



Wood and Stone

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At least in the plain sense of Lamentations 4, the destruction of Jerusalem is not presented as the execution of a carefully designed plan. It is a moment of unleashed fury:

איכה ד:יא

כָּלָה ה' אֶת חֲמָתוֹ שֹׁפָךְ חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ
וַיֵּצֵת אֵשׁ בְּצִיּוֹן וַתֹּאכַל יְסוּדֵיהָ:

Lamentations 4:11

The Eternal exhausted God's wrath, poured out God's blazing anger,
kindled a fire in Zion, and it consumed her foundations.

This is not the image of a parent disciplining a child in order to teach a lesson, nor of a judge reluctantly carrying out a just sentence. Nor does the verse invite us to imagine a hidden divine blueprint in which the catastrophe is simply another step toward an inevitable redemption. Instead, it portrays something far more unsettling: an outburst of anger.



We know from our own relationships that moments like these—when communication breaks down, patience is exhausted, and anger takes over—can mark the beginning of the end.

Yet the *midrash* reads this verse in a strikingly different way:

מדרש תנחומא תזריע יג

אף זה לטובה שהפיג הקדוש ברוך הוא את חמתו בירושלים, שנאמר "כלה ה' את חמתו", שאילולי כן, כל ישראל נתחייבו כליה.

Midrash Tanhuma Tazria 13

This, too, was for the good: the Holy One poured out divine wrath upon Jerusalem, as it is written, “The Eternal exhausted God’s wrath.” Had God not done so, all of Israel would have been destroyed.

God was angry, and that is understandable (even if theologically complicated). But God redirected that anger toward something less destructive than it might have been. The destruction of Jerusalem becomes the means by which God’s rage is spent without consuming the people themselves.

Another *midrash* develops this idea through Psalm 79, a psalm describing the destruction of the Temple. It begins:

תהלים עט:א

מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף אֱלֹקִים בָּאוּ גוֹיִם בְּנַחֲלֶתְךָ טָמְאוּ אֶת הַיֵּכַל קִדְּשְׁךָ שָׂמוּ אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם לְעֵיִם:

Psalm 79:1

Mizmor of Asaf. God, nations have entered Your inheritance; they have defiled Your holy Temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

Our Rabbis pause over the title. Why is this composition called a *mizmor*, a psalm of praise? Faced with such devastation, shouldn't it have been called a lament?

The *midrash* answers with a parable:

איכה רבה ד:יד

א"ר אלעזר משל למלך שעשה חופה לבנו, תיקן ביתו גיידה וסיידה וציירה, פעם אחת הכעיסו וסתרה, התחיל פדגוג יושב ומזמר, א"ל המלך חרב ביתו ואתה יושב ומזמר, אמר להו לכך אני מזמר ששפך חמתו על חופת בנו, ולא על בנו, כך אמרו לאסף, הקדוש ברוך הוא החריב את מקדשו, ואתה יושב ומזמר, אמר להם לכך אני מזמר ששפך הקדוש ברוך הוא חמתו על עצים ואבנים, ולא על ישראל, ה"ד ויצת אש בציון ותאכל יסודותיה.

Eikhah Rabbah 4:14

A king built a magnificent wedding canopy for his son. He decorated it beautifully. One day the son angered him, and in his rage the king tore down the canopy. The tutor sat singing. The king said, "My son's wedding canopy has been destroyed, and you are singing?" The tutor replied, "That is precisely why I sing: because you poured out your anger on the canopy, and not on your son."

So, too, they said to Asaf: "The Holy One destroyed God's own Temple, and you are singing?" He answered: "That is exactly why I sing—because the Holy One poured out divine wrath on wood and stone, and not on Israel."



On a first reading, the *midrash* seems to encourage us to search for the silver lining, to discover a trace of love even within catastrophe. There is real wisdom in that instinct. The ability to recognize hope amid devastation allows people to endure suffering without surrendering to despair.

But there is also a danger. One might emerge from reading it feeling almost reassured: “Perhaps everything turned out for the best after all?” Such a reading risks dulling the sharp theological challenge of the destruction and bypassing the painful self-examination it demands. Worse still, it can become a way of avoiding responsibility: “True, God destroyed a building—but after all, God still loves us.”

I believe the *midrash* is doing something far deeper. The *midrash* claims that the real theological question is not, “How could the Temple have been destroyed?” but rather, “How is it that the Jewish people survived?” Given the biblical portrayal of Israel’s moral collapse, and the overwhelming descriptions of divine anger found throughout Lamentations and the prophets, the true surprise is not that Jerusalem fell, but that not all of Israel was destroyed.

Beginning from that premise makes it possible to experience genuine gratitude for Jewish survival without diminishing the horror of the destruction itself. Precisely because the destruction represents such a profound rupture—an expression of divine anger born of deep moral failure—it also opens the possibility of marveling at the fact that the covenant endured. The continued existence of the Jewish people becomes neither obvious nor inevitable, but an extraordinary invitation to build a different kind of Jewish future.



What should that future look like?

Here the *midrash* offers a second, equally profound assumption: people matter more than buildings. The *midrash* subverts a religious imagination in which the Temple stands as the ultimate value; even in our own time—particularly within religious communities—it is not uncommon to hear sacred places described as worth dying for. It takes the holiest and most cherished building imaginable and deliberately reduces it to “wood and stone.” In doing so, it points toward the kind of world that must emerge after destruction: one in which human beings, rather than structures, stand at the center.

The *nehamah* (condolence) that we must seek on Tisha B'Av then, is not simply a reassurance that God still loves us. It must go and confront the terrifying possibility that the destruction might have marked the final chapter in the relationship between God and the Jewish people—and then refuse to accept that ending. It is that perspective that can allow us to see The Temple's destruction not as an end of the covenant, but as the end of Israel's punishment, echoing the closing words of Lamentations 4:22: “Your punishment is complete, Daughter Zion,” and inviting us to write the next chapter.

