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to me

*BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives,
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The Aliveness of Lament

Hannah Kapnik Ashar ('04) | BronfmanTorah | D'varim / Tisha b'Av 2018

This summer, we are bringing you divrei torah written by the 2018 Bronfman Fellowship educational team.

The third contribution in this series is written by Hannah Kapnik Ashar, who is teaching a five-session shiur, "Threatened with Resurrection." It's rare, if possible, to feel at once entirely honest and entirely secure. Part of interpersonal and human-divine relationship is the movement between safety and depth, or stability and consciousness. Fellows will explore these poles through: mystical sources, excerpts from liturgy, and classical rabbinic and modern texts. The title of the shiur is drawn from the discussion of Julia Esquivel's poem "Threatened with Resurrection" in Parker Palmer's *The Active Life*.

Hannah Kapnik Ashar ('04) is a Faculty Member and Manager of Fellowship Year Experience at The Bronfman Fellowship. She is also a Rabbinic Intern at Congregation Bonai Shalom, the Conservative synagogue in Boulder, Colorado. Hannah co-founded

The Tefilah Retreat, a weekend of Jewish spiritual practice for young adults, and Come & Listen, a progressive Jewish podcast. She lives in Boulder with her spouse, Yoni, and her two young daughters.

As we approach the reading of *Eicha*, the Book of Lamentations, on Tisha b'Av this Saturday night, I find myself humming the haunting melody of the text. I anticipate returning to my most beloved image in *Eicha*: "Pour out your heart like water, / In the presence of the Lord" (2:19) – a vision of expression, honesty, flow. And also my stomach churns in anticipation of the next sentence: "Alas, women eat their own fruit, / Their newborn babes." (2:20) Who imagined this image should be in our canon? Who thought this would instruct us in better living? Why do we need to remember life so corroded? Lamentations wrenches us out of comfort, disgusts us, asks us to wrestle with piety in the midst of suffering. And perhaps also to weep.

In her essay "For These I Weep: A Theology of Lament," contemporary Jewish feminist theologian Rabbi Rachel Adler describes the anguish of loss as an unmaking of one's world. And when it's not clear how to remake that world, lament becomes our tool. She writes:

According to our mystical tradition, language precedes everything, for the world is created with the alphabet. To unmake a world is to undo the alphabet of creation, to plunge the world constituted by language back into disorder, to strike it wordless. But how can the alphabet so violently broken be reconstituted? How can the broken reenter the realm of language and speak the unspeakable? The doorway, I would maintain, is lament. In lament, the boundary between the made and unmade universe is thinnest, for it is the cultural form closest to the preverbal howl of pain. Lament can be incoherent and chaotic picking its way through a broken rubble of unbearably vivid happenings and intolerable sensations. Its content is dangerously dark and disordered, and its meaning may be non-existent,

rejected, or found wanting. And yet I want to argue that the doorway through which lament enters the world is a *petach tikvah*, a doorway of hope.

Lament, mournful poetic chant, can be our guide through the transition from broken to unbroken. "In lament, the boundary between the made and unmade universe is thinnest, for it is the cultural form closest to the preverbal howl of pain." Adler describes lament as a 'cultural form' – indeed she goes on to show astounding textual examples of lament as a once-living art form and still-necessary component of mourning. It has, though, become alien. It is only on Tisha b'Av that I return to this text and this mode. I find myself wanting this art form. Wanting this prayer form. I want this companion for being in and coming out from the depths. Adler talks about the need for a theology where we do not rush to theologize and make sense of suffering, but allow first a stage of lament. That we must mourn and express chaos. Emit our preverbal howl. Lament is the cultural form in our communal repertoire for this.

I hear Rabbi Adler's vision of lament in dialogue with a text Rabbi Shai Held shared with me from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, from "Prayer as Dialogue":

The principal topic of Jewish prayer is *tehinnah* [petition, or supplication]; praise and thanksgiving are merely prologues and epilogues. Most of the Psalms are petitionary. Isaac prayed for progeny... Christians and mystics considered *tehinnah* an unworthy form of prayer, a cash-and-carry relationship, a form of trade or barter, a sacrifice for a recompense, a self-directed prayer... This [focus on supplication] is based on our singling out of one particular emotion above all others as the central requisite for prayer, namely, dependence and helplessness. Though contradictory emotions may exist, such as joy, sadness, gratitude, submission, shyness, etc., the feeling of dependence in our state of wretchedness is paramount.

We might have thought supplication was an insult to God, but actually supplication

serves to help us know our own vulnerability. Prayer can help us to cultivate dependence and helplessness. In the context of lament, Soloveitchik cuts in a different direction: when we don't need to cultivate helplessness but have plenty of it, supplication from our lowliness might allow us a respite from the isolation of an unmade world. To feel dependent could also be to feel held, or to feel that the remaking of the world is possible. "Lift up your hands to God / For the life of your infants, / who faint in hunger / at every street corner." (Eicha 2:19) Somehow there is an ability to lift hands to God while infants faint with hunger; to relate our brokenness to someone beyond us. I hear Adler offering lament as a way to howl the pain we feel in moments or eras of our world being unmade. I hear Soloveitchik gift us with smallness, that we might relinquish the illusion of control.

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