

# **Tisha Be'ab Reader**

**Torah Readings,  
The Book of Ekha,  
Psalm 137 and Kinot**

**with Laws and Commentaries**

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## **Tisha Be'ab Reader**

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# Halakhot of Tisha Be'ab

## I. Overview

The fast of the Ninth of Ab, referred to by the prophet Zechariah, was established as a national mourning day commemorating destruction of the Bet Hamiqdash, sacked on that day by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. The Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:6) relates that four other national calamities occurred in various years on this day: the Almighty's decree that the 'Generation of the Wilderness' be denied entry to the Land of Israel because of the transgression associated with the spies; destruction of the Second Temple (by the Romans in 70 C.E.); capture of the great city Bethar (the last stronghold of Bar Kokhba in the revolution he led, 7 miles southwest of Jerusalem, by the Romans in 135 C.E.); and Jerusalem was ploughed like a field (see Jer. 26:18).

The full degree of mourning is limited to Tisha B'ab day itself. Secondary rituals beginning prior to the fast day were established in the course of time which are increased in intensity as the day approaches.

The ultimate purpose of the fast days is to foster repentance and increase the national commitment to Torah and misvot. The giving of charity to the needy is essential on these days.

## II. The Three Weeks

The three weeks beginning with the 17th of Tammuz through the 9th of Ab have often been times of adversity for the Jewish People. However, the sages did not establish formal restrictions until Rosh Hodesh Ab, as they did not wish to add to the nation's burden. We have been advised to be more cautious than usual with potentially dangerous situations during these days of dejection.

It is a Sephardic custom to refrain from eating ‘new’ fruit during the three weeks so as to avoid reciting ‘sheheheyanu.’ This berakha is a joyful thanksgiving expression and it is difficult to mention ‘lazeman hazeh’ with a happy heart during these days. We also desist from wearing new clothing during the three weeks. However, at a b’rit milah ‘sheheheyanu’ is recited. On Shabbat, it is permitted to partake of ‘new’ fruit and recite ‘sheheheyanu’ and wear new clothing.

Some Sephardic communities, as do all Ashkenazic communities, desist from having weddings and musical functions for the three weeks. Most Sephardic communities, following Shulhan Arukh, desist for nine days only, beginning Rosh Hodesh Ab. For many decades, however, the Brooklyn Syrian community has not held weddings during the three weeks.

### **III. The Nine Days**

Beginning Rosh Hodesh Ab we refrain from optional festive occasions and reduce joyful pursuits. This includes purchases of luxuries, new clothing and wedding accoutrements. If a wedding is shortly after Tisha B’ab and time is of the essence, necessary shopping is permitted. We refrain from home decorating during these days.

We refrain from meat, including chicken, and wine during these days. Out of respect for Rosh Hodesh, the Syrian community begins these latter stringencies from the second of the month.

Meat and wine are permitted on Shabbat during the nine days as well as at a se’udat misvah, such as a b’rit milah or siyum masekhta (concluding study of a Talmudic tractate). Habdala wine is permitted.

One may have meat during these days if required for health purposes such as may be the case with an anemic person, a nursing or pregnant woman or one who gave birth within thirty days.

The Syrian community's custom has been to eat meat leftovers from Shabbat during the nine days providing that one did not purposely cook extra for this purpose. Most other Sephardic communities are strict on this. Many authorities hold that with the advent of efficient freezers it is now proper to be strict.

#### **IV. The Week During Which Tisha B'ab Occurs**

After the Shabbat before Tisha B'ab through Tisha B'ab itself is the 'Week of Tisha B'ab.' If Tisha B'ab falls on a Sunday or on Shabbat - in which case the fast is pushed to Sunday - there is no 'Week of.'

During the 'Week of,' the following are prohibited:

- a) Washing the whole body with hot or warm water. Showering or bathing in cold water is permitted. A little warm water may be mixed in to break the chill.
- b) Wearing fresh clothes. It is advisable to accumulate slightly worn garments from before the 'Week of' to change into. Something worn a half-hour is no longer 'fresh.'
- c) Washing clothing even to wear after Tisha B'ab. Washing garments of little children, who constantly soil them, is permitted.
- d) Haircuts and shaving. A man who normally shaves daily or every other day, and requires to shave for business reasons, may do so except on Tisha B'ab itself.

#### **V. Se'udat Hamafseket**

The last meal before the fast, when taking place on a weekday, should be plain, comprised of bread and water with, at most, one cooked dish. If the dish preparation

normally comprises more than one item, such as eggs and tomatoes, it is acceptable. Fish is too luxurious for this meal. Uncooked vegetables and tea or coffee are permitted to be added to this meal.

It is customary for this meal to choose an item that symbolizes mourning, such as a hard-boiled egg or lentils.

One sits alone on the floor for this meal. Even if three men are in the same room they do not recite zimun before birkat hamazon.

When the last meal occurs on Shabbat there are no restrictions; one may eat meat, drink wine and enjoy a most festive meal.

## **VI. Tisha B'ab Night and Day**

Tisha B'ab prohibitions apply from the sunset beginning the day until "appearance of the stars" the following evening, in the New York area about 30 minutes after sunset. The following are prohibited: eating, drinking, washing the body, anointing, wearing leather shoes and marital relations.

Studying Torah, which gladdens the heart, is also prohibited, except for the study of sad subjects. The obligation to study Torah daily, however, applies to Tisha B'ab. It is customary to study Lamentations (Ekha), the Book of Job, the sad portions in Jeremiah and the Talmudic account of the destruction.

Pregnant and nursing women, although straightaway exempt from the other rabbinical fasts, if healthy, are required to fast on Tisha B'ab unless they are extremely weak. One who gave birth within thirty days before Tisha B'ab is also exempt. When Tisha B'ab falls on Shabbat and the fast is pushed to Sunday, which lessens its status,

pregnant and nursing women are exempt. One who is sick or would become sick upon fasting is exempt. When Tisha B'ab falls on Shabbat and the fast is pushed to Sunday, one who is permitted to eat must first make habdala.

Washing any part of the body, besides the fingers, whether in hot or cold water, is forbidden. Netilat Yadayim is up to the knuckles. One wipes away the sediment from the eyes in the morning with the dampness of the towel. After using the bathroom, or if one has touched a covered part of the body, washing is up to the knuckles. If somehow a part of the body became dirty or very sweaty, it is permitted to wash in a limited way, for the essential prohibition of washing is when done for pleasure.

Application of medication or deodorant is permitted. Those for whom brushing teeth is as a necessity, that they are extremely bothered when they do not brush, may do so. Of course, one must be careful not to swallow water when doing so.

Non-leather sneakers with non-structural leather ornamentation are permitted. Leather garments other than shoes are permitted.

It is customary to sit on the floor as a mourner at night and in the day until minha. Laughter and levity are prohibited all day. If greetings are extended it should be in a feeble manner.

In past centuries many communities established a custom not to work on Tisha B'ab. However, even in those communities it was permitted to work to prevent depreciation of capital or to take advantage of an unusual passing opportunity. The manner in which the modern economic system is structured, most businesses involve significant loss of capital when one closes as there are

numerous fixed expenses, including payroll, rent and utilities. Thus, in our days most businesses are permitted to be open and most people are permitted to work. The rabbis said that those that can be off work without causing significant loss, to more fully participate in the mourning, should do so.

When there is a milah on Tisha B'ab, the father, sandaq and mohel are not allowed to break their fast. However, when Tisha B'ab falls on Shabbat and the fast is pushed to Sunday, these three are permitted to curtail their fast and eat after an early mincha.

All that is prohibited on Tisha B'ab is permitted immediately at the conclusion of the day except for eating meat and drinking wine. As a remembrance to the fire that continued burning in the Bet Hamiqdash through the next day, we refrain from these until the conclusion of the following day. When Tisha B'ab falls on Shabbat and is pushed to Sunday, we only refrain from these items the night immediately following the fast.

When the fast begins on Saturday night, the habdala on wine at the conclusion of Shabbat is recited Sunday night. Boreh Me'oreh Ha'esh, the blessing commemorating the creation of fire, however, is recited Saturday night.

## **VII. Prayers**

On the afternoon preceding the fast most congregations pray mincha early to allow partaking of a regular meal such that there would be a respectable interval between it and se'udat mafseket, which is eaten close to sunset.

Tahanun supplications (ana) is not recited in mincha before Tisha B'ab or on Tisha B'ab day, as it is called mo'ed in Megillat Ekha. Although in peshat this usage refers to a date

for destruction, the midrash expounds it as eventually becoming positive and great cause for hope and redemption.

To create a suitable atmosphere, synagogue lights are dimmed during evening and morning services.

In most Aleppo-derived communities, Ha'azinu is recited before arbit and in shahrit in place of Az Yashir. It is generally chanted in unison by the congregation.

Ekha and various qinot (elegies) are recited both in the evening and morning services. In most Aleppo-derived communities Ekha is read before arbit; as Rabbi Matloub Abady a"h wrote, citing the 1525 Mahzor Aram Soba, this was a pre-Shulhan Arukh Aleppo custom. In virtually all other communities, following Shulhan Arukh, Ekha is read after arbit.

Anenu is recited in all three amidot of the day. Nahem is recited in the Boneh Yerushalayim berakha of the amida. Following Shulhan Arukh, many Sephardic communities recite Nahem in all three amidot. Some recite it only in minha. The amida is not repeated if one forgot to recite these. Since the establishment of the modern state of Israel, particularly since 1967, many recite a modified version of Nahem so that it should be in harmony with the reality of today.

Kaddish Titqabal is not recited in arbit. It is recited in the other prayers.

Sefer Torah is read in shahrit and minha. There is haftara reading in shahrit. Most Sephardic communities also read a haftara in minha. The Aleppo community, however, does not, based on HaRambam.

Following Shulhan Arukh, shahrit should not be prayed with talit and tefillin, emphasizing the mourning nature of the day. Talit and tefillin are donned for minha. Some don tefillin privately at home in the morning, recite shema, remove them, and come to synagogue for prayers. Some members of Aleppo-derived communities even pray individually at home until after the amida and come to synagogue for Sefer Torah, Ekha and kinot. In our days, when people from different communities and different customs congregate for prayers, it is most advisable to follow Shulhan Arukh and pray with a minyan in synagogue without talit and tefillin.

At the conclusion of minha selected comforting verses from Tanakh are recited.

**תזכו בנחמת ציון**

# Parashat Debarim - Tisha Be'ab

## Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22

*The following was published for Shabbat Parashat Debarim in 2004 in Efrat, Israel by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin.*

What is the real significance of our Tisha B'Av mourning?  
What really caused the Temple's destruction?

The Haftarah selection for this week's portion Debarim, is the last of three Haftarahs preceding the fast day. Two of the Haftarahs are from Jeremiah, the prophet who actually lived through the cataclysmic loss. This week, the third, is from Isaiah, chosen by the sages to be read immediately before the ninth of Av, a reading which provides deep insight into why the Temple was destroyed. Indeed, this Sabbath is called Shabbat Hazon (the Sabbath of the Vision) after the first word of the Haftarah.

We read how Isaiah mercilessly berates the Jewish people:

“Hear the word of the Lord, rulers of Sodom, give ear to the Torah of our God, you people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifice to me? I'm sated with the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of sated beasts; ... Bring no more vain offerings, incense of abomination they are to me. As for the New Moons, the Sabbaths and the Festivals, I cannot bear iniquity along with your solemn convocations. Your hands are full of blood ... Wash you, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease to do evil. Learn to do well; seek justice; relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow ....” [Isaiah 1:10-17].

I have quoted at length because these seven verses, although but a fragment of Isaiah's words, capture the essence of prophetic sensibility as well as alluding to the age-long tension between prophet and priest. Long before the checks and balances of a democratic government, Judaism had its own built-in system for maintaining a balance between the awesomely exact ritual requirements in the Holy Temple which was the domain of the priests and an ethical spirit of universalism, compassion and justice which was promoted – and insisted upon – by the prophet. The prophets stood alone as they raged against the sins of people, especially when the sins took on a veneer of religious respectability which only served to hide the rot within. The hypocrisy of the Israelite callousness towards the oppressed coupled with concern about punctilious religious performance made a mockery out of ritual and an abomination out of the Temple. If indeed the word Korban (sacrifice) is derived from Karov (to come near to G-d), then the sacrificial offerings ought to bring us closer to the G-d of “compassion and freely-given love, patience, loving-kindness and truth.” If the aftermath of the sacrifice is not a more sensitive human being, then the offering becomes a bribe and the offerer a hypocritical scoundrel attempting to manipulate G-d to serve his selfish and nefarious purposes. No wonder the Oriental (Sefardi) Prayer/books ordain the following introduction to synagogue prayer: “Behold I am now prepared and ready to perform the ritual of prayer, as it is written in the Bible, ‘you shall love your neighbor like yourself.’” The purpose of ritual is not merely to bring us closer to G-d; its purpose is rather to help us understand that our G-d is a G-d of love and compassion who wants us to act lovingly and compassionately towards every human being!

Of course, we need ritual in every aspect of our lives. The nuances of ritual are the grammatical rules of the language with which man communicates with God. Rituals give a

people its identity in the world, its colors and sounds and haunting melodies. Rituals give people an ethnic identity apart, emphasizing unique eating habits as well as unique celebrations and holy days. Indeed, without ritual, the Jews would blend into the overall landscape of humanity and disappear as an identifiable people. But the purpose of Jewish separate ethnic identity is not merely to be separate; it is rather to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priest-teachers who will communicate the will of a G-d of ethics and morality, love and peace, to the entire world.

And even ritual, in the eyes of classic Judaism, does not exist in a vacuum. The Sabbath itself, rich with ritualistic tapestries, opens itself to an original ethical view of all creations made by G-d, Who endows each of His creatures with right-to-life; indeed the Bible declares the very purpose of the Sabbath to be “in order that your male and female Gentile slaves may rest like you” (Deut. 5), and it is a holy day in which even beasts of burden must rest, even a mosquito may not be killed, even a blade of grass dare not be plucked from the ground. No wonder Martin Buber declared that anyone incapable of saying Shabbat Shalom to a dog or a tree does not understand the true purpose and meaning of the Sabbath!

When the question was raised whether to continue keeping fast days that were instituted after the destruction of the first Temple or abandoning them once the Second Temple had been rebuilt, we hear God’s answer in the words of the prophet: “...When you fasted and mourned, in the fifth month and the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for Me you fasted?” After all, when you ate and when you drank, it was you who did the eating and you who did the drinking... This is what the Lord G-d of Hosts declares: True judgements shall you judge, loving-kindness and compassion shall you do to your sibling humans. Do not

oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the indigent..." (Zehariah 7: 5-10).

God doesn't need our fast days, nor does He need our sacrifices. Ritual is a means to the end of developing a more sensitive and compassionate human being. When the ritual – or Temple – didn't do its job – or, even worse, became an impediment to the goal, served as a cover-up for iniquity – then the Temple had to be destroyed.

Hence, what must be done to bring back the Holy Temple? Demonstrations, petitions, tanks? Isaiah makes no bones about it. The Haftorah ends with the verse: "Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and those that return to her with righteousness" (1:27). Yes, "The fast days ... will be turned into days of gladness and rejoicing, [but only] when you [learn] to love truth and peace." (Zechariah 7).

## Debarim - Counsel for the Defense

*Dvar Torah by Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, for Shabbat Perashat Debarim, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007.*

There are times when, beneath the surface of an apparently simple interpretation, an intense drama is taking place. So it is with the opening verse of Debarim.

The text seems simple enough. “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan, in the Aravah, opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Lavan, Hazeroth and Di Zahav.” The sages, however, ever sensitive to the slightest nuance, heard something strange and suggestive in these words. What is Di Zahav? Evidently the name of a place. But it has not been mentioned before. How then does it help us locate where the great last speeches of Moses took place, if we have no way of knowing where it was?

Besides which, the name itself is suggestive. Di Zahav means “enough gold.” Might there not be a subtle reference here to an episode which involved gold – namely, the golden calf, the worst sin of the previous generation? On this slender basis, the sages built one of their most daring interpretations:

Moses spoke audaciously [hiti’ach debarim] towards Heaven . . . The school of R. Jannai learned this from the words Di Zahav. What do these words mean? They said in the school of R. Jannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: “Sovereign of the Universe, the silver and gold [zahav] which you showered on Israel until they said, Enough [dai], was what caused them to make the calf . . . R. Hiyya bar

Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse around his neck and set him down at the door of a house of ill-repute. How could he help sinning?

Moses, in this dramatic re-reading, has been transformed into counsel for the defense. Yes, he says to G-d, the people committed a sin. But it was You who gave them the opportunity and the temptation. Without gold, they could not have made the calf. But it was You who told them to ask their neighbors for gold. This was not something they did of their own accord. Therefore you must not blame them. Please, instead, forgive them.

We hear, in this aggadic passage, one of the most striking and humane motifs in rabbinic thought. It is called being *melamed zekhut*, judging favorably, or arguing the case for the defense. It means placing a positive construction on events, pleading a cause, putting the case for mercy or at least mitigation of sentence. The sages sought to exonerate Israel. Yes, to be sure, judging by appearances, they may have been guilty of waywardness, backsliding and ingratitude. They may at times have failed to live up to the highest ideals of the Torah. Yet consider the difficulties they faced, the dangers they went through, the temptations that surrounded them. Even the making of the golden calf, their greatest sin, was in some measure excusable.

*Limmud Zekhut* has a rich history in aggadah and halakhah, Jewish thought and law. One of its classic expressions is to be found in Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom, written around 1165. Spain had been invaded by an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, who confronted Jews with the choice: convert or die. Maimonides' own family was forced to flee. Some Jews, however, stayed, publicly embracing

Islam while secretly remaining Jews – forerunners of the later marranos who converted to Christianity.

One of the forced converts wrote to a rabbi to ask whether he was right to continue to practice as many mitzvot as he could in secret. The rabbi wrote back a dismissive reply, saying that now that he had abandoned Judaism, every religious deed he performed was not a merit but a sin. Appalled by this reply, Maimonides wrote the Epistle, saying that indeed Jews should leave Spain and go somewhere they could practice their religion openly. But those who stayed and converted under fear of death should not be regarded as sinners. To the contrary, every mitzvah they do is still a good deed. Indeed, in one sense, it is a great deed since “the reward is much greater for a person who fulfils the Law and knows that if he is caught, he and all he has will perish.” In the course of the letter, Maimonides cites a host of examples in which the sages say that the greatest of the prophets were criticized by G-d when they criticized the Jewish people. His conclusion is that “It is not right to alienate, scorn and hate people who desecrate the Sabbath. It is our duty to befriend them and encourage them to fulfill the commandments.”

It is a note that sounds again during the Hassidic movement, most famously in many stories attributed to the great R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. It is said that Levi Yitzhak once saw a Jew smoking in the street on Shabbat. He said, “My friend, surely you have forgotten that it is Shabbat today.” “No,” said the other, “I know what day it is.” “Then surely you have forgotten that smoking is forbidden on Shabbat.” “No, I know it is forbidden.” “Then surely, you must have been thinking about something else when you lit the cigarette.” “No,” the other replied, “I knew what I was doing.” At this, Levi Yitzhak turned his eyes upward to heaven and said, “Sovereign of the universe,

who is like Your people Israel? I give this man every chance, and still he cannot tell a lie!”

The great leaders of Israel were the great defenders of Israel, people who saw the good within the not-yet-good. Where did they learn it from? From the prophets themselves. Most notable in this regard is a figure not usually associated with good news, namely Jeremiah. His name is associated with a bringer of bad tidings, yet it is he who says in the name of G-d:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
How as a bride you loved Me  
And followed Me through the desert,  
Through a land not sown.

Again, it was Jeremiah who said of Ephraim (the northern kingdom, usually associated with idolatry):

Is not Ephraim my dear son,  
The child in whom I delight?  
Though I often speak against him,  
I still remember him.  
Therefore my heart yearns for him;  
I have great compassion for him – declares the Lord.

There were the great prophecies of hope in the concluding chapters of Isaiah, from which all seven haftarot of “consolation” are taken, beginning next week. Indeed almost every prophet gave voice to hope. The prophets criticized Israel, but always, and only, out of love. Perhaps the most paradoxical of all such utterances came, in the name of G-d, from Amos: “You only have I chosen [yadati, which may also mean, ‘have I known’ or ‘have I loved’] of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.” The very suffering of the Jewish people, implied Amos, was a sign of their chosenness, their preciousness in the eyes of G-d.

What then is going on in the sages' interpretation of the words Di Zahav in the first verse of Debarim? The sedra [perasha] of Debarim is always read on the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av, the most tragic date in the Jewish calendar, the day on which both the first and second temples were destroyed and on which many other catastrophes occurred, including the defeat of the Bar Kochba rebellion, Hadrian's rebuilding of Jerusalem as a pagan city, and the Spanish expulsion.

The haftarah (the famous "vision" of the first chapter of Isaiah, which gives its name to this day, Shabbat Chazon) is one of the most searing indictments in all literature of the corruption of a people. Debarim itself is harsh in its judgement of the Israelites. Rashi, in his comment to the first verse, writes that "These are words of rebuke, and [Moses] is listing the various places where [the Israelites] provoked G-d." The connection between sedra [perasha], haftarah and Tisha b'Av is driven home by the unmistakable three-fold occurrence of the word Eichah:

In the sedra [perasha]: "How [eichah] can I bear your problems, your burdens and your disputes alone?"

In the haftarah: "How [eichah] the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her; but now murderers!"

In the megillah: "How [eichah] deserted lies the city, once so full of people. How like a widow is she who once was great among the nations. She who was a queen among the provinces has now become a slave."

These are terrifying judgements, awesome in their cumulative weight. It is not too much to say that had this been all, the Jewish people might have concluded that the mission G-d had given them was impossible. However hard they tried, it seemed, they fell short. They were afflicted;

they suffered; twice they had seen their holiest site destroyed. The first time, when they were exiled to Babylon, consolation was at hand. The prophets told them – and they were right – that within seventy years they would return. This time, however, under Rome, no end was in sight. An extraordinary passage in the Talmud tells us how close Jews came to despair:

R. Ishmael ben Elisha said: Since the day that a government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids us to enter into the ‘week of the son’ [i.e. brit milah, circumcision] we ought by rights to issue a ruling forbidding Jews to marry and have children, so that the seed of Abraham our father would come to an end of its own accord.

It was a moment of crisis. (So, incidentally, was the Spanish expulsion. Abarbanel, who lived through it, later wrote: “I used to say in those days [following the expulsion] all the prophets who prophesied about my redemption and salvation are false; Moses, may he rest in peace, was false in his utterances, Isaiah lied in his consolations . . . Let the people remember all the despairing things they used to say at the time of the exile.”)

What, at such times, is the role of a sage? The sages were not prophets, but they knew they carried the same responsibility (“From the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages”). They knew that at times of comfort and ease, the task of the prophet is to warn of impending dangers, to detect the first signs of moral drift and decadence. But at times of trouble the role of the prophet is to bring hope.

That is what the sages did. Building on the prophets but going beyond them, they were *melamed zekhut* for the Jewish people. They became advocates for the defense.

They spoke the good news about Jews (“Even the emptiest of Israel is as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is of seeds”; “Let Israel alone: they may not be prophets, but they are the children of prophets”; “they are believers, the children of believers”; “A Jew who sins remains a Jew”). Throughout the rabbinic and post-rabbinic literature this note sounds time and again – a note of love, of generosity of spirit, even awe for this people who, though much afflicted, never gave up its faith.

And this is what they did on Shabbat Chazon. On this, the most painful Shabbat of the year, they introduced into the first verse of Debarim a note of defense. Yes -- Israel sinned, nowhere more so than when they made the golden calf, but even then there was a case to be argued in mitigation – and this, they said, is what Moses did. Don’t blame them, he said to G-d: they were not responsible for the gold, and without the gold there would have been no golden calf. Moses, counsel for the prosecution, becomes Moses, attorney for the defense. Thus the sages introduced a note of hope into what otherwise might have been the Shabbat of despair.

Where is that voice today? We know all too well our failings as a people. Yes, Jews in Israel are a fragmented and deeply divided society. Yes, Jews in the Diaspora are assimilating and disaffiliating. Those who seek to be critical will find no shortage of grounds on which to be so. But Jewish leadership as the sages understood it is about love, respect, even awe for the Jewish people – this extraordinary people who after the Holocaust and the angel of death collectively created the greatest single affirmation of life in the past two thousand years of our history: the State of Israel. This remarkable people who, despite the pressures of modernity and post-modernity, still identify as Jews, come to the aid of other Jews in need wherever they are, who carry beneath the surface of their lives a glowing

ember of identity which with the right touch may yet be fanned into flame. This people who, though they may live far from Israel, still carry Israel, the land and its people, in their heart, so that when it is attacked they come to its defense. We have no shortage of internal critics. What we need is the opposite. Who will be *melamed zekhut* for the Jewish people today?

# Shabbat Hazon

by Rabbi Ralph Tawil

**Value:** Good behavior towards people is essential for a good relationship with God. Whenever you hear that a person “has become religious,” there is a tendency to think of that change in terms of his taking on ritual observances. Perhaps he prays longer, keeps the laws of Shabbat more stringently, or even dresses differently. What, unfortunately, does not come to mind is that the person has become kinder and more sensitive; or that he has decided to refrain from embarrassing others or gossiping. Would a person who had decided to be a better listener and be more considerate be described as becoming more religious? Or what about a person that decided that all his business practices must be on the highest ethical standards; reporting mistakes in his favor with as much diligence as he would mistakes that cost him money? I venture to guess that in today’s parlance that these changes would be described as proper, the “right thing to do.” They would probably not be described as “more religious.” The prophecy that we read as the haftarah prior to Tisha Be’ab disagrees.

**Background:** The haftarot which we read in the Shabbat services throughout the summer months are connected with the grievous commemoration of the temples’ destruction of the Ninth day of Ab (Tish’a Be`ab). The haftarot of the three weeks preceding Tish’a Be`ab contain prophecies that are very critical of Israel. The haftarot of the ten weeks following that day of fasting have prophecies of consolation and of a call to repentance. This Shabbat, the Shabbat before the fast day of Tish’a be`ab, the portion chosen criticizes Israel about their diligent observance of ritual laws (i.e. sacrifice, festivals, and even prayer), and their laxness regarding ethical laws. The prophet’s point is that the ritual observance is not only meaningless, it is

abhorrent, when not coupled with proper behavior towards other people. Let's listen to the words of the prophet.

**Text:** Isaiah 1:10-17, 27

Listen to Hashem's word, you chieftains of Sedom, pay attention to God's instruction leaders of 'Amorah. Why do I need all your sacrifices, Hashem says, I am fed up with burnt offering of rams, suet of fatlings, and blood of bulls; and I have no delight in lambs and he-goats. You come to appear before Me - who ever asked you to do this, to trample My courts? Don't bring Me your futile offerings, your incense is disgusting to Me, as are your New Moons and Sabbaths. I cannot stand holiday with injustice. I hate your New Moons and festivals, they are a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. When you lift up your hands I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen—your hands are stained with crime.

Wash yourself clean, put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Devote yourself to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow.

...Siyon will be saved by justice, and her repentant ones by righteousness.

**Analysis:** Notice the vehemence of Isaiah's rebuke. *Yeshu'ya* referred to Israel's leaders as being from Sedom and 'Amorah, two places notorious for their unethical behavior. Bne Yisrael must have thought themselves very close to God, because they were offering all the sacrifices, praying and keeping Shabbat as they should. Yet the prophet says that all that is disgusting to God when it is accompanied by injustice and mistreatment of society's disadvantaged and powerless. You cannot be cruel or nasty and expect God to listen to your prayers. You cannot be

inconsiderate and close to God at the same time--no matter how much you pray and learn. Proper relationships with people are the prerequisite for a good relationship with God. As our Sages said, "Good manners precede Torah."

**Discussion:** What does "more religious" mean? (Closer to Hashem, keeping more of the Misvot.) Is it a misvah not to insult or embarrass people? (Most certainly). So if a person decides never to insult or embarrass someone he is becoming more religious.

What do you think Hashem wants more: to pray better, or to be an honest and fair person? (According to what the prophet Yesh'aya said, it is more important to be just and fair.) Emphasize that the best approach is to be honest and a good person, and to pray and observe the ritual commandments as we should. These things are not mutually exclusive.

How can we behave better towards other people? Treat people with respect and consideration. Ask for things by saying "please," and acknowledge someone's favor by saying "thank you." And don't just mouth the words—mean them.

Treat your friends with respect. Of course, this applies to relationships between teachers and students and counselors and campers, as well. Mutual respect and consideration are the building blocks of proper relationships. Teachers and camp counselors must model these behaviors in every contact with students or campers.

### **For older children:**

Why do you think that people who want to become more religious usually understand that in terms of observing

more ritual commandments and not in terms of behaving better towards other people?

Perhaps, because behaving in a good way towards people is considerably harder than taking upon oneself an extra stringency regarding what you can eat. It is much more demanding to never gossip than it is to refrain from violating the Shabbat.

Why do you think that our Sages chose this prophecy to precede the day of fasting and repentance that is Tish'a Be'ab? (When we think about repenting, our focus should be on the more thoroughgoing repentance that is required for proper relationships between people.)

# Psalm 137 - The Lament of Jerusalem

by Mr. Ronald Benun

Of the 150 psalms, Psalm 137 best fits the category of a lament. The psalmist describes the profound grieving of the Babylonian exiles over Jerusalem and their intense longing for it. In this paper we will demonstrate how the psalmist uses various literary devices to embed these themes in virtually every syllable of the psalm's 84 words. The net result reflects the all-encompassing despair and sorrow of the sensitive segment of the nation in exile.

## Location of Psalm 137 in Tehillim

At first glance, Psalm 137 appears out of place with the psalms that precede it. Psalm 137 is placed towards the end of the fifth book of Psalms. Prior to Psalm 137 the general tone of book five is celebratory. The following is a brief outline of the celebratory psalms that precede Psalm 137 in book 5:

1. Book 5 opens with Psalm 107 in which the psalmist praises G-d for his kindness to Man. It opens with the statement - **הָדָו לִיהֲנֶה כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**, followed by the repeated refrain of - **יִדְוֶה לִיהֲנֶה חַסְדּוֹ** וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם. The psalm concludes with the phrase - **וְיִתְבֹּנְנֵי חַסְדֵי יְהוָה** - once more referring to the opening "**כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**".
2. Psalms 113 -118, more commonly known as the **הַלֵּל**, is a running praise of G-d which also opens and closes its last psalm with the "**כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**" statement. This **כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ** statement envelopes Psalms 107 - 118.
3. Psalm 119 is a celebratory acrostic that contains 8 verses for each letter of the alphabet.

4. Psalms 120 – 134, sometimes referred to as the Psalms of the return, consist of the 15 celebratory שירי המעלות.
5. Psalms 135-136 praise G-d for the great miracles he did for the nation during the exodus, culminating in 26 repetitions of “כי לעולם חסדו”. These final כי לעולם חסדו repetitions create an envelope around the Psalm 107-136 block, as 107 opened with “כי לעולם חסדו”.

Directly following this intense burst of praise, the psalmist turns to the concluding eight Psalms of Tehillim proper.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137 is the first of these eight psalms, and instead of continuing the praise, he is forced to confront his current reality. He is in exile, the nation is in exile, and the days of rejoicing in Jerusalem have become a mere memory. Instead of celebrating, he grieves - lamenting the loss of Jerusalem and the victory of Israel's enemies.

## Structure

Psalm 137 consists of 3 clearly delineated sections:

### Section 1

- (א) על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם בכינו בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן :  
 (ב) על עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ כְּנְרוֹתֵינוּ :  
 (ג) כִּי שָׁם שָׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דַּבְּרֵי שִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן :  
 (ד) אֵיךְ נָשִׁיר אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר :

In this section, the psalmist describes the nation that has been exiled to Babylon; they sit by the river, weeping and remembering Zion. They discard their musical instruments

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<sup>1</sup> Pss. 137-145 serve as the conclusion to the Book of Psalms, while the final five psalms (Pss. 146-150) function as the coda or grand finale to Tehillim.

as they can no longer play them; they can no longer be joyous without Jerusalem. Verse 3 continues with an account of the captors asking the exiled nation (possibly with intention to torment), to “sing to us one of the songs of Zion.” In verse 4 the nation responds with a rhetorical question, “How can we sing the song of YHVH on alien soil?” Throughout this section, the author is recalling events experienced by the nation and, accordingly, speaks in the plural form.

## Section 2

(ה) אִם אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי :  
 (ו) תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אִם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶכֶּי אִם לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל  
 רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי :

After recalling the exile in section one, the author shifts his mode of speech from first person plural (we) to first person singular (I), and personally addresses the city. In this section (vv. 5-6) he turns to Jerusalem itself and says “If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget.” The use of the word “forget” in conjunction with his right hand poetically captures the imagery of someone who has become incapacitated and is unable to act, as the right hand represents Man carrying out action. He has such an intense connection to Jerusalem that if he were ever to forget the city he would be incapacitated; his hand would “forget”. Similarly, the use of the phrase *תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אִם* (v.5) poetically captures the imagery of someone who cannot speak without mentioning Jerusalem. If he does not use his mouth to recall Jerusalem (*אֶזְכְּרֶכֶּי*), he will not be able to speak. The author is so profoundly attached to Jerusalem that he cannot talk or move without remembering the city.

### Section 3

(ז) זָכַר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד  
הִיְסוּד בָּהּ :  
(ח) בַּת בְּבֶל הַשְׂדֻדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁישַׁלְמָם לָךְ אֵת גְּמוּלָךְ שֶׁגַּמְלֶתָ לָנוּ :  
(ט) אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁיאַחֲזוּ וְנַפְצוּ אֵת עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע :

In the third and final section of the psalm, the psalmist turns to G-d and prays for Him to remember the day of Jerusalem's destruction, how the nation of Edom cheered and encouraged the atrocities committed during that time; they cried "strip her, strip her to her very foundation!". The psalmist then turns to the nation's captor, Babylon, and pronounces a blessing upon he who makes them suffer the same carnage that they brought upon Israel.

One significant aspect of the structure of Psalm 137 is the placement of repeated key phrases and words. One such word in this psalm is the string of ע followed by ל forming the syllable על, which occurs at the end of each of the three sections delineated above. The first section ends with על אֲדַמַת נֶכָר (v. 4), the second section ends with על רֵאשׁ שְׂמִחָתִי (v. 6), and the third section ends with על עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע (v. 9). In each of the section endings, the על string is placed at the beginning of a 3-word clause that closes the verse and the section. These two letters do not only differentiate sections, they also serve as literary markers at the beginning and end of the Psalm; the Psalm begins with the words על נְהָרוֹת בְּבֶל (v. 1) and ends in v. 9 with the word סָלַע, i.e. על in reverse, enveloping the Psalm in the ע and ל sequence. (We will elaborate on this point later in the paper.)

Another word that occurs at key locations is the repeated זָכַר root. In the opening verse of section 1 the psalmist uses the זָכַר root when mournfully remembering Jerusalem in the words בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֵת צִיּוֹן (v. 1). In section 2 the זָכַר root occurs at the center of the section in v. 6 as אִם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶכִי, also referring to the psalmist's resolve to remember the

city. In addition, the root שכח (forget), the antonym of זכר (remember), is used twice in the first verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, referring to the individual psalmist's resolve to never forget Jerusalem. Section 3 opens on the words זָכַר הַיְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֱדוֹם (v. 7) as part of the psalmist's prayer for G-d to remember the nation of Edom in connection with Jerusalem. The repetition of the root זכר found at key locations throughout the three sections not only corresponds to the thematic division, but also further accentuates the theme of this psalm, i.e. the intense emotional longing for Jerusalem.

### Psalm 137's Theme

As we have observed in our other studies on Psalms<sup>2</sup>, the center word or verse of a psalm is particularly significant, often its focal point. Center points can be determined based on the word counts or the verse counts of the text. In this psalm, both do indeed, have thematic connotations. The center verse of Psalm 137 is v. 5 - אִם אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי. The psalmist is so emotionally attached to Jerusalem, the city that is referred to in Psalms as full of G-d's compassion, justice and righteousness (cf. Ps. 48, 122), that he can never forget it.<sup>3</sup>

The center words of the entire Psalm are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחֶפְזִי, "my tongue to my palate," which describe the psalmist's intense longing for the city. A closer look at these two metaphors reveals that they express the psalmist's message in a much

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ronald Benun, "Psalm 22: From the Depths of Divine Abandonment to the Pinnacle of Hopeful Vision." *Purim Reader*. (New York: Tebah, March 2008), p. 31

<sup>3</sup> This center verse is arranged in a chiasm where the center word יְרוּשָׁלַם is flanked with the שכח root immediately before and after it and with assonance at the opening and closing of the verse with אִם and יְמִינִי.

deeper manner than appears on the surface.<sup>4</sup> When he states “תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי” it appears that he means to say, “Jerusalem is so intrinsically ingrained in my writing of this composition that if I forget Jerusalem my right hand would forget its instructions and would not be able to write anything, since virtually every word contains a literary reference to Jerusalem,” as we will soon demonstrate.

Similarly, with the second metaphor, the psalmist seems to be saying, “If I am not conscious of Jerusalem when I speak, my tongue would be stuck to my palate and I wouldn’t be able to say anything, since every word I say contains a literal reference to Jerusalem. In addition, if Jerusalem is not foremost in my happy occasions my tongue would not be able to participate in the celebration because it’s impossible for me to sing of any joyous event without referring to Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup>

The word Jerusalem occurs three times in the psalm (vv. 5, 6, and 7) and its synonym Zion occurs twice (vv. 1 and 3). Combined, Psalm 137 has a higher occurrence of Jerusalem/Zion than any other psalm. The word Jerusalem is found at key junctures throughout the Psalm. As noted above, it is the central word in the center verse. In addition, in v. 6 it directly precedes the closing words of the second section - יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֵאשׁ שְׂמֵחָתַי. The word Jerusalem occurs at the exact center of the 7<sup>th</sup> verse; notably, the seventh word of the 13-word verse.<sup>6</sup> The word Zion is the closing

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<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of this metaphor, based on the preponderance of the ל, will be elaborated shortly.

<sup>5</sup> It should be recalled that in verse 3 the captors asked the Israelites to sing of the songs of Zion in joyous occasions.

<sup>6</sup> For the significance of this number see Rabbi Shamah’s article: *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. For the use of word counts see: Ronald Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 Article 5 (2006).

word of the verse both times it is used. The repeated reference of Jerusalem and Zion at specific locations throughout, appears to be another literary device used to underscore the Psalm's focus on Jerusalem.

Upon close examination, the reader notices that the text is filled with alliteration that focuses around the letter *ש*. The Psalm contains the phrases *שָׁם יִשְׁבְּנוּ* (v.1), *שָׁם שְׁאֵלוּנוּ שׁוֹבְיָנוּ* (v.3), *שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר יְרוּשָׁלַם* (v.3), *אֶשְׁכַּחךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח* (v.5), *עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתֵי אֲשֶׁרִי* (v.6), *הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שְׁיִשְׁלַם* (v.8), and *שְׁיֵאחֲזוּ* (v.9). The abundance of alliterative *ש*'s brings attention to the unusually high frequency of *ש* in this text. Of the 317 letters in Psalm 137, 26 of them are *ש*, comprising 8.2% of the letters. On average the letter *ש* makes up about 4% of the letters of Psalms. Thus, this Psalm contains double the amount of *ש*'s that the average psalm contains. Many scholars have commented on the abundance of alliterative *ש*'s in this Psalm, but most do not offer sufficient explanation as to why the letter *ש*, in particular, is alliterated so frequently. Another letter, *ל*, is also significantly alliterated in this Psalm in the phrases *עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם*, *יְרוּשָׁלַם*, *לֹא אֶעֱלֶה*, *לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִפִּי* (v.6), *שְׁגַמְלֶתְ לָךְ*, *שְׁגַמְלֶתְ לָנוּ* (v.8) and *עַל הַסֵּלַע* (v.9), which all bring attention to the letter *ל*. The letters *ש* and *ל* may be significant in this Psalm because together with the letter *מ*, they make up the word *שלם*. Though the pronunciation of Jerusalem is “*yerushalayim*,” it is never written in its full form (*מלא*) and always appears without the *י* (yod) as *יְרוּשָׁלַם*. The city of Jerusalem is clearly referred to as *שלם* in Psalm 76:3 where it states *וַיְהִי בְּשָׁלַם סוֹכּוֹ וַיִּמְעוֹנְתּוּ בְּצִיּוֹן*.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have pointed out that it is very likely that *שלם* was the original name of the city of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Note that in Psalm 76:3 there is ABBA parallelism where the words *סוֹכּוֹ* and *וַיִּמְעוֹנְתּוּ* are synonymous as are *שָׁלַם* and *צִיּוֹן*.

<sup>8</sup> See *Olam HaTanakh*

Being that שלם is synonymous with Jerusalem, the placement of ש, ל, and מ in the text carries quite a bit of significance. As seen in table 1, one observes that these three letters occur in close proximity to one another several times in this text, and in some cases form the acronyms of word sequences. In verse 1, the word שלם can be found in the words שָׁמַל בְּבָבֶל; the ש, ל, and מ can be reorganized to spell שלם. In verse 3 שלם can be found in שָׁמַל שְׂאוֹנוֹ, וְתוֹלְדֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה שִׁירֵינוּ, and שִׁירֵינוּ מְשִׁיר. In fact the phrase שִׁירֵינוּ מְשִׁיר makes a glaring reference to Jerusalem in that it contains the letters י, ר, ו, and ש (ירוש), and is followed by a ל, and מ in the next two words, לְנוּ מְשִׁיר. The phrase שִׁיר מְשִׁיר in verse 4, and לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אֵם in verse 5 similarly each contain these three letters in sequence. Verse 5 contains an explicit mention of Jerusalem, and it is also followed by the words עַל רֹאשׁ, resulting in the ending letters (ספי תבות) of “עַל רֹאשׁ” to be read backwards as שלם. Strikingly we find the actual word שלם in the word שְׂמֵחָה of verse 8<sup>9</sup>, shortly followed by the word שְׂמֵחָה that contains another שלם reference! See Table 1:

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars have noted that the word שְׂמֵחָה in Ps. 137 may be alluding to Jerusalem (see e.g. Olam HaTanakh on Ps. 137).

Table 1

(1) על נהרות בבל שם שִׁבְנוּ גַם בְּכִינוּ  
בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן :

(2) על עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כְּנָרוֹתֵינוּ :

(3) כִּי שָׁם שָׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְבָרֵי שִׁיר  
וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמִיחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן :

(4) אֵיךְ נָשִׁיר אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר :

(5) אִם אֲשַׁכַּחַךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי :

(6) תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לֶחֶפֶי אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶכִי אִם  
לֹא אַעֲלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמִיחָתִי :

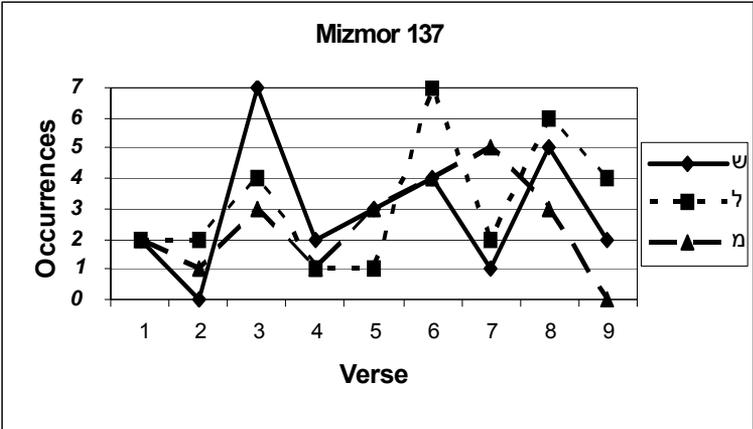
(7) זָכַר יְהוָה לִבְנֵי אֲדוֹם אֶת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם  
הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הִסּוֹד בָּהּ :

(8) בֵּית בָּבֶל הִשְׁדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁשְׁלַם לָךְ אֶת  
גְּמוּלָךְ שְׂגַמְלַת לָנוּ :

(9) אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁיֵּאֲחִז וְנִפֹּץ אֶת עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל  
הַסַּלַע :

The spelling out of Jerusalem throughout the psalm through meticulous placement of the letters  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  is amazing in and of itself. However, this feature is even more astonishing when analyzing another aspect of the letter clustering throughout the Psalm. Not only has the psalmist incorporated the name of Jerusalem into the individual words, overall the letters  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  are clustered in such a way that in the beginning of the Psalm there is a higher frequency of the letter  $\psi$  followed by a higher frequency of  $\text{ל}$ , followed finally by  $\text{מ}$ 's, with the effect that in a way the entire Psalm spells out the name of Jerusalem –  $\text{שלם}$ . In verse 3 the letter count of  $\psi$ 's in the Psalm reaches a high point with seven occurrences of the letter. In verse 6, the frequency of  $\text{ל}$ 's in the Psalm supersedes the  $\psi$ 's with seven occurrences. In verse 7 the letter  $\text{מ}$  occurs five times, the highest occurrence of the letter  $\text{מ}$  in a verse in Psalm 137, also superseding the  $\psi$ 's and  $\text{ל}$ 's in this verse. It is also noteworthy that in verse 7 the grand total occurrence of each individual letter  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  in the Psalm is exactly 19 times up to this point. Verse 7 evens out each letter usage, returning back to verse one where each letter was used exactly twice (See Table 2).

Table 2



Furthermore, the psalmist appears to have integrated the name of Jerusalem into the letter counts of the verses. As noted above, the name יְרוּשָׁלַם is the central word in verse 7. This verse has a total of 47 letters. The letter ש, the only ש in the verse, occupies the 24<sup>th</sup> position – the exact center of the verse. The central placement of the ש in the word יְרוּשָׁלַם, i.e. the center word of the verse, perhaps was intentionally placed to allow the reader to distribute this solitary ש among the surrounding ל’s and מ’s to form the word שלם multiple times. Similarly, in verse 8, the phrase לְךָ שְׁיִשְׁלָם is at the center of the ten words. As noted, the word שְׁיִשְׁלָם contains the word שלם in its pure form. Verse 8 is comprised of 37 letters, and the letter ל of שְׁיִשְׁלָם occupies the 19<sup>th</sup> letter position, the center letter of the verse. Once more, the psalmist appears to have employed this same technique of placing the center letter ל in the word שלם (Jerusalem) allowing the surrounding ש ‘s and מ’s around the ל to form the word שלם many times. In the center verse of Psalm 137, we find an exceptionally incredible usage of this technique. As stated, at the center of this five-word verse we find the word Jerusalem. There is only one ל in this verse- the one found at the near-center of the verse within the word Jerusalem. There are three ש’s and three מ’s surrounding the ל, placed in a chiastic manner around the singular ל, once more spelling the name of Jerusalem numerous times. We find each of the letters used to make up the word שלם, the ש’s and the מ’s, are prominently found as the second letter in each word of the verse; or at the position to “the right” of the lead letter in each word. The striking aspect of this placement is that within the verse, the psalmist informs us that “if he forgets Jerusalem he will forget his right”; the psalmist never forgets Jerusalem and in a stunning play on these words he places the letters that make up Jerusalem’s name at the location to “the right” of each word in the verse.

אִם אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי

Taken together, the letter placement throughout the entire Psalm appears to have the intent of spelling out Jerusalem's name, שלם, over the entire course of the Psalm. This astounding technique has the overall effect of having the word ירושלם emanate from every syllable of the Psalm!

It is quite remarkable that in a psalm that is focused on the message of never forgetting Jerusalem, the letters of the city's name recur so many times in the text in such a structured fashion. The letters ש, ל, and מ recur so often in this psalm that they make up about 24% of all of the letters in this psalm (77/317)<sup>10</sup>. Within the text itself, Jerusalem is never forgotten; it is referenced in many different ways. Zion is mentioned twice, יְרוּשָׁלַם is mentioned three times, and there are 9 references to שלם, adding up to at least 14 references to Jerusalem in this psalm. The memory of Jerusalem is so ingrained in the psalmist, that every fiber of his Psalm contains the name of the city. He so yearns for Jerusalem that he cannot even write the Psalm without making constant, yet subtle references to the city throughout the text. He cannot mention Babel, the place of his exile, without making subtle reference to his home, Jerusalem (בְּבָבֶל שָׁם). Just as he cannot speak without remembering Jerusalem (לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ), he cannot write without remembering Jerusalem in his writing either. Jerusalem is part of his essence; it is like his יְמִינִי. Additionally, when in v. 5 the psalmist states - אִם אֶשְׁכַּח אֶם אֶשְׁכַּח תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי, he is simultaneously poetically alluding to the fact that he cannot forget Jerusalem, for if he did his right hand would stop functioning, i.e. he would stop writing. The psalmist, however, not only continues to write his lament on Jerusalem, as we have explained, Jerusalem

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<sup>10</sup> For the significance of the number 77 see: Ronald Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 Article 5 (2006).

is integrated into every syllable of Psalm 137 in every possible manner.

The way this message is sophisticatedly embedded into the fiber of the psalm, may also explain why the psalmist uses the letters ץ and ל in beginning and ending the Psalm and in marking off its 3 sections. As stated above, the central words of the entire psalm are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכֵּי, “my tongue to my palate.” The sound that is made by the letter ל is created by placing the tongue on the palate (or putting one’s “lashon” on his “hik”). Because the letter ץ is a vowel, the word על mimics the transition of an opened mouth (ע - a vowel) to a closed one (ל). Following the phrase - תִּדְבַּק לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכֵּי in verse 6, there is a large concentration of ל (palatal letter), א (open mouth), and ע (open mouth). The consecutive alternating ל with א/ע in this verse makes the syllables here sound particularly disjointed, poetically relaying the focal message that the psalmist cannot open his mouth without remembering Jerusalem. Moreover, by beginning the Psalm and ending each of the 3 sections with the word על, the psalmist is creating the literary effect of fulfilling what he said in v.4 - his tongue is stuck to his palate. He is so deeply affected by his separation from Jerusalem that he cannot talk properly; he is inarticulate, and is what is commonly termed “tongue-tied.” There is not a single verse in this Psalm that does not contain the letter ל. Notice that the other letters that spell the name of Jerusalem, ש, ן, and ם, are each conspicuously omitted from a single verse. In v. 2 there are no ן’s, and in v.9 there are no ם’s. The blatant omission of these otherwise ubiquitous letters in Psalm 137, only further makes the ever-present ל eye-catching. The deliberate repetition of the letter ל seems to have the effect of the reader experiencing the psalmist’s difficulty in speech, with his tongue stuck to his palate, while reading and pronouncing the numerous ל’s found throughout the Psalm. As stated above, the last word in the

Psalm, **הַסִּלַע**, also has the two letters **ע** and **ל** but in opposite order, ending the Psalm with the tongue off the palate (opened mouth). To appreciate the significance of this dramatic change in the Psalm, we need to look no further than the words directly preceding **הַסִּלַע**. In the last verse the psalmist expresses his wish for his enemy to be destroyed - **אֲשָׁרֵי שְׂיֹאחֻזוּ וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֵיךְ**. Throughout the Psalm the repeated **ל** signified the deep emotional longing for Jerusalem, and the intense affliction caused by the actions of the nation's enemies. Only at the end of the Psalm, where the psalmist expresses vindication for the evils committed by the nation's enemies, is he able to take his tongue off his palate.

## Ekha and Mizmor 137

The following are some of the many comparisons between Ekha and Mizmor 137. Although we will slightly digress from the main theme, it is noteworthy to mention them at this point<sup>11</sup>:

The phrase **תִּדְבַק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי** echoes Ekha 4:4:

תהילים 6: 137 **תִּדְבַק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי** אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶיךָ אִם לֹא אֲעֲלֶה אֶת  
 ?רוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי :  
 איכה 4: 4 **דְּבַק לְשׁוֹן יוֹנֵק אֶל חֶפֶז** בְּצָמָא עוֹלָלִים שְׂאֵלוּ לָחֵם פִּרְשׁ  
 אֵין לָהֶם :

The word **לשון**, the **דבק** root, and the Hebrew word for palate (**חֶפֶז**) are used together only twice more in Tanakh-Ezekiel 3:26 and Job 29:10. As we have explained, in Psalm 137 the psalmist expresses his inability to speak (his tongue being stuck to his palate) by alliterating the letter **ל**. Usage of this phrase has a multi-faceted effect when understanding its backdrop. Ekha 4:4 describes the devastating famine that took place during the destruction of Jerusalem with the heartbreaking scene of babies dying of

<sup>11</sup> These comparisons are from a soon to be published article on Ekha.

thirst, causing their tongues to stick to their palates. There are many other similarities between Psalm 137 and Ekha. Although we will not discuss these similarities and their implications here at length, we will briefly mention some of these to give the reader a sense of the interplay between these two texts, both written as reactions to the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile.

1. The recollection of Edom's jeering of עָרוּ עָרוּ in Psalm 137:7 recalls the end of chapter 4 in Ekha where the word תַּתְעָרִי is used in conjunction with Edom:

איכה 4: 21 שִׁישִׁי וְשִׁמְחִי בֵּת אֲדוֹם יוֹשְׁבֵי תַי {יֹושְׁבֵת} בְּאֶרֶץ  
עוֹץ גַּם עָלֶיךָ תַעֲבֹר כּוֹס תִּשְׁכָּרִי וְתִתְעָרִי :

2. In Ekha 2:10, the elders lament Zion's destruction by placing dust on their head. Likewise, in Psalm 137, the psalmist states that even at the happiest hours, Jerusalem will remain in his memory, using the same word ראש as in Ekha.

תהילים 137: 6 תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לֶחְמִי אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶכִי אִם לֹא  
אֲעֲלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׁמֹחֲתִי :

איכה 2: 10 יֵשְׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ יְדֻמוֹ זִקְנֵי בֵּת צִיּוֹן הֵעֲלוּ עֶפְרַע עַל  
רֹאשָׁם חֲגֹרוּ שִׁקִּים הוֹרִידוּ לְאֶרֶץ רֹאשָׁן בְּתוֹלֵת  
יְרוּשָׁלַם :

3. As stated, Psalm 137 opens and closes with the letter ע, the text ending on the word סע. Notice that Ekha chapter 5 has an unusually high occurrence of the letter ע as well. Five verses begin with ע. This is a statistically high number of times for a verse to begin with ע. Less than 2% of verses in Tanakh begin with ע compared with 25% of verses in chapter 5.
4. Ekha 5 opens on the words - זָכַר יְהוָה מָה הָיָה לָנוּ - הַבֵּיט {הַבִּיטָה} וַיִּרְאֶה אֶת חֲרָפְתָנוּ זָכַר. Recall that the root was repeatedly used in Psalm 137 at key locations, as in the opening verse where the

psalmist mournfully remembers Jerusalem in the words בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן.

5. Note the verses that close chapters 1, 3 and 4 in Ekha and their similarity to the last 2 verse of Ps. 137.

תהילים 8:137 בַּת בְּבֵל הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שָׁיִשְׁלָם לְךָ אֶת  
גְּמוּלְךָ שְׂגַמְלֶתָ לָנוּ :

תהילים 9:137 אֲשֶׁרִי שְׁיֵאֲחֹז וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע :

איכה 22:1 תָּבֵא כָּל רָעָתָם לְפָנֶיךָ וְעוֹלָל לְמוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר עוֹלָתָ  
לִי עַל כָּל פְּשָׁעַי כִּי רַבּוֹת אֲנַחְתִּי וְלִבִּי דָּוִי :

## A New Song

Psalm 137 laments one of the most painful moments in the nation's history, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the nation. Throughout the Psalm the psalmist relays his message using poetic techniques that underscore his yearning for Jerusalem and his overwhelming grief. From the lament, however, the psalmist is still able to end on the prospects that justice will be served to his enemies. Although the general tone in Psalm 137 provides little more than a glimmer of hope for the nation, analysis of the eight-psalm conclusion of Tehillim illuminates the seeds of hope and inspiration the psalmist planted within Psalm 137.

One of the more painful images in Psalm 137 is the opening scene, in which the nation sits on the riverbanks of Babylon, no longer able to sing, hanging up their instruments, unable to sing the songs of Zion. As we stated, the nation asks in v. 4 "How can we sing the song of YHVH on alien soil?" There is no answer provided in Psalm 137 to this question, and so it is understood to be a rhetorical question; apparently the memory of Jerusalem is overwhelming. In fact, though, the psalmist does not leave this question unanswered, but provides the answer at the near-end of the conclusion in Psalm 144. At the precise

center of the 130-words in Psalm 144 are the words “שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲשִׁירָה” “I will sing you a new song” (v.9). Furthermore, the psalmist states here that he will sing the new song with a “ten-stringed harp.” The image of the exiles putting away their lyres in despair, unable to sing at Psalm 137 (v.2), is transformed in Psalm 144; a new, magnificent song is sung on a ten-stringed instrument as the nation will renew their covenant with G-d, and G-d will therefore continue to protect them.

תהילים 4:137 אֵיךְ נִשְׁרַח אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר :  
 תהילים 2:137 עַל עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ בְּנֵי נֹרְתֵינוּ :  
 תהילים 9:144 אֱלֹהִים שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲשִׁירָה לְךָ בְּנֶבֶל עֲשׂוֹר אֲזַמְרָה  
 לְךָ :

In Psalm 144 the psalmist expresses his utmost faith that G-d will save him from the oppressors calling them בְּנֵי נֶכֶר in verses 7 and 11, the same appellation of the exile land, אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר, in Psalm 137:4. Moreover, throughout Psalm 144 the psalmist uses the root פצה numerous times (vv. 7, 10, 11) asking G-d to save him from the oppressors, praying that G-d scatter them וַתִּפְצֵם (v.6). These words all are similar to the prayer at the conclusion of Psalm 137:9 - אֲשֶׁרִי שְׂיֵאֲחֻזוּ וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֵיךְ. In Psalm 144:8, the psalmist describes the enemy as people whose mouths speak lies, and whose “right” is false - שׂוֹא וַיִּמְיֵנָם יָמִין - אֲשֶׁר פִּיהֶם דִּבֶּר שׂוֹא וַיִּמְיֵנָם יָמִין - אֲשֶׁרִי. <sup>12</sup> This certainly is reminiscent of Psalm 137 where the psalmist states that if he forgets Jerusalem, his tongue will be stuck to his palate, i.e. he becomes inarticulate - תִּדְבֹק - לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִפִּי (v.6), and his right hand loses function - אִם - אֲשֶׁרִי (v. 5). At the conclusion of Psalm 144, the psalmist praises the nation as G-d protects them, using the word אֲשֶׁרִי twice. Recall that Psalm 137 also used the word אֲשֶׁרִי twice, once in v. 8 praying that Babylon will be punished, and then in the concluding statement which opens on the word אֲשֶׁרִי.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, see Psalm 144:11.

The inspirational message of hope is seen to an even greater degree at the end of the coda in Tehillim. No longer is the nation unable to sing the songs of Zion. The penultimate psalm of Tehillim opens on the heightened command to “sing to the Lord a new song.”

תהילים 1:149 הַלְלוּהָ שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהַלְתּוּ בְּקוֹל  
חֲסִידִים :

Psalm 150 is the grand finale of the Tehillim. It is composed entirely of song and praise of G-d. The psalmist repeats the root הלל thirteen times, alluding to the covenant. This praise is accompanied with the magnificent call for the wind instruments to play - בְּתִקְעַ שׁוֹפָר - followed by the string instruments - בְּנִבְל וְכִנּוֹר (v. 3), and the percussions - בְּתוֹף וּמַחוּל (v. 4). The Psalter has reached its climax. G-d's songs and praises are not only sung with a “ten-stringed harp” (Ps. 144:9), the entire orchestra is playing in unison. Not only has the nation renewed its song, all mankind is now singing and praising G-d - כָּל הַנְּשָׂמָה תְּהַלֵּל יְהוָה הַלְלוּהָ - (v.6).

## Conclusion

Psalm 137 is read on Tisha B'Ab in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the nation. The memory of Jerusalem is imprinted throughout the Psalm, making it clear that the events of Tisha B'Ab and the ensuing exile devastated the nation. However, along with expressing the grief of exile in a most moving manner, the psalmist is able to instill the powerful message of hope that the nation will put their faith in G-d, renew the covenant, and become even greater than before. Perhaps, one present day example of such hope is seen in a recent change in the interpretation of one phrase in Psalm 137. When the psalmist prays for the nation of Edom to be held accountable, he refers to the destruction of Jerusalem as יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם (v.7), calling it the “day of Jerusalem,” instead of

the “day of destruction” as even uttering those words are overwhelmingly unbearable. After over 2000 years the name יום הַרוּשָׁלַם has lost its negative connotation, and instead has become associated with the modern-day Israeli holiday celebrating the day that Jerusalem was reunified in 1967, the 28<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, יום הַרוּשָׁלַם.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed the present generation almost in its entirety never associates the name יום הַרוּשָׁלַם with the destruction of the temple, but rather the day Jerusalem was reunified. I realized this recently when teaching Psalm 137 to a group of young men and one student remarked “I know יום הַרוּשָׁלַם, it is כ״ח אייר!”