

Israel, Gaza, and us:
Feeling others' pain in a time of war

Lament for Be'eri
by Yagel Harush

How has Be'eri, my well, become my grave?
And my day of light turned into darkness?
All my fruit is ruined and my song overturned.
My eyes pour out water from the depths of my brokenness.

For so many of us, the past year has been a year of anguish like no other. It is hard to adequately describe the pain that we have experienced. The horror of the attack on October 7th. The hundreds of dead, young and old, Jews and non-Jews, kibbutzniks and city dwellers, a tragedy touching every part of Israeli society. The steady stream of stories of people's experiences during the attack, hiding and hoping, hearing loved ones' last words, stories of those who survived and those who died. The trauma that enveloped the whole country, and many of us here, in reaction to that day. And then the continuing, unending agony of the hostages held underground, babies and young people, the ill and infirm, never knowing who was alive or dead or if they would ever return, along with the slow stream of deaths of mostly young soldiers in combat in Gaza. It is, as they say in Israel, *lo y'uman* and *lo yitpas* – impossible to believe and impossible to grasp, just as hearing of the murder of six hostages at point blank range by the terrorists holding them is impossible for us to bear. This pain is impossible to bear. So what are we to do?

At the same time, there is immense, unbelievable pain on the other side of the border between Israel and Gaza, the pain of the thousands of innocents who have been killed, caught between Hamas and the IDF. We can blame Hamas for hiding behind civilians, for building tunnels under schools and weapon storage facilities under mosques, for bringing destruction on Gaza and death to its citizens. And we can blame the Israeli government for not taking enough care to minimize civilian casualties, for using excess force and enormous bombs that take the lives of the innocent along with combatants. But no matter whom we blame, the pain remains, the unending pain of parents who have lost children, the uncomprehending pain of orphans who have lost their parents, the hopeless pain of people living in despair in a war zone where no place seems safe. This pain, too, is impossible to believe and impossible to grasp; this pain, too, is impossible to bear. So what are we to do?

Yagel Harush wrote his heartbreaking lament about the slaughter at Kibbutz Be'eri to give voice to the pain, as he said, "to clothe the pain with words"¹ For those who know Hebrew, you may have heard that he begins each stanza with the word *eichah* – "how" – to echo the Book of Lamentations, which is known in Hebrew as *Eichah*. The Book of

¹ <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/judaism/776332/>

Lamentations repeatedly asks “How?” How could tragedy have struck? How could the people have been slaughtered? How could horrors have been perpetrated on them? And how can we bear to continue living in a world where such things happen?

Here in our own community, although at a remove from the violence that has engulfed the Middle East, we have held the pain of the severe illnesses and sudden deaths of our members that have wrenched our hearts, along with the prolonged dying of others that has been equally difficult to witness. We have held each other and tried to comfort each other when it seemed that no comfort could come. We have faced timely and untimely deaths together, and we have also asked, “How?” How could our loved ones suffer? How could lives of beauty and promise, of love and caring, of curiosity and intellectual achievement, be cut short? How could there be meaning in the suffering we have beheld? Whether we are feeling the pain of relatives and friends close by or strangers far away that we have never met, whether we are mourning losses that came in their time or those that came suddenly and unexpectedly when we were unprepared, the one thing that binds us together in this moment of Yizkor, this moment of memory, is the pain in our hearts. What can we do about it? How can we bear it?

The Book of Lamentations raises this question again and again, but it offers no answer. At its end, however, it offers us the verse that we recite whenever we put the Torah back in the Ark:

השיבנו ה' אליך ונשובה
חדש ימינו בקדם
HASHIVEINU ADONAI EILECHA V'NASHUVAH
HADESH YAMEINU K'KEDEM
“Return us to You, God, and we shall return;
Renew our days as of old”²

One way to interpret this verse is that in our pain, our despair, and our hopelessness, we should never lose touch with what is divine in us and in each other. The pain we feel is a reminder to keep in close contact with what is most important, even and especially at the time when it is most difficult.

The lesson of this verse is necessary because one of the chief human responses to pain that touches us deeply is to shield ourselves from any other possible source of pain, like the narrator in the Book of Lamentations who declares, “Look around and see: Is there any pain like my pain?! ”³ Sometimes protecting ourselves is necessary and appropriate, as when we are mourning a personal loss. Each moment of individual mourning deserves its own space; we do not ask that mourners take on any more pain at that time. But when we are mourning a

² Lamentations 5:21.

³ Lamentations 1:12.

communal loss, we can fall into the trap of privileging our own pain to such a great extent that we deny that any other pain exists. In a time of war, this can make us willfully deny that there are any innocents on the other side, deny that their deaths trouble us in the slightest, deny that even the deaths of children do anything to tear away the protective shield we have drawn around our hearts. The pain we are experiencing, and our wish not to experience any more, can even make us attack anyone who speaks of other's pain, venting our anger—the close cousin of pain—on them, even if they really have nothing to do with what is causing us pain.

This is not just a theoretical, possible reaction. We have seen this kind of pain-turned-to-anger right here in this city and, sadly, right here inside our community during the past year, with members reacting harshly to each other for mentioning the pain of a group that their hearts are closed to. This kind of anger directed at each other is only destructive. It will not stop the war or drive it to our preferred conclusion. It will not do a thing to help or save anyone in Israel or in Gaza, or in the most recent conflict in Lebanon. But it will, if left unchecked, alienate us from each other and deprive us of the support of our community at the time we most need it. And if things go further, it will consume this community, and many American Jewish communities, and tear them apart.

How do we open ourselves to the pain that we may be protecting ourselves from? How do we learn to feel some of the pain that others in our community are feeling, instead of only being willing to accept the existence of the particular pain of our hearts? I think we can learn from two Biblical stories that involve conflict between the Israelites and their enemies, Amalek and Canaan. If you remember, Amalek was the group that attacked the Israelites from the rear as they were fleeing from Egypt, exhausted and faint.⁴ Amalek attacked those who were the weakest, the young and the old, a slaughter of innocents. For this reason, God declared that when there is opportunity, the people should blot out the memory of Amalek, adding, "Don't forget!"⁵

But when the moment comes, and King Saul is commanded to utterly destroy Amalek,⁶ he does not, leaving many of them and, most importantly, their king, Agag, alive.⁷ Samuel the prophet, rebuking Saul, takes the sword himself to slay the king of his people's greatest enemy. And then something strange happens. The perspective of the text seems to shift to allow us to see the pain of King Agag as he approaches death, and even the projected pain of his family. As Samuel calls him forward, the text says, "Agag approached him with faltering steps, saying, 'Ah, bitter death is at hand!'" Then Samuel says, "As your sword has bereaved women, so shall your mother be bereaved among women," and kills him. The moral position of the text is clear: Amalek is the Israelites' greatest enemy, who attacked them when they were at their weakest, and killing their king is a just act. Yet at the same time the text emphasizes the humanity of that enemy and opens up his and his family's very human pain to our eyes.

⁴ Deuteronomy 25:17-18.

⁵ Deuteronomy 25:19.

⁶ I Samuel 15:1-3.

⁷ I Samuel 15:7-9.

An oddly similar thing happens in the case of the conflict between the Israelites, led by the prophet D'vorah, and the Canaanites, led by their general, Sisera. The Canaanites oppress the Israelites for years until D'vorah receives word from God that the time has come for the Israelites to fight them off. Although her own general, Barak, is reluctant, she persuades him to fight by her side, and they route the Canaanite army, with Sisera escaping on foot.⁸ Sisera happens upon the campsite of a woman named Ya'el, who offers him seeming hospitality, but when he falls asleep she pounds a tent peg through his temple and kills him.⁹ D'vorah and Barak sing a song of victory, but in the middle of it, once again, the perspective of the text starts to slip to allow us to see the pathos and the pain of Sisera's mother, waiting for him to return from the field of battle that has taken his life:

Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
Behind the lattice she wailed:
"Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"¹⁰

While the text presents us with a literal window into the pain of Sisera's mother, the Talmud goes further in connecting us with her through the word used here for "wailed," a very unusual word, *va-t'yabev*. The sage Abaye teaches that this word is equivalent to the word for the long "cry" (*t'ki'ah*) of the shofar that we sound on Rosh Hashanah to arouse God's mercy for us, while other sages connect it to the three shorter "moans" (*sh'varim*) of the shofar or to the much shorter "whimpers" (*t'ru'ah*).¹¹ Natan ben Yehiel, an 11th century commentator known as the Aruch, goes even further, teaching that the entire custom of sounding the shofar 100 times on Rosh Hashanah stems from Sisera's mother, since, according to his interpretation, she actually uttered 100 cries in her pain for her son.¹² We are taught, then, that our cries to God are modeled on the cries of a non-Jewish mother in her anguish for her son, who was an enemy of the Israelites. It is her example of expressing pain through wailing that we follow when we approach God on the High Holidays.

These texts present extreme cases, where non-Israelite leaders who are the very cause of the Israelites' pain are nonetheless humanized as they die, and we see and even emulate the pain of their mothers as well. But these cases do suggest that in our less extreme case, where we know that those among us are carrying the pain of the deaths of blameless relatives and close friends, and we know that others among us are carrying the pain of the deaths of innocents in Israel, in Gaza, and in Lebanon, we can and should allow at least some of that pain into our hearts. We do this not to bow to one side or the other but to retain our humanity,

⁸ Judges 4:6-15.

⁹ Judges 4:17-21.

¹⁰ Judges 5:28.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 33b.

¹² While the reasoning of the Aruch's interpretation is not stated explicitly, some have speculated that it is based on the *gematria* (numerical value) of the Hebrew words for "through the window," which is 99, plus the word "wail," to make 100.

acknowledging and feeling the full anguish of this situation, the pain it is causing on all sides. We can allow the cries of the pain of the bereaved and the blood crying out from the ground to touch us, to soften our hearts, and make us more open to the web of humanity who are suffering.

I am not saying that doing this is easy, and it certainly goes against our natural human instinct to protect ourselves from pain. But it may be the only way, the only way to bear the unbearable, to support each other in the face of unimaginable loss, and to keep our hearts human. No one will be able to tell which tears on our faces are for the losses of our community, which are for the children of Israel, which are for the children of Gaza, and which for the children of Lebanon; only we will know.

Rachel Goldberg Polin, the mother of Hersh Goldberg Polin who was abducted and held as a hostage on October 7th and then murdered in late August, wrote this poem in December, while he was in captivity, called "One Tiny Seed":

There is a Yiddish lullaby that says, "Your mother will cry a
thousand tears before you grow to be a man."
I have cried a million tears in the last 67 days.
We all have.
And I know
...way over there,
There is another woman who looks just like me
Because we are all so very similar
She has also been crying...
All those tears.
Our sea of tears
They all taste the same.
Can we take them, gather them up, and remove the salt,
And then pour them over our desert of despair...
And plant one tiny seed
A seed wrapped in fear, trauma, war, pain and hope?
And see what grows ...

Yagel Harush completed his lament with a similar expression of hope in our mingled tears:

And how I do wonder, Creator of the heavens,
how long a people can remain in turmoil?
How long will we be cast down to the earth?
Rise up, now, and light my candle.
And from Your storehouse of compassion, heal my brokenness.
And may my weeping eyes provide water for Be'eri.

Ken y'hi ratzon – so may this be God's will.