Where Are God’s Tears in Lamentations?

Tears abound in Lamentations: the poet cries, the people cry, even the city cries, but God does not. In contrast, the gods and goddesses of ancient Near Eastern city laments, cry along with their people. *Midrash Eichah Rabbah,* seemingly uncomfortable with such a callous depiction of God, rereads Lamentations to include God weeping.

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Photo by David Bar-Cohn

Lament is a widespread literary form of expression—from ancient to modern times, from East to West, chanted and declaimed.[1] Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, characterizes lament as tragic discourse that finds expression not in language but in silence:

[L]ament is precisely the stage at which each language suffers death in a truly tragic sense, in that this language expresses nothing, absolutely nothing positive… Language in the state of lament destroys itself, and the language of lament is itself, for that very reason, the language of destruction.[2]

Lament abounds in language; lament destroys language. This seeming paradox can be sustained, if not resolved, when we take into consideration the function of lament to exhibit grief,[3] that can take the non-verbal form of weeping, and is expressed in tears.[4]

Crying for Jerusalem

In the opening of *Eikha* or Lamentations, composed sometime in the decades following the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia in 586 B.C.E.,[5] an anonymous observer[6] describes a desolate Jerusalem, personified as a woman:

איכה א:ב בָּכוֹ תִבְכֶּה בַּלַּיְלָה, וְדִמְעָתָהּ עַל לֶחֱיָהּ.

Lam 1:2 Weeping, yes, weeping at night—with tears (running) down her cheek.[7]

These tears are given more vivid expression when they are conveyed in a personified Jerusalem’s own words:

איכה א:טז עַל אֵלֶּה אֲנִי בוֹכִיָּה, עֵינִי עֵינִי יֹרְדָה מַּיִם.

Lam 1:16 For these am I weeping. My eye, my eye runs down with tears.

The city grieves over the ravages it has endured. It mourns for itself.

Tears of an Observer

An observer with a harsher tone, focusing more on the depredations wrought by the Deity in the period leading up to the destruction, tells of his own tears at the sight of Jerusalem’s children, dying of hunger in the streets:

איכה ב:יא כָּלוּ בַדְּמָעוֹת עֵינַי, חֳמַרְמְרוּ מֵעַי.

Lam 2:11 My eyes are spent of tears; My insides churn.”

Calling on Jerusalem to Cry

This speaker is so distraught, watching children starve to death (see further Lam. 2:19-20), that he bids even the stone-cold walls of the city to weep:

איכה ב:יח חוֹמַת בַּת צִיּוֹן הוֹרִידִי כַנַּחַל דִּמְעָה, יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה אַל תִּתְּנִי פוּגַת לָךְ, אַל תִּדֹּם בַּת עֵינֵךְ.

Lam 2:18 O wall of Daughter Zion, run down tears like a stream, day and night! Allow yourself no relief (from it), Let your eye be never still!

The poetic conceit of appealing to the city wall to shed tears recalls the earliest laments over the destruction of cities and temples.

Early Mesopotamian Laments

At the end of the third millennium B.C.E., the dominant regime of southern Mesopotamia, the third dynasty of Ur, crumbled under the pressure of foreign aggressors and under the weight of its internal problems.[8] During the following century (the 20th B.C.E.), Babylonian lamentation priests composed at least five lengthy laments in which they interpreted the catastrophes as the venting of the high gods’ anger, but also cited the foreign elements that perpetrated the disasters.[9] The purpose of the laments is to assuage the gods’ anger, to enable the rebuilding of the temples, and to restore the gods to them. In the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur, not only are the cities and their gods in grief, but the brickwork of the cities grieves as well:

O city, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
O brickwork of Ur, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!..
O shrine, Nippur, O city (of Nippur), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!
O brickwork of (the) Ekur (temple), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
O brickwork of (the city of ) Isin, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
O brickwork of Uruk land, the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!
O brickwork of (the city of Eridu), the wailing is bitter, the wailing raised by you!...
O city, though your walls rise high, your land has perished from you![10]

These Sumerian laments share several themes and motifs with the book of *Eikha*, although a direct influence of the former on the latter is implausible.[11]

YHWH Does not Cry

Nowhere in Lamentations does God show any compassion. Just the opposite—the phrase וְלֹא חָמַל “had no compassion” recurs as a refrain throughout chapters 2 and 3 (2:2, 17, 21; 3:43), and compare אַתָּה לֹא סָלָחְתָּ, “you were unforgiving” in 3:42. It goes without saying that the God of Lamentations sheds no tears over the destruction he has wrought.

The biblical book of Lamentations makes it abundantly clear that the God of Israel, YHWH, had doomed Jerusalem for destruction. For example:

איכה ב:א אֵיכָה יָעִיב בְּאַפּוֹ אֲדֹנָי אֶת בַּת צִיּוֹן הִשְׁלִיךְ מִשָּׁמַיִם אֶרֶץ תִּפְאֶרֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא זָכַר הֲדֹם רַגְלָיו בְּיוֹם אַפּוֹ.

Lam 2:1 How could YHWH in his anger so detest Daughter Zion? Cast down from the sky to the ground the Splendor of Israel? Paying no regard to his Footstool[12] on his Day of Anger?

ב:ב בִּלַּע אֲדֹנָי (לא) [וְלֹא] חָמַל אֵת כָּל נְאוֹת יַעֲקֹב הָרַס בְּעֶבְרָתוֹ מִבְצְרֵי בַת יְהוּדָה הִגִּיעַ לָאָרֶץ חִלֵּל מַמְלָכָה וְשָׂרֶיהָ.

2:2 YHWH eradicated without compassion all of Jacob’s pastures. He destroyed in his fury Daughter Judah’s fortresses. He brought to the ground and profaned / a kingdom and its princes.

The next verse mentions an apparently human agent of havoc,[13] nevertheless, the only “enemy” that counts and is named is the one to whom all these merciless acts of destruction are ascribed—the Deity himself.

איכה ב:ג גָּדַע בָּחֳרִי אַף כֹּל קֶרֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵשִׁיב אָחוֹר יְמִינוֹ מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב וַיִּבְעַר בְּיַעֲקֹב כְּאֵשׁ לֶהָבָה אָכְלָה סָבִיב.

Lam 2:3 He cut down in heated anger every horn of Israel.[14] He held back his right arm in the face of the enemy.[15] And he burned in Jacob like a fiery flame, consuming all around.

ב:ד דָּרַךְ קַשְׁתּוֹ כְּאוֹיֵב נִצָּב יְמִינוֹ כְּצָר וַיַּהֲרֹג כֹּל מַחֲמַדֵּי עָיִן בְּאֹהֶל בַּת צִיּוֹן שָׁפַךְ כָּאֵשׁ חֲמָתוֹ.

2:4 He drew[16] his bow like an enemy, his right hand steadied like a foe; And he slew every delight of the eye. Onto the tent of Daughter Zion[17] he poured his venom like fire.

God has determined that Judah should be devastated, and God executes the devastation in anger. This is in strong contrast to the Mesopotamian laments mentioned above where the human actors are cited by name.

The Gods and Goddesses of Sumer Cry

In the Sumerian laments, the gods, and particularly the goddesses, of the devastated cities cry over the desolation of the sites and the people.[18] For example, after mentioning some of the foreign elements that wrecked the city and its temples, the Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur continues:

The city they made into ruins—the people moan.
Its lady (the goddess) cries: “Alas, my city!”, cries “Alas, my house!”
Ningal (the goddess) cries: “Alas, my city!”, cries: “Alas, my house!”
“As for me, the woman, woe, the city has been destroyed, woe, the house has been destroyed,
“O Nanna (the male god, her counterpart), the shrine of Ur has been destroyed; its people have been smitten.”[19]

The Goddess Tries to Save Her City

The goddess is frustrated because when she had first learned that the high gods had determined to destroy the city, she did her best to intercede, using her tears as a weapon:

When they had commanded the utter destruction of Ur,
When they had ordered that its people be killed,
On that day, I did not forsake my city,
I did not neglect my land;
I shed my tears before (the sky god) An,
I myself made supplication before (the weather god) Enlil.
“Let not my city be destroyed!” I said to them,
“Let not its people perish!” I said to them.
But An would not change his word,
Enlil would not soothe my heart with …“It is good; so be it.”[20]

As a monotheistic work, Lamentations has no other divine personality, male or female, who could weep over the travesty. Moreover, unlike with the city gods of Mesopotamia, Lamentations has no balance between God perpetrating the calamity and God showing empathy toward the people, who grieve over the suffering that ensues.

The impression is created in Lamentations that the biblical Deity is unfeeling and cruel. He is unmoved by the profound human suffering he causes. But the classical sages (*chazal*) would not let that impression stand.

Rabbinic Midrash: Attributing Merciful Impulses to God

For the sages, as for many other texts in the Bible, the Divine is both just and punitive—and sensitive and merciful. God maneuvers between the principle of compassion (*middat ha-raḥamim*) and the principle of justice (*middat ha-din*). Accordingly, whereas the God of *Eikha* sheds no tears over the destruction He has wrought, the God of *Midrash Eikha Rabba* not only cries—he shows himself to be a virtuoso of grieving.[21]

For example, in one excerpt, the Deity wails over his temple using rhetoric that recalls the plaint of Ningal—“Alas, my city! Alas, my house!”—in the Sumerian lamentation quoted above:

אָמַר לָהֶן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְמַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת בּוֹאוּ וְנֵלֵךְ אֲנִי וְאַתֶּם וְנִרְאֶה בְּבֵיתִי מֶה עָשׂוּ אוֹיְבִים בּוֹ.

The Blessed Holy One said to the angels: “Let us go, I and you, so that we may see what the enemies have done to my House (temple).”

מִיָּד הָלַךְ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא וּמַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת וְיִרְמְיָה לְפָנָיו, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁרָאָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, אָמַר בְּוַדַּאי זֶהוּ בֵּיתִי וְזֶהוּ מְנוּחָתִי שֶׁבָּאוּ אוֹיְבִים וְעָשׂוּ בוֹ כִּרְצוֹנָם.

Straightaway went off the Blessed Holy One and the angels, with (the prophet) Jeremiah in the lead. When the Blessed Holy One saw the Holy Temple, he said: “This is indeed my House, and this is my Resting Place, into which enemies have entered and done as they pleased.”

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה הָיָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא בּוֹכֶה וְאוֹמֵר אוֹי לִי עַל בֵּיתִי, בָּנַי הֵיכָן אַתֶּם, כֹּהֲנַי הֵיכָן אַתָּם, אוֹהֲבַי הֵיכָן אַתֶּם, מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לָכֶם, הִתְרֵיתִי בָּכֶם וְלֹא חֲזַרְתֶּם בִּתְשׁוּבָה.[22]

At that moment the Blessed Holy One began crying and said: “Woe is me over my House! My children—where are you? My priests—where are you? My intimates—where are you? What can I do for you? I gave you warning, but you did not repent of your ways!”

Teaching the Angels How to Mourn

The angels want to participate in mourning the destruction, but they are unschooled in this practice. God insists on teaching them how to mourn.[23] In a passage that begins with a quote from Isaiah (22:12), God seems to adopt a female role and gesture (*Eikha Rabba*, Petiḥta 24):

וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹהִים צְבָאוֹת בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לִבְכִי וּלְמִסְפֵּד (וּלְקָרְחָה וְלַחֲגֹר שָׂק) . אָמְרוּ מַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת לְפָנָיו, רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, כְּתִיב ( תהלים צו, ו) : הוֹד וְהָדָר לְפָנָיו, וְאַתָּה אוֹמֵר כְּדֵין.

“The Lord God of Hosts called on that day for crying, and mourning, and shaving the head, and wearing sackcloth (all gestures of mourning).” The angels said before him: “O Master of the World! It is written (Psalms 96:6), ‘Majesty and glory go before him (God)’—and you can say something like this? (They think it demeaning for the Deity to engage in mourning rites.)

אֲמַר לְהוֹן אֲנָא מַלֵּיף לְכוֹן, הַיְינוּ הוּא דַאֲמַר (ישעיה לב, יא): פְּשֹׁטָה וְעֹרָה וַחֲגוֹרָה עַל חֲלָצָיִם, כָּךְ תִּהְיוּ מַסְפִּידִין עַל שָׁדַיִם סֹפְדִים, עַל חֻרְבָּן רִאשׁוֹן וְעַל חֻרְבָּן שֵׁנִי.

He said to them: “I will teach you! This is what (Isaiah 32:11) said: ‘Stripped, naked, and girded on the loins.’ That is how you mourn ‘beating the breasts’—over the first destruction (of the First Temple) and over the second destruction (of the Second Temple).

Each breast being beaten here correlates with one of the destroyed Temples.

God Weeps

Another text from *Eicha Rabbah* fills out the biblical text of Lamentations with ancillary episodes, seeking to show the sympathetic side of the punishing Deity, and insinuates the weeping Deity into the biblical source through an intertextual association, reading one text in light of another.[24]

Lamentations 1, as we saw above, presents the personified Jerusalem weeping. These verses recall to the rabbinic mind a verse from Jeremiah, in which Jeremiah employs some of the very same vocabulary in order to evoke his own tears over the national catastrophe:

ירמיה ח:כג מִי יִתֵּן רֹאשִׁי מַיִם וְעֵינִי מְקוֹר דִּמְעָה וְאֶבְכֶּה יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה אֵת חַלְלֵי בַת עַמִּי.

Jer 8:23 Would that my head were water, and my eye a fount of tears, that I might cry by day and night over the victims of the Daughter of My People!

Although it seems obvious that this wish is being expressed by Jeremiah, the sages make use of their characteristic interpretative devices in order to attribute it to the Deity (*Eikha Rabba,*Parasha 1):

מִי אָמַר הַפָּסוּק הַזֶּה, אִם תֹּאמַר יִרְמְיָה, אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא לֶאֱכֹל, אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא לִישֹּׁן, אֶלָּא מִי אֲמָרוֹ מִי שֶׁאֵין לְפָנָיו לֹא אֲכִילָה וְלֹא שֵׁנָה, דִּכְתִיב (תהלים קכא, ד): הִנֵּה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Who must have said this verse? If you say Jeremiah, could he do without eating? Could he do without sleeping? (In other words, if all he does is weep, he can neither eat nor sleep.)

Rather, who must have said this verse is one for whom there is no eating and no sleeping, as it is written (Psalms 121:4): “The Guardian of Israel never slumbers and never sleeps.”

In such a tightly reasoned reading, only God could have spoken the verse. God brings himself to weep over the devastation that he causes.

God Is Overwhelmed by Weeping

According to the same midrashic work, the Deity so wearies himself with weeping that he must get help. This too is based on a close reading of a passage in Jeremiah (9:16-17). YHWH tells the prophet (*Eikha Rabba*, Petiḥta 2):

ירמיה ט:טז ...הִתְבּוֹנְנוּ וְקִרְאוּ לַמְקוֹנְנוֹת וּתְבוֹאֶינָה וְאֶל הַחֲכָמוֹת שִׁלְחוּ וְתָבוֹאנָה

Jer 9:16 …Look around, and summon the female keeners, that they come; and send for the wise women, that they come.

ט:יז וּתְמַהֵרְנָה וְתִשֶּׂנָה עָלֵינוּ נֶהִי וְתֵרַדְנָה עֵינֵינוּ דִּמְעָה וְעַפְעַפֵּינוּ יִזְּלוּ מָיִם.

9:17 Let them hurry and raise up a wailing for us; and let our eyes run with tears and our eyeballs flow with water!

The midrashist discerns that the Deity here speaks in the first person plural. Let the keeners wail for *us*; let *our* eyes flow with tears. God includes himself as a benefactor of the women mourners’ services.

The Deity, infers the midrash, had so tired himself with mourning over the destruction of the northern kingdom and other disasters that he felt compelled to wreak on the people of Israel and Judah, that he would need assistance in properly grieving over the destruction of Jerusalem.

The image of a callous God that is represented in *Eikha* is rounded out by a far more empathetic God in *Midrash Eikha*.[25]

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/where-are-gods-tears-in-lamentations)

\* I dedicate this piece to the memory of Prof. Yeshayahu Maori, a much beloved scholar and teacher.

1. See, e.g., Nancy C. Lee, *Lyrics of Lament: From Tragedy to Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
2. Gershom Scholem, “On Lament and Lamentation,” trans. from German Lina Barouch and Paula Schwebel, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21 (2014): 4–12 [p.7].
3. See Paul Joyce, “Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), pp. 304-20. Joyce references and applies the well-known theories of Yorick Spiegel and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross concerning the stages of mourning and dying.
4. Mourning can entail anger as well. See ibid.; also F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 36-41. We should not be surprised to find grief, a process beyond language, and anger, taking the form of accusation, intermixed in a work of lamentation. In fact, the larger part of the biblical book of Lamentations is grievance and complaint, wagging a finger of indictment against the God who would so mercilessly, so disproportionately, rain his wrath down on his people. See Edward L. Greenstein, “The Wrath at God in the Book of Lamentations,” in *The Problem of Evil and Its Symbols in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Henning G. Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (London-New York: T & T Clark International/Continuum, 2004), pp. 29-42.
5. See Edward L. Greenstein, “The Book of Lamentations: Response to Destruction or Ritual of Rebuilding?” in *Religious Responses to Political Crisis*, ed. Henning G. Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (London-New York: T & T Clark International, 2008), pp. 52-71.
6. Several different voices of lamentation can be found in *Eikha*, These voices may even seem to be in dialogue or debate. See my [“Voices in Lamentations: Dialogues in Trauma,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/voices-in-lamentations-dialogues-in-trauma) *TheTorah.com* (2015). Although tradition identifies the author of Lamentations as the more or less contemporaneous prophet Jeremiah, there are many reasons to disavow this tradition, not least of which is the poet’s negative views of the prophets (see 2:9; 4:13). Almost any modern commentary will enumerate the reasons. Even the traditionalist commentary of Yael Ziegler (*Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World* [Jerusalem: Maggid, 2021], pp. 3-7), takes an ambivalent position. However, the speakers in the book are not the author—there are several speakers, including some females.
7. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
8. See, e.g., Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), pp. 1-3.
9. The five laments are over Ur, Sumer and Ur, Nippur, Uruk, and Eridu. They are all available in English editions. For a survey, see Willam W. Hallo, “Lamentations and Prayers in Sumer and Akkad,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (4 vols.; New York: Scribner’s, 1995), vol.3, pp. 1871-1881. For more detail, see Nili Samet, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), pp. 1-13. For an overview of the city lament genre in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, see Edward L. Greenstein, “Lamentation and Lament in the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 67-84.
10. Samet, *The Lamentation*,p. 57. Cf. from the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur, line 380: “Laments sounded all along its city wall”; Michalowski, *The Lamentation*, p. 61.
11. For analysis of the parallels, without concluding that there is a direct relationship, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993). Editor’s note: See also, Nili Samet, [“The Sumerian City Laments and the Book of Lamentations,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-sumerian-city-laments-and-the-book-of-lamentations) *TheTorah* (2015). For the argument that Lamentations is more like a cultic lament than a city lament, see Uri Gabbay, [“The Genre of Lamentations,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-genre-of-lamentations) *TheTorah* (2017).
12. The holy city and its temple (see, e.g., Isa. 66:1).
13. It is striking that, in contrast to the Mesopotamian laments, *Eikha* never mentions the agency of Babylonia. The mention of Edom in Lam. 4:21-22 alludes to an apparent scavenging role in the wake of the destruction; but to examine this requires a lengthy and detailed discussion.
14. The people is likened to a horned animal, like a gazelle, whose pride and beauty are dashed with the removal of its horns.
15. By holding back his saving power, he allowed the enemy to do as it pleased.
16. Literally, “stepped” on the bow, holding it steady as he pulled back the string.
17. The Temple.
18. See the classic essay by Samuel Noah Kramer, “The Weeping Goddess: Sumerian Prototypes of the *Mater Dolorosa*,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983), pp. 69-80. For women as keeners in the Bible and in other cultures, see, e.g., Nancy C. Lee, *The Singers of Lamentations: Cities under Siege, from Jerusalem to Sarajevo* (Leiden: Brill, 2002)—and see further below.
19. Samet, *The Lamentation*, p. 67.
20. Ibid., p. 63.
21. See further Alan Mintz, *Ḥurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 49-83. For the translation and discussion of many of the pertinent passages, see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 24-34. For translations of several lengthy passages from *Midrash Eikha Rabba*, see David G. Roskies (ed.), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia-New York-Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), pp. 51-60. For extensive literary and thematic analysis of this midrashic work, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *The Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; Hebrew original published 1996).
22. From *Midrash Eikha Rabba*, Petiḥta 24 (ed. Solomon Buber, p. 25). This vocalized text is taken from Sefaria.
23. This excerpt is also taken from *Midrash Eikha Rabba*, Petiḥta 24 (ed. Solomon Buber, pp. 24-25). The vocalized Hebrew text is taken from Sefaria.
24. For the centrality of intertextual interpretation in midrash, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Such readings are often if not usually in both directions. See, e.g., Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011).
25. For this theological function of midrash, see, e.g., Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith, and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005).