother" as both the Shekhinah and Binah. Then, we took "walls" to signify the Shekhinah, designating "Mother" first as Binah—with the Shekhinah as Her house—and then as the Shekhinah, understood as an entity that resides within Her own Self. Another possible reading presents Binah as the house's—the Temple's—"walls", to the extent that Binah is Tiferet's heavenly home,[7] which has its *sacred* earthly correspondent in the Temple. This reading highlights Binah's role as both a Mother to the Shekhinah, and, by means of Her all-embracing Motherhood, a Mother to Israel. It also gives us a coherent picture of the subsequent childhood reminiscence ("She who used to suckle us from Her soothing bosom, every day in those *ancient days*") as being oriented towards a past that is further away—a past that belongs more to itself, the past, than to the person reminiscing. This past is the original past, as "ancient days" could be a name for the sefirah Kater, known as Atika Kadisha, the Holy Ancient One, the day that came before the six days of Creation (the six "middle" sefirot) that the blessed Holy One encapsulates. Here Keter, the day predating Creation, bears a special connection to the Shekhinah, the sacred day of rest—Shabbat—from which the six days of Creation withdraw. Binah, the Mother and Mother-of-the-Mother suckling Her people, is soothing them in Her bosom, which is set in—or equated with—"those ancient days".

More than a portrayal of the family, what we have here is a portrait of generational ties, as Atika Kadisha corresponds to the figure of the Grandfather in Kabbalistic mythology. As Grandfather, He is both Father to Binah, to the Shekhinah and to Israel, as well as counterpart for Imma Ila'ah, the Upper Mother Binah. It is telling that this intergenerational connection takes place at the point of the text in which suckling is mentioned, as the sefirotic flow that suckling represents is what nourishes, at once, text, Israel, and the multiple aspects of God. It

[7] "*But man is going to his everlasting house*" (335) signifies Tiferet's ("Man") ascension to Binah, his house and Mother. Ironically, it is Tiferet's retreat into the heights that leave His consort and sister vulnerable to the attacks of the forces of evil, symbolized by the snake. This signals to the function of the demonic in fraternal competition.

is, therefore, fitting to envision these nodal points of textual meaning as swellings of divine nurture which also work as an outward manifestation of hurt in the text.

The narrated experience of loss begins to resemble, more and more, the primordial experience of lack. If "loss" refers to something that cannot be re-attained, then "lack" denies the fact of having attained it in the first place. This distinction opens the way for messianic imagery and the concept of the "hope of return", one consistent with the untenable desire of the exiled: "hope" is a propulsion into the ever-imagined future; "return", a thrownness into the longed-for past. Two of Keter's names further highlight the temporal dimension of this passage, and of the intention it foreshadows: the Patient One is constantly *waiting*; in Him the primordial past is suspended, as is the future it awaits. On the other side of the equation, I Will Be (*Ehyeh*) forever *promises,* and it is this promise that fulfills the drive, and feeds into the raison d'être, of this unfulfilled expectation. Historical rupture takes on its full meaning, as the destruction of the Temple made possible by the departure or displacement of the days of creation and rest by "a day of din and tumult and confusion" (Isaiah 22:5) pinpoints a traumatic discontinuation of time. In other words, a rip in the somewhat-unified tradition of the Jerusalem community accompanies an increased awareness of the past.

> Now, our eyes dart about in every direction. The site of our Mother's dwelling is in upheaval—destroyed. O, let us bang our heads against the walls of Her house and Her dwelling. Who will comfort us? Who will speak to our hearts and protect us before the King? (301).

Their eyes' detachment from the solidity of the still-standing wall and confused roaming over the ruins are a metonym for the dauting moment the Jerusalem Jews were about to enter. To have one's "eyes dart about in every direction" means to not know where to look—where to look for God, for solace, for the consolation found in a Mother's "soothing bosom". Therein also lies the danger of moving towards the north, where the demonic throne is to be found. As the passage indicates, this confusion of the eyes corresponds to a confusion of the heart not being spoken to.

This paragraph adds to the connotations that "walls" had accumulated in the preceding one. The walls of the site of the Mother's dwelling are what remain of the house. Interestingly, one would expect the outermost part of the house to be the first one to go down under the attack by the forces of the demonic. The walls seem to serve two main goals: setting the limits of the domain over which God exerts Her power and protecting this territory. Walls, fence, and limits function interchangeably here. As legal limits surrounding the commandments, they determine what moral and religious practices lie within God's territory and which belong to the demonic realm.[8] This seemingly more abstract meaning gives way to its mythical correlate, one expressed as a geopolitical boundary rather than a "merely" legal one. The mythological strain of the Kabbalistic text undoes metaphor as it evidences the precariousness of the literal-figurative divide. It becomes clear from this reading that geopolitical limits are as physical as they are political, and that legal boundaries bear both a political character and material consequences.

Logically, these "walls" or "fences" were erected at those ambiguous spaces "where people are likely to be lax in observance" (305). Because the borderland between the divine and the demonic is the most vulnerable in the Universe, it is precisely there that the serpent will lurk

[8] "The rabbis erected "fences", legal stringencies designed to protect the inner core of the commandment, but the serpent loiters near those fences—where people are likely to be lax in observance—and pounces when they slacken. By pounding the *Shekhinah* down to the ground, the serpent foists onto Her the curse that was laid upon it (305).

and wait to bite those who err. The walls—the last stronghold of the collapsing house—seem to represent the Shekhinah as much as they represent Her people. The walls around Her, which both protect and sustain Her dwelling place, are at once the strongest and most vulnerable point of entry keeping the serpent from the sefirotic structure—hence the ambivalent role they play in the tragedy of the Temple's destruction. Interestingly, the walls do not seem to protect divine structure from the evil outside. *Kohelet* 10:8 tells us that "*He who breaches a wall—a snake will bite him*, which provides the prudent warning that when dismantling a stone wall, one should be cautious—for its cavities may well conceal a snake's lair" (306, my emphasis).[9] The snake punishes those that do what it did with the very punishment it received from God for its evil deed: it punishes the Shekhinah by bringing Her down to the ground, and the ones it bites and kills are those who "make breaches in fences"—that is, break divine law. The serpent is a repeater; all it seems to do is find breaches for the contradictions inherent to the divine drama to leak through. The dynamic interaction between the venom of the serpent's bite and the sefirotic fluid animates all levels of existence, from lowest to highest.

Learning and teaching a language

The text continues to describe the divine drama, in which the Mother Shekhinah protects Her children from their Father's unmeasured judgment. Given that the exceeding gushing of Gevurah (the fifth sefirah) plays an important part in the creation of the Sitra Ahra, the inflated strikes that the King Tiferet inflicts as a punishment for His subjects'—His children's—sins are but a compulsive repetition containing, *in potentia*, the tragedy that ensued upon His retreat.

> When we used to sin before our Father and the lash would shoot up to strike us, She would stand in front of us and receive the flogging from the King, protecting us. This is as is said: *But he was crushed for or sins, wounded for our iniquities* (Isaiah 53:5). But now, we have no Mother! Woe unto us! Woe unto you, afterward! It befits us to weep, it befits us to wail. If befits us to explain these words of bitterness, to teach those experts in ululation the language of lamentation (301).

In describing the Shekhinah's willingness to dive into the eye of the storm—from which She would emerge not only dignified and noble, but also whole—the Jerusalem Jews shrewdly place *themselves* at the center stage of this cosmic drama, noting their central role in the divine family drama.[10] The Shekhinah is punished "in their place", in both meanings of the phrase: She is punished *instead* of them, for their sake and protection, and She is also punished *where they are.* Because *they were there* and witnessed Her suffering, they learned not only *from* Her suffering, but also *how* to suffer. Being physically there and seeing their Mother's pain in a way *taught* them how to suffer in a manner compatible with Her own. Pain thus seems to be vicariously transmitted and witnessing takes on a pedagogic value in this process. It is by means of their presence that the Jerusalem Jews learn the proper language of lamentation, the language in which they will be able to adequately weep and wail for the loss of the Temple.

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[9] "Rabbi Shemu'el son of Nahman said, 'The serpent was asked, *Why are you generally to be found among fences?* He replied, *Because I made a breach in the fence of the world*.' Rabbi Shim'on son of Yohai taught: The serpent was the first to make a breach in the world's fence, and so he has become the executioner of all who make breaches in fences'" (Vayiqra Rabbah 26:2, Vilna).

[10] "Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our pains that he endured—though we considered him plagued, stricken by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our sins, crushed for our iniquities; he bore the chastisement that made us whole and by his bruises we were healed" (Isaiah 53:4–5).

There is something to be said about learning the "right" language to mourn and the means for attaining such knowledge. For one thing, the language of one's reaction must resonate with the language of the action that is taken in and interpreted. Indeed, claims to the ability to provide a *befitting* interpretation are often bound to the assertion that one is *familiar* with the material at hand. In short, the underlying contention here is that one needs to listen before speaking and watch before explaining; the "bitterness" of the words needs to be tasted before it can be expounded.

Progressive personification and liminal space

At this point, the wandering subjects describe the exhausting search routine they embark on daily, which proceeds over a series of ritualized steps. At each familiar piece of furniture they approach in Her chambers, a question is posed. However, the recipient of the question changes as the passage—and the night—goes by:

> Every day we approach Mother's bed, but we do not find Her there. We ask after Her—no one heeds us. We ask after Her bed—overturned. We ask after Her throne—collapsed. We ask Her palaces—they swear they know nothing of Her whereabouts. We ask the dust—no footprints there.
>
> We ask the rooftop, and the rooftop replies that She had been sitting there weeping and wailing. But She had trudged on, sobbing, shrieking grievously for us from rooftop to rooftop. This is as is written: *What has happened to you now, that you have gone, all of you, up on the roofs?* (Isaiah 22:1) We ask of the pathways and boulevards, and they all reply that they head an agonizing sound of weeping, weeping for Her children, but they know not where She disappeared (302).

First they ask after Her bed, then they ask after Her throne, both of which are reduced to shreds of Her presence—mere markers of Her absence. Suddenly, they cease to "ask after" and begin instead to address the questions to the objects directly: they ask Her palaces, which reply that they know nothing of Her. They ask the dust, to which it replies with a dearth of signs. The palaces reply verbally, whereas the dust makes use of another means of answering. Interestingly, that with which it replaces a verbal answer is not a symbol, but a different kind of sign—an index. Footprints differ from mere symbols in that they *are* the actual imprints of the thing they signify. They are *left behind* in the process of becoming a form of, and an instrument for, representation. In short, they are part and parcel of the story they tell, and so they *tell* that which they effectively *are*. In this sense, they are metonymic of several elements that I deem essential to this story, such as the Temple, tradition, human action in relation to divine happening, and writing.

The next to be pressed for answers are the rooftops, which are the balconies "from which people leapt to their deaths during the horrors of Jerusalem's destruction. The rooftop is also one of the stages that the Shekhinah mounts as She leaves Jerusalem" (302). The rooftops function as a liminal space between ascension and descent. Interestingly, although rooftops seem to represent an intermediate level between Earth and Heaven, as it is the uppermost plane of the terrestrial, it is from there that the Shekhinah, who is ensnared by the demonic Samael, leaves Jerusalem and enters the Other Side. The Shekhinah's contradictory departure mimics that of those who kill themselves at the sight of their home's violent destruction: they leap *down* into their deaths, but in dying, their soul is released into the divine home hidden *above*.

Transmission through space and time

Weeping and mourning are animating activities in that they help, quite literally, keep the memory of the Temple alive.

> It befits us to weep, it befits us to mourn. O, let us kiss the walls of Her palace, sobbing bitterly! We shall be the ones who begin the wailing—we see this every day! O, let us weep constantly, and never forget the bitterness of our tears!" (302).

In one sense, the memory of the Temple is kept alive in the minds and stories of those "weeping constantly". Their incessant weeping is an effluent telling that ensures that they never forget the bitter taste of the tale being told. To sob and weep bitterly is to never stop telling, but in such a way that the sobbing and the weeping themselves produce the story that is reproduced. That might just be the reason why the framing narrative for the interpretation of Lamentations is a competition to decide who is more fitting to weep and mourn: those who weep are those who get to tell the story, and a befitting weeping is nothing but a suitable recreation of the memory of the mythical event. Within the framework of mythical thinking, tale, ritual, and religious belief are all nourished from the same substance, which is human activity and expression. Crying, wailing, and kissing the walls of the devastated palace are affective re-actions that, more than sustain the memory of the Temple, endow it with an "aliveness" of its own: the Temple is not just remembered; it remembers—it remembers us as much as we remember it. And, for all we know, the path of mutual reminiscence might conceal the way back home.

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