**THOUGHTS ON LAMENTATIONS**

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**Restoring the Glorious Past**

The penultimate verse of Megillat Eichah is one of the best known Scriptural citations in Hebrew liturgy because it is recited at the conclusion of the Torah service as the curtains of the ark are closed.  “Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old (Lamentations 5:21).”  In its original Biblical context, the concluding section of the verse represents a wish for God to restore a recently destroyed Judah and Jerusalem to their former glories, when the latter was “great with people” and the former was “great among nations” and “princess among states” (1:1).

Because Lamentations 5:21 does not explicitly state which of the better moments in Israel’s past should be renewed at the time of the redemption, the homilists were free to offer suggestions (Lamentations Rabbah 5):

A) “The days of old” refers to the era of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.  The linguistic basis for this interpretation is the presence of the word קדם in Lamentations and in Genesis 3:24.  Conceptually, the homilist read the dirge as a plea for a return to the conditions in which primordial man lived.  Sin, or rather the urge to sin, was unknown.  Man’s relationship with God, the focus of the first half of Lamentations 5:21, was not yet compromised by the stain of iniquity.  Because the Destruction of the First Temple was not interpreted as an arbitrary edict by an indifferent or malevolent god, but rather a deserved punishment imposed upon a wayward and corrupt people, reversion to a world without sin would mean a world without the horrors of that Destruction.

B) Lamentations 5:21 is compared to another well known Scriptural verse, recited thrice daily upon the conclusion of the silent Amida prayer.  “Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of yore and in the years of old (Malachi 3:4).”  “The days of yore” refers to Moses and “the years of old” refers to Solomon.  Metzudat David noted that both in the days of Moses and of Solomon a heavenly fire came down to the newly built altar and consumed the dedication sacrifices of the Wilderness Tabernacle and the First Holy Temple, respectively.  Since Lamentations was composed in the wake of the Temple’s destruction, and at a time when propitiating God with flesh offerings was considered essential to maintaining a favorable relationship with Him, the suggestion that its author had in mind a glorious moment in Israel’s cultic history seems quite reasonable.

Alternatively, identifying the era of Solomon as the glorious “years of old” relates not to the religious developments of his generation but to the material prosperity and physical safety attained during his kingship.  “All the days of Solomon, Judah and Israel from Dan to Beer-Sheba dwelt in safety, everyone under his own vine and under his own fig tree (I King 5:5).  The memories of material overabundance and security from external threat contrast with Lamentations’ depiction of famine-induced cannibalism and the mass rape of the daughters of Zion by the invading marauders.

C) Rabbi Judah the Patriarch understood “the days of yore” to refer to Noah and the “years of old” as referring to Abel.  The linguistic basis for the first half of Rabbi’s exegesis is a comparison between כימי in Malachi and כי מי in the verse “For this to Me is like the waters of Noah (Isaiah 54:9).”  The last chapter of Lamentations represent the viewpoint of the handful of Judahite survivors who stayed in Zion after the masses either were forcibly exiled to Babylonia or fled to Egypt.  They are the remnant of Israel, hoping for rebirth; Noah was the remnant of humanity hoping for a chance to repopulate the world.  The days of Abel are remembered fondly for predating the institution of idolatry – based on the understanding of Genesis 4:26 that false worship began in the subsequent generation of Enosh.  The late first Temple era prophets railed against the idolatrous tendencies of the contemporary Judahites (Jeremiah 2:11).  Their theological perversion was key to God’s decision to allow the Destruction to occur.   Accordingly, a renewal of the conditions of yesteryear would include the elimination of idolatry (see Yoma 69b).

A verse similar to Lamentations 5:21 appears at the end of the Haphtarah for Shabbat Hazon (the Sabbath before Tisha b’Av), and is the basis for the eleventh blessing of the weekday Amida.  “I will restore your magistrates as of old and your counselors as of yore.  After that you shall be called City of Righteousness, Faithful City (Isaiah 1:26).”  A late Aggadic text identifies the magistrates as Moses and Aaron and the counselors as David and Solomon (Midrash Zuta Eichah 1).

Lamentations wishes for the future to be better than the present.  The mechanism for that is returning to the conditions of a distant past.  This is an important theme in Judaism.  The eminent historian Jacob Katz noted that pre-modern European Jewry was a traditionalist society.  It collectively believed that the solutions to its present problems were to be found in the received tradition and through emulating the past.  Arguably, this way of thinking is a necessary element in the psyche and weltanschauung of a people which is steadfastly committed to belief in, and the preservation of, an ancient Revealed body of knowledge, law, and ethical code.

Many moderns do not embrace this kind of traditionalism.  They assume that the world is on the march toward a much better future as it escapes the barbarism of the past (though plainly the practices of ISIS constitute a counter-example to such a view).  Theodore Parker’s opinion -- made famous by Martin Luther King Jr. – was that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”  On a global level, the Bible might be seen to agree with that sentiment.  Prophetic eschatology emphasizes the cessation of human conflict and the advent of universal human brotherhood.  At that time, “the land will be filled with knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah 11:9).”

But for us Jews as a nation/people/family/race/ethnos, a belief in slow (and unsteady) moral progress would have been insufficient to preserve our distinct identity during the centuries of exile.  The ability to look back at the grandeur of the Hebrew past was absolutely necessary for generations of our displaced ancestors to maintain a belief in, and to have the audacity to hope for, a glorious national future.