

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter LVII: Kinnot (Lamentations)

Essay 11: With self-degradation, we ask G-d to remember us and to regret our exile.

מִדְרָשׁ על פסוק זכר-עניי ומרודי, פנסת ישראל אומרת לפני הקב"ה, רבונו של עולם, זכור ענייין שענייתי, ומרודי שמרדתי בך, ויסורין שהרוניתי לענה נראש, יצאו אלו באלו. זכור תנפור. תני רבי חייא משל למלך שיוצא למלחמה והיו בנני עמו והיו מקנטין אותו. למחר יצא המלך לבדו ולא היו בנני עמו, אמר המלך הלואי היו בנני עמי נאפילו היו מקניטין אותי. ואית תלתא פסוקים חד מי-תנני במדבר מלון ארחים. וכתוב בן-אדם בית ישראל ישבים על-אדמתם וכו'. והדין: זכור תנפור ותשום עלי נפשי. אמר רבי יודן זכור תנפור, יודע אני שאתה זוכר אומות העולם, אבל מה אעשה ותשום עלי נפשי, מתלא אמרה עד דשמינא עבידא קטינא, נפשיה דקטינא נפקת עכ"ל.

Midrash Lam. Rabbah reads:

There is a verse: **“To recall my distress and my straying was wormwood and poison”** (Lam. 3:19). **The Assembly of Israel¹ said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: “Master of the universe, recall the distress with which I distressed You, and my straying when I rebelled against You, and the suffering with which I have filled You, the ‘wormwood and poison.’ Let them cancel one another.”** [In other words, let the wormwood and poison that I’m experiencing serve as adequate punishment against my misdeeds.]

There is a verse: **“When remembering, my soul is bowed down within me”** (Lam. 3:20). **Rabbi Chiyya taught, “There is a parable of a king who goes out to war and his sons were with him and they provoked him. The next day, the king went out by himself and his sons were not with him. The king said: ‘If only my sons were with me, even though they provoke me.’** The king is the Holy One, blessed be He, and the sons, these are Israel. When Israel went out to war, the Holy One, blessed be He, went out with them. When they provoked Him, He did not go out with them. When Israel was not in the land, He said: ‘If only Israel were with me, even though they provoke me.’ ”

* English translation: Copyright © 2020 by Charles S. Stein.

¹ The term Assembly of Israel (כנסת ישראל) (*Knesset Yisrael*) could have different meanings. It could simply refer to the Jewish people; or it could refer to the Great Assembly (כנסת הגדולה) (*Knesset ha-Gedola*), the wise men who led Israel from the end of the Biblical prophets through the Mishnaic period; or in Kabbalistic terms, it could refer to the sefira of Malchut, kingship. In this essay, the Assembly of Israel is responsible for the Jewish people, and is equated not with the human leadership, but with the sefira of Malchut.

Rabbi Chiyya continued: **There are three verses. The first is: “Oh, to be in the wilderness, at an encampment for wayfarers! Oh, to leave my people, to go away from them, for they are all adulterers, a band of rogues.”** (Jer. 9:1). [But now G-d thinks:] Who will give My people to be with me, as they were at the beginning, in the wilderness!

And it is written [in the second verse], **“O mortal, when the House of Israel dwelt on their own soil**, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their ways were in My sight like the uncleanness of a menstrually impure woman.” (Ezek. 36:17).

And [the third verse], **this one: “When remembering, my soul is bowed down within me”** (Lam. 3:20).

Rabbi Yudan said: “ ‘When remembering,’ I know that you remember the nations of the world, but what will I do? ‘My soul is bowed down within me.’ ” So it is said: **‘The fat becomes small and the small one dies.’ ”**

- Midrash Lam. Rabbah 3:7

The Matnot Kehuna² explains “The fat becomes small and the small one dies”: “Before the fat animal becomes small and inferior, the sick soul exits and he won’t be able to see the inferiority and poverty of the fat one.” In other words, Rabbi Yudan’s interpretation of the verse is that G-d will remember the evil perpetuated by the “fat” nations of the world against us, and they will have their downfall (i.e., become small), but the prophet is asking what he will do while waiting, that as an individual, he may not live to see this downfall of the nations, and thus he laments.

צָרִיד עֵינַי עַל טַעֲנָה זוֹ שֶׁל הַכְּנָסֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, זְכוּר עַנְוֵינִי וְכוּ', יֵצְאוּ אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֵלוּי. דְּמַמָּה נִפְשָׁד, אִם הַיְיִסּוּרִין שֶׁבָּאוּ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם כְּדָאִים לְפִי חוֹמֵר עֲוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם שְׁעֵשׂוּ, קִשָּׁה. וְכִי קָב"ה עֲבִיד דִּינָא בְּלֵא דִּינָא לְשִׁלוּחַ לְהֵם יִיסּוּרִין אַחֲרֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי שֶׁכָּבַר בְּמַרְקוֹ עֲוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם, דְּאִיצְטְרִיד לְכְנָסֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לִזְמַר זְכוּר וְכוּ' יֵצְאוּ אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֵלוּי? וְאִם אֵינָם כְּדָאִים מַה זֶה טַעֲנָה, יֵצְאוּ אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֵלוּי, הֲלֵא עֲדִינִי לֹא מַרְקוֹ הַחֲטָאִים כְּפִי הַצּוֹרֵד?

This plea of the Assembly of Israel, “Recall the distress Let them cancel one another,” requires examination, whichever way one looks at it. If the sufferings that came upon Israel were sufficient according to the severity of their intentional transgressions, it is difficult to understand the plea. For does [the] Holy One, Blessed Be, execute justice without justice, to send them other sufferings after their transgressions have already been cleansed, such that it’s necessary for the Assembly of Israel to say, “recall Let them cancel one another”? If [the sufferings] were not sufficient, what is this plea, “Let them cancel one another,” for they haven’t yet cleansed the sins as needed?

² Rabbi Issachar Katz-Berman (? Volhynia–1598 Palestine?), a rabbi in various communities in Poland, known especially for Matnot Kehuna (Krakow 1588), a Midrashic commentary, and Mareh Kohen (Krakow 1589), an index on the Zohar.

ועוד אמאי הפסיק בין עינניין שעניתי וייסורין שהרוינתני? הנה לו לומר ומרודי או קודם ענניין [ן] או לאחר לענה. ועוד אמאי פתח בתחלה בלשון מדבר בעדו עניי ומרודי, ואחר כך סיים לענה ראש ולא אמר לענ[ת]י וראשי? ועוד בפירושו זכור תזכור דתני רבי חייא וכו', שרצונו לומר שהקב"ה יזכור ממנו ויצטער על מה שהגלה אותו, איך שייך סיפא דקרא ותשום עלי נפשי? הנה לו לומר זכור תזכור ותשום עליך נפשה, שהפנסת ישראל היא מדברת, ובמאי פליגי ר' יודן.

Furthermore, the Assembly of Israel essentially said, “Recall *Your* distress, *my* straying, and *Your* suffering, the wormwood and poison.” **Why is there an interruption** with the introduction of the words “*my* straying” **between “the distress with which I distressed You”** (i.e., “*Your* distress”) and “**the suffering with which I have filled You**” (i.e., “*Your* suffering”)? **[The author]** of the Midrash **should have said “and my straying” either before “the distress which I distressed You” or after “wormwood and poison.”** In other words, wouldn’t it have made more sense to write, “Recall *my* straying when I rebelled against You: the distress which I distressed *You*, and the suffering with which I have filled *You*, the wormwood and poison,” or to write, “Recall the distress which I distressed *You*, and the suffering with which I have filled *You*, the wormwood and poison—*my* straying when I rebelled against You”? **Furthermore, why does [the author of the Midrash] open with language speaking for itself, “my distress” and “my straying,” and afterward conclude with “wormwood and poison,” and not explain the Scripture to say, “my wormwood and my poison”?** **Further, in the explanation of, “When remembering, my soul is bowed down within me”** (Lam. 3:20), for which the Midrash comments: **Rabbi Chiyya taught the parable about the king going out to war, for which [the author of the Midrash] wants to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will remember us and will regret that He exiled us, what is the relevance of the end of the verse, “my soul is bowed down within me”?** According to the Midrash, **[Jeremiah] should have said, “When remembering, Your soul is bowed down within You,” for the Assembly of Israel was the one speaking to G-d. Finally, with what is Rabbi Yudan disagreeing**, for it seems that he simply repeated the same words offered by Rabbi Chiyya, “My soul is bowed down within me”?

ולבאר כל הספקות נקדים לשון הזהר פרשת אחרי מות (דף ע"ד) וז"ל: תא חזי, כל זמנא דישראל רחוקין מהיכלא דמלכא, כפיכול מטרוניתא איתרחקת עמהון. מאי טעמא. בגין דמטרוניתא לא אקדימת קיסטא להאי בר, לאלקא ליה, למהד באורח מישר. בגין דמלכא לא אלקי לבר נש לעלמין. אלא שביק פלא בידא דמטרוניתא, לאנהגא היכלא, ולא לקא ברה, ולדברא ליה באורח קשוט, לקבליה דמלכא. ורזא דמלה כתיב, ובפשעכם שלחה אפכם. אמכם דא פנסת ישראל, עכ"ל.

To explain all the doubts, we will advance the language of the Zohar from parshat Acharei Mot (III: page 74a):

Come and see, as long as Israel are distanced from the king’s palace, it is as though the queen distances herself with them from the king. What is the point? For the queen doesn’t hasten to use her staff to flog this son so that he will walk in a straight path. For the king never flogs a person; rather, he leaves everything in the hands of the queen, to manage the palace and to flog her son and to lead him to the path of truth, rather than the king doing so himself.

The esoteric secret of the matter is that which is written: “The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother admonished him” (Prov. 31:1). His mother, this is Bathsheba.³ After all, the Scripture says: “The proverbs of Solomon: A wise son brings joy to his father; a dull son is his mother’s sorrow” (Prov. 10:1). His mother’s grief is certain. See what is written: “A wise son brings joy to his father.” As long as this son walks in a straight path and is wise, his father will be happy. This is the Holy King Above.⁴ Just a happy father. [But if] this son is found on the wrong path, what is written? “A dull son is his mother’s sorrow.” **The esoteric secret of the matter is written: “And your mother dismissed you for your crimes” (Isaiah 50:1). Your mother, this is the Assembly of Israel [i.e., the sefira of Malchut, kingship].**⁵

- Zohar III: 74a

ואף על המדרש הקדוש הזה יש לתמוה [ה] היכן מצינו שהאם מצווה להנהיג בניה בתורה ובמצוות, והלא החיוב הוא על האב דוקא? ובהדיא אמרינו בפירק קמא דקידושין (דף כ"ט) האב חייב בבגו למולו לפדותו וללמדו תורה ולהשיאו אשה וללמדו אומנות וכו'. איהי מנלן דלא מחייבא וכו'. ובכולהו מפיק התם מקראי שהאם אינה מצווית לעשות לבנו, ובכמה דוכתין גמי אמרינו שהאם אינה מחוייבת לסגף בניה למצוות. ואם כן קשה למה הקב"ה שנקרא אב דכתוב בני בכרי ישראל וכדאיתא התם בזהר רוצה להעניש את האם דהיינו פנסת ישראל בשביל שלא הנהיגה אותנו בדרך אמת, והוא אינו רוצה לעשות כלום.

Even regarding this holy Midrash, one has to wonder where we find that the mother is the one obligated to lead her son in Torah and the commandments, for isn't this an obligation of the father? In explanation, it says in the first chapter of tractate Kiddushin (page 29a), “The father is obligated to his son to circumcise him, and to redeem him [if he is a firstborn son who must be redeemed by payment to a priest], and to teach him Torah, and to marry him to a woman, and to teach him a trade, etc. . . . From where do we [derive] that [his mother] is not obligated [to circumcise her son]? As it is written: ‘[And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old,] as G-d commanded him’ (Gen. 21:4). [G-d commanded] him, and not her.” With regard to all of these cases, circumcision, redemption, education, etc., [the ruling] that the father is obligated is brought out there in Kiddushin 29a, from verses, for the mother is not commanded to do these things for his son, and in a few places, it even says explicitly that the mother is not obligated to educate her sons in the commandments. If so, it is difficult why the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who is called “Father”—as it is written, “Israel

³ According to tradition, Lemuel is another name for King Solomon. Sanhedrin 70b cites Prov. 31:1, saying that Bathsheba had Solomon bound to a pillar and flogged for excessive drinking. See also Lev. Rabbah 12:5. From the standpoint of Kabbala, the Perush HaSulam commentary on the Zohar, by Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag (1886–1955), adds a note here that the reference to Bathsheba is a reference to the sefira of Malchut, kingship.

⁴ The Perush HaSulam explains that this refers to Ze’ir Anpin. (This is a revealed aspect of G-d in Kabbalah, comprising the emotional sefirot attributes: Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod and Yesod.)

⁵ The Perush HaSulam adds a note here that the Assembly of Israel is also a reference to the sefira of Malchut, kingship.

is My first-born son” (Ex. 4:22), and as brought here in the Zohar—wants to punish the mother, who is the Assembly of Israel, for not leading us in the path of truth, when He does not want to do anything as far as leading us in the path of truth.

וְנִשְׁלוּם שֶׁהַקַּב"ה נָתַן הַבְּחִירָה לְאָדָם כְּדֵי שְׂיִהְיֶה לוֹ מִמְּנָה שְׂכָר וְעוֹנֶשׁ. וְאִם הָיָה הַקַּב"ה עֹצְמוֹ מְדַרְיָה אוֹתָנוּ בְּדַרְיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל חַיֵּינוּ מוֹכְרֵי חַיִּים לְהַיּוֹת צְדִיקִים, שְׂהַיָּצֵר הָרַע לֹא הָיָה לוֹ עוֹד פֶּחַ לְהַעֲזִיב פְּנֵיו נֶגְדַּר רְצוֹן הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׂמוֹ. וְשׂוֹב לֹא הָיָה לָנוּ בְּקִיּוּם הַמִּצְוֹת שׂוֹם שְׂכָר, וְלָכֵן מָה עֲשֵׂה הַקַּב"ה? הַגִּיט זֶה לְכַנְסֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל הַפְּגָמִים שְׂאָנוּ עוֹשִׂים אֵינָם מְגִיעִים עַד הַקַּב"ה חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם, שְׂאֵם כֵּן לֹא הָיָה עוֹד חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם תְּרוּפָה לְמַכּוֹתֵינוּ.

One can say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave free will to man in order that he should have reward and punishment from it. If the Holy One, Blessed be He, was Himself leading us in the straight path, then we would be compelled to be righteous people, for the evil inclination has no power to show its face against the will of the Creator, may His Name be blessed. Another reason for Him not to lead us, is that in fulfillment of the commandments we would not have any reward, and therefore what would the Holy One, Blessed be He, be accomplishing? [G-d] left this job of leading us with the Assembly of Israel, and none of our defects reach the Holy One, Blessed be He, for correction, G-d forbid, for if they did, then G-d forbid there would be no healing for our wounds.

וְעַל זֶה נֶאֱמַר אֲנִי ה' לֹא שִׁנִּיתִי, וּבְכוּדִי לֹא אֶחָר לֹא אֶתֵּן וְכוּ'. אֲמָנָם מְגִיעִים עַד כְּנֻסֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂגָם הִיא תִּהְיֶה לָהּ שְׂכָר וְעוֹנֶשׁ, שְׂאֵם תִּנְהַיֵּג בְּנִים בְּדַרְיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּהְיֶה בְּרוּם הַמַּעְלֹת, וְלִהְיוֹת לְהַפְּדוֹ חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם, מִה שְׂאֵין כֵּן בְּאֲבוֹת וּבְנִים שֶׁל מִטָּה שְׂאֵף אִם הָאֲבוֹת נִכְרִיחוּ בְּנֵיהֶם לְהַיּוֹת צְדִיקִים וְטוֹבִים, סוּף סוּף הַבְּחִירָה בְּיַד הַבֵּן לַעֲשׂוֹת הַיִּשְׁרָר בְּעֵינָיו. וְהָאֵם פְּטוּרָה מִכְּפָה מִצְוֹת שְׂרִשׁוֹת אֲחֵרִים עֲלֶיהָ, מִה שְׂאֵין כֵּן בְּאֵם הַעֲלִיּוֹנָה שְׂאֲדַרְבָּא אֵין בַּעֲלָהּ מִצְוָה אוֹתָהּ רַק עַל דְּבָר זֶה דְּוָקָא. וְאִם הִיא תִּכְרִית אֵת בְּנֵיהָ לֹא תִּהְיֶה מְסוּלְקָת מֵהֶם הַבְּחִירָה, כִּי אֵין פְּחָה כָּל כָּךְ כְּמוֹ הַקַּב"ה דְּכָתִיב בֵּיהּ אֲנִי ה' לֹא שִׁנִּיתִי.

On this topic it is said, “I am the L-rd, I have not changed” (Malachi 3:6), and “I will not yield My glory to another” (Isaiah 42:8). Indeed, these [defects] do reach the Assembly of Israel, who will also have reward and punishment, for if she, the Assembly of Israel, leads [her] sons in the straight path, she will be at the highest peaks; and the opposite is also true, G-d forbid. That is not the case with the fathers and sons of the earthly entourage, for even if the patriarchs will force their sons to be righteous and good, in the end, the free will is in the hand of the son to do what is correct in his own eyes. The mother of the earthly entourage is exempt from a number of the commandments, because she is under the authority of others, such as her husband. That is not the case for the mother above, i.e., the sefira of kingship, for to the contrary, her husband commands her for this very thing only, to lead the sons on the straight path. If she forces her sons, the free will won’t be removed from them, because her power to control them is not like that of the Holy One, Blessed be He, of which it is written regarding Him, “I am the L-rd, I have not changed.”

ובנה נבא לביאור מדרשנו, וזאת היא הטענה שלה, הואיל שפשעיהם של ישראל לא עשו פגם בך חס ושלום, רק כל הפגמים עשו רושם בי דנקא. אם פן אין לה לדקדק עמהם שיהיו הייסורין כפי חומר העון כדי שיתקנו כל אשר ענתו. ולכן הפסיק ומרודי בין ענויי[ן] ללענה וראש, כלומר זכור ענוייין שענית אותי. ואמרה עניי בלשון מדבר בעדו, דהיינו הייסורין, שסבלה היא להתרחק מן דונה. ומרודי שמרדתי בך שלא הנהגתי ישראל בדרך ישרה, ועוד לענה ראש הם הייסורים שבאו על ישראל, ונצאו אלו באלו.

In this way, we will come to an explanation of our Midrash. This is [the Assembly of Israel's] claim: Israel's intentional rebellious acts didn't wound You, G-d forbid, and it's only that all the defects made an impression specifically on me. If so, You shouldn't be exact with them such that their sufferings are in proportion to the weightiness of the sin, so that by Your being lenient they won't be destroyed, but rather they will have an opportunity to "correct all that they have twisted."⁶ Therefore, "my straying" interrupts between "the distress which I distressed You" and "wormwood and poison," as if to say, "remember the distress with which you answered me." She says "my distress," language speaking for itself, which is the sufferings, that she is suffering to be distanced from her Beloved. "My straying when I rebelled against You," that I did not lead Israel on a proper path, and also "wormwood and poison" are the sufferings that came upon Israel; let them cancel one another.

וימה שדקדקו רבי חייא ורבי יודן בנתשום עלי נפשאי? היינו משום דהאי ותשום פתיב ותשית, לשון דיבור, וקרין ותשום, לשון השפלה. ור' חייא מפרש ליה לפי הפתיב, והפנסת ישראל אומרת בך לפני הקב"ה זכור תזכור וכו', כלומר סוף סוף אתה תזכור ממנו ותצטער על שהגליתנו, וזהו מה שנפשי אומרת לי לנתמני. ואחר כך בא רבי יודן כדי לפרש אף הקרי דהיינו ותשום לשון השפלה, ואלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים.

Why were Rabbi Chiyya and Rabbi Yudan precise to say, "When remembering, my soul is bowed down within me"? It was because this word, "bowed down" (ותשום) (*ve tashoach*), is according to our Masoretic tradition written ותשיח (*ve tasiach*) ("and you will converse"), a term of speech, but it is read ותשום (*ve tashoach*) ("bowed down"), a term of degradation. Rabbi Chiyya interprets this verse according to the written form, and the Assembly of Israel says this before the Holy One, Blessed be He, "When remembering, converse about my soul," as if to say, "In the end, You will remember us, and You will regret that you exiled us," and this is what my soul says to comfort me. Afterward, Rabbi Yudan came in order to interpret even the pronounced word, which is ותשום (*ve tashoach*) ("bowed down"), a term of degradation. Both of these approaches are the words of the Living G-d.

* * *

⁶ Derived from Eccl. 7:13: "Consider G-d's doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted?"