

THE BOOK OF JOB AS A WAY OF RELATING TO JEWISH NATIONAL SUFFERING

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INTRODUCTION

TB *Taanit* 30a cites a *baraita* outlining the laws of the Ninth of Av: Our Rabbis taught: All obligations that are observed by a mourner are observed on the Ninth of Av: one is forbidden in eating and drinking, in anointing and the wearing of shoes, and in sexual relations, and it is forbidden to read from the Torah, Nevi'im, or Ketuvim, or to learn Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Halachot, or Aggadot. But . . . one may read the books of Lamentations, Job, and the sad parts of Jeremiah.¹

One can readily understand why Lamentations and the sad parts of Jeremiah would be appropriate for the Ninth of Av, for they recount and mourn the very destruction of the Temple that the Ninth of Av commemorates.² Job, however, seems to be out of place. It is true that Job deals with events of a tragic nature, but it is the story of an individual tragedy. The Tanakh is replete with such episodes, so this is insufficient to explain why Job alone was singled out to be added to the list of permitted learning on the Ninth of Av.³ However, a literary comparison between the book of Job and the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations⁴ will reveal that Job, in fact, does provide a way of relating to the Jewish exile which is complementary to Jeremiah and Lamentations, making it uniquely appropriate for inclusion in the list of permissible study on the Ninth of Av.

JOB AND JEREMIAH

The best known place to begin comparing Job with Jeremiah is the cursing of the day of their birth.⁵ Not only do both Job and Jeremiah curse the day of their birth, but they are the only two characters in Tanakh to do so. In chapter 3 of the book of Job, he states:

Perish the day on which I was born, and the night it was announced, 'A male has been conceived!' May that day be darkness; May God above have no concern for it; May light not

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shine on it; May darkness and deep gloom reclaim it; May a pall lie over it; May what blackens the day terrify it. May obscurity carry off that night; May it not be counted among the days of the year; May it not appear in any of its months...Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me, or breasts for me to suck? (Job 3: 3-12).⁶

Compare this with chapter 20 of the book of Jeremiah:

Accursed be the day that I was born! Let not the day be blessed when my mother bore me! Accursed be the man who brought my father the news and said, 'A boy is born to you,' and gave him such joy! Let that man become like the cities which the Lord overthrew without relenting! Let him hear shrieks in the morning and battle shouts at noontide – Because he did not kill me before birth so that my mother might be my grave, and her womb big [with me] for all time. Why did I ever issue from the womb, to see misery and woe, to spend all my days in shame! (Jer. 20:14-18).

The two speeches are strikingly similar, and yet with a significant difference. In Jeremiah's story, there are several characters. In addition to himself, there are his father, his mother, and the man who brought his father the news that a male had been born. In Job, there is no mention of such a messenger. Though the news is brought, it is brought passively. Instead of referring to his mother and father as people, Job tells only of a womb, knees and breasts. In addition, while Jeremiah wishes to undo his birth and thereby his own existence, Job goes a step further and seems to be attempting to uproot the entire day from the calendar.⁷

The impersonality of the story of Job cursing the day of his birth is characteristic of the entire book. The book tells very little about Job. It does not give any dates or other historical events with which to identify when he lived. The only identifying information given about him is that he lived in the land of Utz (Job 1:1). The land of Utz is mentioned only two other places in Tanakh: Jeremiah and Lamentations. It occurs in the exact same context in both places. In Jeremiah, it is in Chapter 25, in the midst of the "Grapes of Wrath" prophecy, as it lists all the nations that persecuted Israel, which God

will cause to drink from the metaphorical cup of poisoned wine at the end of days.

For thus said the Lord, the God of Israel, to me: 'Take from My hand this cup of wine, of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink of it. Let them drink and retch and act crazy, because of the sword that I am sending among them' So I took the cup from the hand of the Lord and gave drink to all the nations to whom the Lord had sent me: Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, and its kings and officials, to make them a desolate ruin, an object of hissing and a curse, as is now the case; Pharaoh king of Egypt, his courtiers, his officials, and all his people; all the mixed peoples; all the kings of the land of Utz; all the kings of the land of the Philistines, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and what is left of Ashdod (Jer. 25: 15-20).

The same context is formulated concisely in Lamentations 4:21, *Rejoice and exult, O daughter of Edom, who dwells in the land of Utz! To you, too, the cup shall pass, you shall get drunk and expose your nakedness.* We will say more about this later.

In Chapter 12, Jeremiah enters into, or at least fantasizes about, entering into an argument [*riv*] with God.

You will win [tzadik], O Lord, if I make claim [riv] against You, yet I shall present charges against You: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are the workers of treachery at ease? You have planted them, and they have taken root, they spread, they even bear fruit. You are present in their mouths, but far from their thoughts.⁸ Yet You, Lord, have noted and observed me; You have tested my heart, and found it with You. Drive them out like sheep to the slaughter, Prepare them for the day of slaying! How long must the land languish, and the grass of all the countryside dry up? Must beasts and birds perish because of the evil of its inhabitants, who say, 'He will not look upon our future'? (Jer. 12:1-4).

The word *riv* can mean a fight, but in biblical Hebrew, it is usually found in the judicial context, a fight in court, a lawsuit.⁹ Particularly in the Latter Prophets there are a number of *rivim*, usually with God as the plaintiff, suing, so to speak, the children of Israel for breach of contract, i.e., not keeping the Torah.¹⁰ Here Jeremiah seeks to reverse that motif and initiate a lawsuit

against God. He first acknowledges that God is righteous and that of course he, Jeremiah, would not win if this lawsuit were to be made real, but he still must give voice to his feelings. In Chapter 9, Job, too, speaks about entering into a *riv* with God. *Indeed I know that it is so: man cannot win [yitzdak] a suit against God. If he insisted on a trial [riv] with Him, He would not answer one charge in a thousand* (Job 9:2-3).

Though I were in the right, I could not speak out, but I would plead for mercy with my judge. If I summoned Him and He responded, I do not believe He would lend me His ear. For He crushes me for a hair; He wounds me much for no cause. He does not let me catch my breath, but sates me with bitterness. If a trial of strength – He is the strong one; if a trial in court – who will summon Him for me? Though I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; though I were blameless, He would prove me crooked. I am blameless – I am distraught; I am sick of life. It is all one; therefore I say, ‘He destroys the blameless and the guilty’ (Job 9:15-22).

With language similar to that of Jeremiah, using the same root, *tz-d-k*, Job begins by acknowledging that he knows he cannot win. However, in what reads almost as a parody of Jeremiah, he then goes on a long tirade about why he could not win, bringing every possible reason other than God’s ultimate righteousness: God would not bother to respond to the charges; He is strong and there is no one to subpoena Him; if He were to come to the trial, He would lie and distort justice; and there is no objective arbiter to hold Him accountable. Once again we see Job taking a motif from Jeremiah and taking it a step further. Jeremiah gives voice to frustration, while maintaining belief in God’s ultimate righteousness. Job, on the hand, has no such compunctions. He comes out and openly challenges any sense of Divine justice.¹¹

JOB AND LAMENTATIONS

The linguistic parallels between Job and Lamentations are not as obvious as those with Jeremiah, but there are nevertheless some striking parallels in the overall structure of the books. They both begin with a declaration of a simple faith in God. In Job it is Job’s famous initial response to his first round of suffering: *Then Job arose, tore his robe, cut off his hair, and threw himself on the ground and worshiped. He said, ‘Naked came I out of my mother’s*

womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:20-21).

Likewise, Lamentations begins its first chapter with a declaration of the simple belief that Israel's suffering is a result of her sins:

Jerusalem has greatly sinned, therefore she is become a mockery. All who admired her despise her, for they have seen her disgraced; and she can only sigh and shrink back. Her uncleanness clings to her skirts. She gave no thought to her future; she has sunk appallingly, with none to comfort her. See, O Lord, my misery; how the enemy jeers! (Lam. 1:8-9).

By the middle of each book, both are complaining of the excessive nature of their suffering. A good example is chapter 7, where Job accuses God of making him a target, singling him out for punishment from which God derives no gain: *If I have sinned, what have I done to You, watcher of men? Why make of me Your target, and a burden to myself? Why do You not pardon my transgression and forgive my iniquity? For soon I shall lie down in the dust; when You seek me, I shall be gone (Job 7:20-21).*

Lamentations 2:4 accuses God of becoming an enemy, a stark change from the just punishments of chapter 1: *He bent His bow like an enemy, poised His right hand like a foe; He slew all who delighted the eye. He poured out His wrath like fire in the Tent of Fair Zion.*

Lamentations and Job also both have uncertain endings.¹² The poet of Lamentations¹³ ends by begging for God to restart His relationship with the Jewish people, but has no sense of certainty about it: *Why have You forgotten us utterly, forsaken us for all time? Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old! For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us. (Lam. 5: 20-22).*

Job, in the end, admits his mistake in speaking ill of God and is ready to hear why he deserved his suffering:

I know that You can do everything, that nothing You propose is impossible for You. Who is this who obscures counsel without knowledge? Indeed, I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know. Hear now, and I will speak; I will ask, and You will inform me. I had heard You with my ears, but now I see You

with my eyes; Therefore, I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes (Job 42:2-6).

Yet God never answers him.

Another striking parallel between Lamentations and Job is the role of the friends. Lamentations 1:2 talks about how all of Israel's friends turned against her: *Bitterly she weeps in the night, her cheek wet with tears. There is none to comfort her of all her friends. All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes.*

The examples are far too numerous to quote here, but one need only read a few of the middle chapters of the book of Job to see why he, too, is famous for friends not behaving in the way true friends should.¹⁴

There are also important differences between Job and Lamentations. Even in his initial declaration of faith, Job never admits any fault on his own part. And why should he? The reader knows what perhaps Job himself can never know: Job really is innocent. The very first verse of the book states in no uncertain terms that Job was *blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil* (Job 1:1). Though Job never learns the cause of his suffering, the reader knows that as well: a bet that God made with Satan (Job 1:6-12).¹⁵

Yet, God criticizes Job with language that echoes Job's friends about Job having no right to challenge divine justice: *Then the Lord replied to Job out of the tempest and said: Gird your loins like a man; I will ask, and you will inform Me. Would you impugn My justice? Would you condemn Me that you may be right? . . .* (Job 40:6-8).

From the omniscient perspective of God or the reader, what basis can there possibly be for criticizing Job? The answer is that when dealing with personal suffering, no matter how absurd and unfair it seems, no individual can ever be sufficiently confident in his or her own righteousness to be able to level accusations against God. However, for the reader, the book of Job gives him or her the opportunity to think, just for a second, that maybe it all really is absurd. Maybe there really is no justice in the world. Maybe it is just God betting with Satan.

But the book of Job does not end with God's rebuke of Job. In chapter 42, God turns to Job's friends and makes them beg Job for forgiveness for mistreating him:

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job. Now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. And let Job, My servant, pray for you; for to him I will show favor and not treat you vilely, since you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job' (Job 42:7-8).

After initially criticizing him for questioning His justice, God praises Job for speaking properly about Him and, two verses later, returns to Job everything that he had lost, *The Lord restored Job's fortunes when he prayed on behalf of his friends, and the Lord gave Job twice what he had before* (Job 42:10).

Medieval and modern commentators have debated the ultimate theological message of the book of Job,¹⁶ and whether his friends were right or wrong. The truth is that it does not matter. The response to someone's suffering isn't theology. To the person suffering, it's painful whether they understand why it's happening or not.¹⁷ The response to suffering is comfort and love. And in that, the friends were certainly wrong. God ultimately vindicates Job because even God acknowledges that in the midst of so much suffering, we need to be able to express grief and anger.¹⁸

JOB AND JEWISH NATIONAL SUFFERING

Let us now return to the land of Utz. The books of Jeremiah and Lamentations assure us that ultimately the wine of God's wrath will turn to the land of Utz. And in the book of Job, it does just that. However, instead of turning on the wicked people who persecuted the Jews, it turns on the completely innocent Job. Looking at the suffering of a functionally anonymous man in a place to which Jews would feel no connection enables the Jewish people to give voice to emotions they could not express when the suffering is personal. When it is personal suffering, one has no choice but to beat one's chest and recite *mea culpas*, for deep down believing Jews know that the prophets have told them over and over again that it is their sins that have brought this upon them. However, the book of Job gives the Jew a vehicle to scream out about God's injustice, the injustice that the Rabbis certainly must have felt looking

upon the children dying from starvation in the streets of Jerusalem, or the blood running in the streets after the massacre at Beitar;¹⁹ the feelings that Jews throughout the centuries must have felt looking upon the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the gas chambers of the Holocaust. “We know we’ve sinned, God, but there is nothing, NOTHING, we could have done to deserve *this*.”

As noted above, Jeremiah does mention that it is unfair that the world suffers *because of the evil of its inhabitants* (Jer. 12:4). Jeremiah touches on the idea that innocents suffer due to evil deeds that they themselves did not perform. This is certainly not the main theme of Jeremiah, but it is taken up and expanded upon in the Book of Job. The function of reading the Book of Job on a day of Jewish national suffering is to provide a safe way to express the feeling that the suffering experienced does not seem justified.

Unlike Lamentations which leaves the reader uncertain as to whether there will be any future relationship between God and the Jewish people, Job does not end with such uncertainty. Though Job never does find out why he suffered, we know that God ultimately restores him to his previous state. This makes Job a book of great faith that God will, in the end, restore the sense of order and justice in the world. And perhaps it is the very absurdity of Job that gives rise to this faith. When in Lamentations the Jewish people are mired in their sin, the punishment may feel excessive, but they always know they are ultimately responsible. In such a context, it would be of supreme hubris to claim to know that the suffering will ultimately end. However, giving voice to the feelings that it really might be absurd and unfair enables one to have the faith that God, whom the believing Jew does believe is ultimately just and fair, will redeem the Jews and restore their glory. This makes Job the ultimate metaphor for Jews looking for a way to relate to suffering in exile, and the ultimate complement to Jeremiah and Lamentations for learning on the Ninth of Av.

NOTES

1. Translations of talmudic passages quoted in this article are my own.

2. Mishnah, *Taanit* 4:6.

3. Even if, practically, one accepts the ruling in *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 554:2, which permits learning the third chapter of TB *Moed Katan* (*Elu Megalhin*) containing the laws of mourning, on Tisha B’av, and therefore implicitly reads the permission granted in the *baraita* in

Taanit as more expansive than merely the three examples given, one can still ask why Job was chosen as the quintessential example to be mentioned in the *baraita*.

4. In comparing Job to Jeremiah and Lamentations, it is not the intent of this article to take a stance on the dating or authorship of the book of Job. That has been debated by scholars since the time of the Talmud (see TB *Bava Batra* 15a-b and M. Pope, *Anchor Bible: Job* (Doubleday: New York, 1973) pp. xxxii-xliii for a summary of the modern scholarship).
5. This similarity has been noted by many without elaboration. See *Bereishit Rabba* 64:5 (in the Vilna printing; 64:8 in the Theodor-Albeck printing), *Pesikta Rabbati* 26; Radak on Jeremiah 20:14; and Pope, *Job*, 27.
6. Biblical translations in this article are taken from the new JPS translation with occasional edits to highlight nuances of the Hebrew text missed by the translation.
7. E. Greenstein, "Jeremiah as an Inspiration for the Poet of Job," in J. Kaltner and L. Stulman, eds., *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (T & T Clark: London, 2004) pp. 102-103.
8. Note the similarity of the language used by Jeremiah here to Job 21:7-8.
9. See Deuteronomy 19:17, 25:1, II Samuel 15:2-4.
10. See Isaiah 3:13-15, Jeremiah 2:7-28, Hosea 4:1-19, Micah 6:1-5.
11. Greenstein, "Jeremiah as an Inspiration for the Poet of Job," 104-105.
12. This overall structure of both Job and Lamentations is based on H. Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (Sephardic Publication Foundation: New York, 2006) pp. 279-295.
13. Traditionally associated with Jeremiah. See TB *Bava Batra* 15a.
14. See TB *Bava Metzia* 58b, where behaving like the friends of Job is given as one of the paradigmatic cases of *ona'at d'varim* [oppressive words].
15. The Hebrew *satan* is obviously not identical with the English Satan, given the many Christological influences on the latter. However, it is used as the translation here for maximum effect.
16. The debate can already be found in TB *Bava Batra* 15b-16a.
17. See supra, n. 14. Telling a person who is suffering that they deserve it is a violation of the prohibition of *ona'at d'varim* [oppressive words] regardless of whether they do, in reality, deserve it.
18. See TB *Bava Batra* 16b, where the idea that a person is not held accountable for the things they say in the moment of their suffering is learned from Job.
19. See TB *Gittin* 56a-57a.

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