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Shabbat Chazon/Tisha be-Av

R. ELIEZER MELAMED, UNPREDICTABLE AND NON-TRIBAL POSEK: THE CASE OF WOMEN'S ROLES

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Between February and March 2022, three separate rabbinic letters were penned against R. Eliezer Melamed and his work [Peninei Halakha](#).¹ The [first](#) was signed by several rabbis and critiqued R. Melamed on four issues:

- 1) R. Melamed's nuanced view on dialogue with Reform leaders;
- 2) His willingness to support a non-Orthodox prayer space at Robinson's arch near the Western Wall²;
- 3) Certain leniencies that he advanced regarding Jewish family law; and
- 4) The publication of a volume of *Peninei Halakha* about the laws of marital intimacy.

¹ For an overview of R. Melamed, see R. Elli Fischer, <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/peninei-Halachah-a-religious-zionist-code-of-jewish-law/>. For a more extensive discussion, see R. Fischer's series of podcasts on R. Melamed at <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/down-the-rabbi-hole/id1594341746>. (The four part series on R. Melamed and his *Peninei Halakha* series are the episodes dated February 3, February 7, February 18, and March 11, 2022.

² While this essay will focus on R. Melamed's views on gender, I will not discuss this specific issue at length. R. Melamed's willingness to sanction egalitarian prayer at Robinson's Arch does not stem from a liberal view regarding the permissibility of egalitarian prayer. In fact, he is quite explicit that egalitarian *tefillah* is at odds with traditional Halakhah. Rather, his ruling is motivated by other factors that are beyond the scope of this essay. See <https://www.inn.co.il/news/499715>.

The signatories of this letter called for their followers to cease viewing *Peninei Halakha* as a legitimate code of Jewish law. Around the same time a similar letter was written with additional rabbinic signatures. Beyond repeating the accusations made in the previous document, the letter cited two additional “problematic” positions of R. Melamed. The first relates to R. Melamed’s permissive ruling regarding accepting donations from Evangelical Christians. The [second](#) accuses R. Melamed of advocating a non-halakhic view regarding conversion standards.³

Both letters explicitly mention R. Melamed and his work *Peninei Halakha* by name. A [third letter](#) released around the same time speaks more generally about the problems of halakhic works written by rabbis who are not sufficiently trained in the nuances of practical Halakhah. The signatories of this last letter accuse certain unnamed rabbis of offering halakhic opinions on

their own without consulting with the great Torah scholars of the generation.

While some signatories of the third letter claimed that they never had any intention to single out R. Melamed, the general tenor of the letters points to a trend in some rabbinic circles to see R. Melamed and his codification project as threatening the basic assumptions of traditional Halakhah. In fact, one of the signatories of the last letter, R. Yaakov Ariel, explicitly states that when dealing with “contemporary issues” (“הנושאים החדשים”), specifically the “most recent volumes of *Peninei Halakha*,” R. Melamed’s writings are not written with proper halakhic methodology.⁴ In addition, another letter written in May and signed by many of the same rabbis who signed the previous letters, specifically single out R. Melamed’s view on conversion standards, contending that they possess zero halakhic standing.⁵

³ <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/judaism/judaism-news/article/8798707>.

⁴ <https://www.srugim.co.il/644496-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%93%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%99-%D7%9E%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%97%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%92%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%A1%D7%A4%D7%A8-%D7%A4%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99>.

⁵ <https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%97%D7%93%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA/1134369-0/>. In July 2022, a group of Haredi rabbis officially placed a ban on studying *Peninei Halakha* and called on their followers to avoid bringing R. Melamed’s works in one’s home, study hall, or synagogue. I am not including this in the body of the text since Haredi opposition to Religious Zionist codes of Halakhah is to be expected. What is more interesting is the extent of the opposition within the Haredi community.

What is particularly interesting about the above-mentioned letters, however, is not only their message but also their medium. While some critics⁶ offer learned critiques of R. Melamed's rulings and methodology surrounding the laws of *niddah*, the letters cited above lack any scholarly back and forth. Instead, they follow the form of the traditional *Haredi pashkevil*⁷ used to access a broad audience, not just the trained scholars who would read a complex halakhic refutation. The *pashkevil* is a form of halakhic shaming, placing the scholar in question beyond the pale without giving him a forum to defend himself.

What is it about R. Melamed that causes these rabbis to publish *pashkevilim* against him? Is it simply a dispute about halakhic interpretation, or are there other undercurrents that motivate the hostility to his views?

Before analyzing the substance of these polemical letters, it is important to note the larger context in which these *pashkevilim* were written. Prior to the publication of these letters, R. Melamed and his *Peninei Halakha* project were perceived to be

part of the Religious Zionist consensus. By 2016, it had sold more than five hundred thousand copies worldwide and had been translated into multiple languages. The rabbinic *haskamot* at the beginning of the books are from Torah luminaries spanning the Religious Zionist spectrum. Moreover, in Religious Zionist schools today, *Peninei Halakha* has become the default code used to study religious law. Beyond *Peninei Halakha*, R. Melamed's influence is echoed by his popular column in the weekly Religious Zionist newspaper, *B'sheva*. This publication is given out for free at communities across the country and provides a platform for R. Melamed to address some of the most contentious halakhic issues of the day. Through these two forums, R. Melamed is one of the most influential rabbis in Israel today. This makes his more "controversial" rulings far dangerous in the eyes of his opponents.

Much of the controversy surrounding Rav Melamed began around June 2020 when he agreed to sit on a Zoom panel with a female Reform rabbi during a conference sponsored by Makor Rishon. Many rabbis within the Hardal community attacked R. Melamed, claiming that

⁶ Such as R. Shmuel Ariel and Dr. Tirza Kellman. See <https://www.kipa.co.il/userFiles/files/3aab53df5ada45cea9c6c6cc18679b598.pdf> for the learned critique of R. Yigal Kaminetsky. See also <https://yhb.org.il/10260/> for R. Maor Kayam's defense of R. Melamed.

⁷ Albeit slightly more elaborate and signed by almost exclusively non-Haredim.

by merely participating, he was granting legitimacy to the Reform movement.⁸ Instead of bowing to public pressure, R. Melamed doubled down on his view regarding dialogue with non-Orthodox leaders and published multiple articles explaining his stance.⁹ The optics of a rabbi deeply rooted in the Hardal world on a split screen with a Reform rabbi were too much for some rabbinic leaders in his community to take. It seems that his public breaking with Hardal norms over his meeting with a non-Orthodox rabbi generated a closer examination of some of his printed works, which in turn became the source of the *pashkevilim*.

While the *pashkevilim* themselves focus on specific positions of R. Melamed deemed to be problematic, there are some sentences in the letters that point to a broader critique. For example, in the second letter, we are told that R. Melamed “made many mistakes,” “invented rulings,” and crossed boundary lines that were established by previous generations. Similarly, the first letter states that regarding family law, R. Melamed permitted certain things that were prohibited by earlier authorities. Moreover, this

letter claims that these leniencies were advocated without proper explanation (בלי לנמק).

One of the consistent undercurrents uniting all these attacks on R. Melamed is the discomfort with his independence. R. Melamed is accused of breaking halakhic protocol. His detractors claim that not only is his bottom line sometimes at odds with Religious Zionist norms, his process of adjudication is also flawed. R. Melamed takes himself to be equally authoritative to rule on matters of Halakhah as anyone else. His opponents assume that this position reflects a hubris and a lack of deference to older sages.

While these letters speak broadly about the challenges posed by R. Melamed’s independence and his unwillingness to defer to requisite sages, a more elaborate and harshly worded critique was written by R. Matanya Ariel. In an interview about the controversy surrounding R. Melamed’s support for certain religion and state reforms,¹⁰ Ariel accuses R. Melamed of being a “trojan horse.” He claims that R. Melamed’s external appearance and pedigree are particularly problematic. “He wears a *frok*, a hamburg... is a settler and is the son of R. Zalman (Rosh Yeshivat

⁸ <https://www.srugim.co.il/455964-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A4%D7%92%D7%A9-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%93-%D7%A2%D7%9D-%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%94-%D7%A8%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%9E%D7%99%D7>

<https://www.makorishon.co.il/judaism/241427/>,
<https://www.makorishon.co.il/judaism/241427/>.

⁹ See for example, <https://yhb.org.il/shiurim/revivim898/>.

¹⁰ Regarding conversion and kashrut regulations.

Beit El).” Moreover, “he has a *Hardali* aura,” having learned in Mercav Harav. R. Ariel implies that people with this background are not supposed to offer liberal rulings on issues that are central to Hardal Orthodoxy. For R. Ariel, R. Melamed’s style confuses the public, as his upbringing and rabbinic stock give traditional credence to his more lenient rulings.

After this interview, R. Ariel published two articles elaborating on his opposition to R. Melamed.¹¹ He

begins by claiming that until recently, R. Melamed’s rulings were consistent with a traditional Hardal worldview, especially on contentious issues.¹² For example, he was one of the founders of Ariel youth movement, which broke away from Bnei Akiva in opposition to co-ed youth programming.¹³ Similarly, R. Melamed has been an outspoken supporter of soldiers refusing orders to evacuate Jewish settlements from the West Bank.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.srugim.co.il/586300-%D7%9E%D7%94-%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A8-%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%96%D7%A8-%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%93>. His second letter contains many ad hominem attacks and opposes primarily R. Melamed’s independence and unwillingness to defer to older sages. See <https://www.now14.co.il/%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%96%D7%A8-%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%93-%D7%90%D7%97%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%95-%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%94-%D7%97%D7%96%D7%95%D7%A8-%D7%91%D7%9A-%D7%93%D7%A2%D7%94/>.

¹² This argument is not precise, as we will see regarding R. Melamed’s view on gender.

¹³ In 1979, R. Melamed challenged the Religious Zionist status quo by working to establish the first separate gendered branch of the Bnei Akiva youth movement in the old city of Jerusalem. Prior to 1979, one of the fundamental assumptions of Bnei Akiva was the belief that co-ed youth programming should be seen as religiously ideal. While some Religious Zionist rabbis such as R. Shlomo Aviner opposed mixed gendered events on halakhic grounds, the head of Bnei Akiva, Amnon Shapira wrote an extensive article delineating the halakhic justification and noting rabbinic support for such a move. R. Melamed’s founding of the separate *snif* in 1979 caused a rift among Religious Zionist rabbis. While some rabbinic leaders supported the idea of a *snif nifrad*, the opposition was so fierce from the national movement that then director of Bnei Akiva Amnon

Shapira published a letter denying that a separate gendered Bnei Akiva branch had opened in the old city. Despite resistance from Shapira, there was a subsequent attempt by R. Melamed and others to open another separate gendered *snif* in Givat Shaul. After years of debate regarding the branch’s institutional affiliation, R. Melamed decided to establish a new youth movement named, “Ariel” that would pride itself in exclusively separate gendered divisions. In fact, when asked directly about his involvement in the founding of Ariel, R. Melamed noted that he was never a member of Bnei Akiva in his youth since he viewed coed programming as religiously problematic.

¹⁴ In 2009 there was an incident where a group of religious soldiers protested their unit’s involvement in evacuating settlements. They did so by holding up a protest banner during a swearing in ceremony at the Kotel. Rumors began circulating that R. Melamed had instructed them to protest. Denying the accusation, R. Melamed wrote an article claiming that while he would not have advised this specific form of dissent, he does see value in their actions and in the larger project of public demonstrations of opposition.

R. Melamed’s public support for refusing orders should not have come as a surprise as already in 2004, he endorsed the view of R. Avraham Shapira prohibiting religious soldiers from taking part in the evacuation of Jewish settlements. Nonetheless, then defense secretary Ehud Barak and army leaders recommended punishing R. Melamed for his call for refusal by removing his Yeshiva from the rubric of the Hesder Yeshiva system. In December 2009 this decision became official. While the association of *Yeshivot Hesder* condemned the decision, it was not ultimately reversed until 2013.

While these positions paint the picture of someone deeply rooted in the Hardal world,¹⁵ R. Ariel claims that R. Melamed's more recent rulings (e.g., how to relate to the Reform movement) reflect a complete ideological change, turning him from a Hardal rabbi into a rabbinic figure who more closely resembles a liberal Orthodox rabbi.

Tellingly, R. Ariel's primary concern is not so much the substance of the rulings (which he opposes as well), but rather with the fact that a perceived Hardal rabbi is the one providing them. R. Ariel idealizes a halakhic world where liberal rulings are made exclusively by liberal Orthodox rabbis, and therefore the community has a clear tribal choice between different types of halakhic models. [As he puts it](#), "liberal [Orthodox] rabbis should be on their side and me on mine."¹⁶ Having rabbis from the "wrong side" of the ideological spectrum

¹⁵ The extent to which R. Melamed was perceived to be representative of the Hardal mainstream is demonstrated by a 2010 heated exchange between him and the head of the centrist Orthodox Tzohar organization R. David Stav surrounding the homogeneity of the Religious Zionist community. R. Stav claimed that it was impossible to speak generically using the term "religious Zionism" since he and R. Melamed (both Religious Zionist rabbis) differ on so many fundamental issues. For example, they disagree on the question of soldiers refusing orders as well as the propriety of a woman serving as the chairperson of a community secretariat. R. Melamed replied to R. Stav's observation noting that he was ok with dividing the Religious Zionist

offering liberal rulings creates the misguided impression that these views could be plausibly supported by other rabbis within the Hardal camp. It also grants unwarranted legitimacy to such views and mistakenly affirms the notion that one can adopt these positions while still being a loyal member of the Hardal community.

Yet as Shlomo Piotrowsky [notes](#), R. Ariel's critique of R. Melamed is not precise.¹⁷ In fact, R. Ariel does not cite a single case in which R. Melamed changed his mind. Instead, he collects conservative rulings of R. Melamed on certain topics, and then contrasts them with R. Melamed's more liberal positions in other areas. He claims that R. Melamed has undergone an ideological transformation simply because in certain areas he deviates from the Hardal mainstream (while maintaining the same allegiance in other areas). Moreover, as R. Michael Avraham [argues](#), R. Ariel's critique

community into two with his followers unified under the banner of "*Torani*" while R. Stav's group would maintain the name "religious Zionism." R. Stav rejected R. Melamed's suggestion since it implies that those who identify as Religious Zionist, are not "*Torani*." Nonetheless, he claimed that while he respects R. Melamed, he thinks that his positions cause great harm to the Religious Zionist communities' relationship with the army and causes a desecration of God's name.

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<https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%97%D7%93%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA/1127142-0/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/opinion/382459/>.

assumes that ideology must drive halakhic rulings (especially regarding issues that involve public policy).¹⁸ Halakhah is supposed to be rooted in an a priori committee to a particular tribal identity. The ideological disposition of a given rabbi should remove certain issues from the realm of creative reflection.

Piotrowsky and R. Avraham's observations highlight the core elements that underlie R. Ariel's critique. The first relates to R. Melamed's unpredictability. According to R. Ariel, *pesak Halakhah* is supposed to follow a specific script, and halakhic independence should accordingly be limited. Secondly, a *posek* must ensure that his rulings confirm the basic assumptions of the community that he is a part of. In this "tribal halakhic" model, certain areas of religious life are assumed to be so central to a community's self-identity that they cannot be reexamined.

Yet as R. Avraham notes, there is an alternative (and more authentic) halakhic model available. Granted, a halakhic decisor's worldview will play a role in his decision making. In most instances, it is likely that a *posek* will rule in a manner that is consistent with his ideological tenor. This cannot, however, be a consciously motivating factor. If

certain positions are unacceptable because they challenge one's overarching ideology, then Halakhah ends up simply being a vehicle to fortify a preexisting ideological agenda. Instead, in the halakhic paradigm described by R. Avraham, a *posek* needs to be truly open minded. After all, his search for truth may lead him to adopt a ruling that clashes with his broader worldview.

The model described by R. Avraham parallels the halakhic approach of R. Melamed. After all, he is willing to challenge normative assumptions of the community that he is deeply a part of both from the right and the left. He is neither a liberal nor conservative *posek*. His halakhic and public-policy positions have been criticized by those across the spectrum of contemporary Orthodoxy. In fact, in contrast to the picture painted by R. Ariel, R. Melamed's recent rulings don't reflect a major transformation. Instead, R. Melamed has always been a non-tribal and unpredictable *posek* committed to a halakhic worldview that is open to challenging accepted communal norms.

While there are many examples of R. Melamed's unique halakhic posture, I would like to focus specifically on R. Melamed's unique view on Judaism and gender. This is a particularly

¹⁸ <https://mikyab.net/posts/73109>.

fascinating case study since aside from the technical halakhic issues involved, it is one of the most sociologically contentious issues facing contemporary Orthodoxy. As a result, it often falls prey to much of the tribal discourse we have come to expect in the conversations surrounding it.

Judaism and Gender

Given his intellectual training in Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, one would expect R. Melamed to adopt a conservative stance regarding the question of women's role within traditional Judaism. Nonetheless, as we will see, R. Melamed's views on gender are almost impossible to categorize.¹⁹

R. Melamed's most extensive treatment of women's roles is found in his nearly twenty-page chapter in *Peninei Halakha - Tefilat Nashim*, entitled "*Ta'amei Mitzvot Nashim*."²⁰ Here, R. Melamed develops a theology of gender that embraces the physical and spiritual differences between men and women. Just as both genders need each other physically for the purposes of procreation, so too men and women depend on one another for spiritual completion. R. Melamed

uses this larger framework to explain why Halakhah exempts women from positive time-bound commandments (PTBC). According to R. Melamed, a woman's primary role is to serve as a mother and build a traditional Jewish home. This is a religious obligation upon which the Jewish people's "personal and national future is founded." Women are uniquely able to successfully serve in this role given the fact that they both carry the child in utero and nurse the baby when he or she is born. Additionally, women [have a](#) "feminine and maternal character, which possesses unique qualities suitable for building and nurturing a family."²¹ Because of the amount of time it entails to properly raise children and manage a successful home life, the rabbis intentionally exempted women from PTBC in order to provide them the proper time and focus to accomplish their larger religious task.

R. Melamed goes further and uses the same model to explain why women are exempt from the formal obligation to study Torah. The requirement to learn Torah placed upon men is perpetual and demands constant assessment of

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that there doesn't seem to be any explicit opposition to the more liberal positions that I will cite in this section. I am not sure why this is the case. It could be that these examples are less well known. More likely is the possibility that given his pedigree, R. Melamed was able to avoid major criticism for an extended period. Moreover,

much of the recent controversies involve *public* pronouncements of R. Melamed as opposed to views tucked away in the details of a halakhic discussion.

²⁰ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-01/>.

²¹ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-02/>.

one's time in order to maximally succeed in the fulfillment of this *mitzvah*. Because of the enormity of the responsibility, the Torah "[relieved](#) [women] of the constant pressure that accompanies men," thus allowing them the mental and physical energy necessary to properly focus on building a family.²²

After providing this general outline, R. Melamed develops a more expansive view of Jewish femininity²³ that additionally explains why women without families are also exempt from PTBC. Quoting his teacher R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook *tz"l*, R. Melamed notes that while men and women are fundamentally equal, "the element of intellect is more discernible in men [while], human emotion is more prominent in women."²⁴ These innate differences are each independently critical methods to access traditional faith and live a life devoted to classical Halakhah. The intellect allows us to delineate and concretize the principles that govern our religious lives [while the emotions provide](#) a more successful entry point to "absorb the faith and vitality of the Torah."²⁵ While both genders are endowed with both emotional intuition and intellectual aptitude, the

unique strengths of each allows the forging of a more holistic religious union.

R. Melamed [argues that](#) a woman's unique emotional intuitive capacity is rooted in the details of the creation story found in the book of Genesis. While Adam is created from the dust of the earth, Eve is created from Adam's rib: "Since the substance from which the woman was created is of higher quality, she is more capable of naturally perceiving the divine ideal."²⁶ This explains why even single women who lack parental responsibilities are exempt from Talmud Torah and PTBC. Given their more innate connection to the Divine, women [can more easily](#) "connect profoundly to the Torah and its purpose."²⁷ Lacking this essentialist component, men, by contrast, need added entry points (such as the requirement to study Torah and PTBC) to access the essential messages of the Torah.

In a creative reading of a variety of rabbinic texts, R. Melamed argues that it is women's more innate sense of belief that allowed them to be at the forefront of all the most significant events in Jewish history. For example, women did not

²² Ibid.

²³ Based heavily on the thought of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook and his son, R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook.

²⁴ *Sihot ha-Ritzyah*, Numbers, p. 413.

²⁵ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-03/>.

²⁶ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-05/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

participate in the sin of the golden calf or the sin of the spies. Moreover, the midrash cites R. Akiva that it was in merit of righteous women that the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt. Lastly, he notes that while it may seem to the outsider that men's roles are more significant than those of women's, in truth the opposite is the case. He supports this claim by first citing a midrash which states that the religious posture of a wife is more likely to positively affect her husband than the reverse. Secondly, he references mystical sources which allude to the fact that "in the future, the [spiritual] advantage of women will be more apparent." Given their innate spiritual posture it is not surprising that the Torah tasks women with the primary role of raising the family. Men may have broader halakhic obligations when it comes to Torah learning and fulfilling PTBC; nonetheless, women's familial responsibilities are "the most significant element in life."²⁸

R. Melamed's strong advocacy of gender essentialism is significant specifically because there are other traditional models that he could have chosen from. For example, some scholars argue that women's exemption from PTBC is

simply a biblical decree, and any attempt to provide a rationale (such as permitting a woman more time for child-rearing) for such an exemption is simply speculation.²⁹ Nonetheless, R. Melamed chooses to advance the view of those authorities who see the discrepancy in obligations as indicating a more fundamental spiritual distinction between men and women. In fact, R. Melamed is so adamant in his claim regarding gender essentialism that he cautions against the blurring of the "uniqueness of each sex."³⁰ Doing so could have serious consequences, even possibly allowing for "existing family structures [to] deteriorate and collapse."³¹ It is only by embracing the uniqueness of both men and women that "the divine Presence dwells with the couple."³² Given the centrality that R. Melamed places upon parenting in general and motherhood specifically, it is not surprising that R. Melamed advocates early marriage for both men and women. Moreover, he is equally adamant about the need to try one's best to build large families with at least four or five children.³³

²⁸ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-07/>.

²⁹ See for example, Torah Temimah, *Parshat Bo*, 42.

³⁰ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/03-03-07/>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/11-02-06/>.

Women and Professional Fulfillment

R. Melamed's focus on motherhood as the bedrock of female identity makes his position about the value of professional fulfillment for women surprising. For example, in one essay, his support for the importance of women's professional fulfillment [leads him to call for](#) a reevaluation of the standard practice for Religious Zionist women to volunteer for national service post high school.³⁴ While R. Melamed is clear that he doesn't oppose *sherut leumi*, he does think that other factors need to be part of the calculation before a young woman decides what to do after high school. He correctly notes that girls will often complete two years of national service followed by a year of seminary studies, thus only beginning their academic studies around the age of twenty-one. According to R. Melamed, this can create the following dilemma for young women: either they must delay marriage until they complete their degree, or they need to marry young, thereby compromising their academic training and professional success. This latter concern is particularly pronounced for women whose families lack the financial means to help a newly married couple. These women will need to take a job to simply cover monthly family costs at the expense of their professional

development (for example, earning an advanced degree).

R. Melamed's concern about delaying the age of marriage is consistent with his overall vision of gender essentialism and the great religious importance of raising a family. What is surprising, however, is the value he places upon women's higher education for practical, national, and religious reasons. On a pragmatic level, he argues that in the contemporary world, income levels are proportional to the level of one's academic training. A woman with a doctorate in engineering, for example, is likely to earn more than a friend of hers who only has a bachelor's degree. From the perspective of societal advancement, having a more educated populace will create more scientific, social, and economic progress.

R. Melamed also notes that technological changes have reduced domestic pressures on women, thus allowing them more time for professional fulfillment. Additionally, longer life expectancy means that women are likely to live for many years after their period of motherhood is completed. For R. Melamed, these changes are religiously significant. In fact, he argues that with

³⁴ <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/4751>.

this newly allotted time, the non-actualization of a woman's unique talents and professional potential is a sin. [He explains that](#) this is the case because everyone is required to try and express their God-given talents.³⁵

On the surface there seems to be a dissonance between R. Melamed's strong gender essentialism and his advocacy of professional advancement and fulfillment for women. After all, he claims that the primary reason women are exempt from PTBC is their need to focus on parenting responsibilities. Yet in the context of women's professional life, he seems to see religious virtue in activities that take women outside the domestic sphere. Aware of this tension, he writes (in bold) that "building a Jewish home is the most important thing and this is where a woman should focus most of her energies." His more expansive view of professional fulfillment, in other words, is not meant to detract from the essential importance of child-rearing, but is an outgrowth of the new technologies and longer life spans, which provide women with more time to express their unique talents beyond the home.³⁶

Another surprising expression of R. Melamed's endorsement of advanced education for women relates to his ruling regarding the permissibility of birth control before the birth of a first child. As a general policy, R. Melamed endorses the common rabbinic view prohibiting the use of contraceptives upon marriage absent extenuating circumstances. Classic extenuating circumstances would be, for example, maternal health problems or marital problems detected early in the marriage. Both categories would fall into the rabbinic category of "*she'at ha-dehak*" and would permit the use of birth control. R. Melamed, however, adds a third example which is much more novel and surprising. In his view, birth control may be permissible in circumstances where both the husband and wife are immersed in rigorous academic programs (e.g., medical school) and having a child would force at least one of them to forfeit his or her professional training. Such a concession would prevent the husband or wife from fulfilling "their talents and aspirations" and by extension limit their overall contribution to society. While R. Melamed does insist that such a decision needs to be made in consultation with a rabbinic scholar, [he does nonetheless see](#) female

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

professional development as a legitimate variable impacting halakhic discourse.³⁷

Women and Ritual

One of the most unique elements of R. Melamed's halakhic thought is his position regarding women's relationship to ritual life, especially regarding rituals that are sociologically contentious within many parts of Orthodoxy. For example, in an article published in the journal *Akdamot*, Yonatan Gershon³⁸ [argued that](#) women and men in the same family should be able to count together towards the quorum of three for the purposes of joining together for a *zimmun*. His argument was endorsed by R. Baruch Gigi, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion.³⁹ One of the halakhic challenges towards counting women in a *zimmun* is the Talmudic claim of “*peritzut*” (immodesty) caused by the mixing of genders. While this concern should only be relevant to men and women from different families, some authorities prohibited counting women towards a *zimmun* with men even in the context of a meal with only the core family unit present.⁴⁰

³⁷ <https://ph.yhb.org.il/14-05-15/>.

³⁸ A student in Yeshivat Har Etzion.

³⁹ <https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.1.Gershon.pdf>.

⁴⁰ See [ibid. page 15](#) for an extensive discussion.

In his extensive essay, Gershon [notes that](#) the concern of “*peritzut*” should not be a relevant variable when discussing a core family unit especially in a modern context where co-ed meals are very common.⁴¹ In a rejoinder to this essay, R. Melamed [presents an alternative view](#).⁴² While conceding that Gershon's conclusion does have halakhic merit (and may be relied upon), he nonetheless recommends adopting the traditional practice excluding women from counting with men towards a *zimmun* even among immediate family. More broadly, R. Melamed notes that shared meals structurally allow for fraternizing and socializing in a way that can create a breach in modesty, and therefore the rabbis didn't allow women to join with men in the quorum. While this consideration would not be relevant in a familial context, [he argues that](#) the rabbis never instituted any formal obligation to recite a *zimmun* when one would need to mix the genders in order to create a quorum of three.⁴³

R. Melamed [adopts a](#) similarly conservative posture regarding the permissibility of women learning Talmud.⁴⁴ The Gemara states that

⁴¹ <https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.1.Gershon.pdf>, page 22.

⁴² <https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/26.3.Melamed.pdf>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/ask/229>.

teaching one's daughter Torah (in this case Oral law) is as if one has taught her *"tiflut"* or frivolity. R. Melamed interprets this phrase in a way that is consistent with his strong sense of gender essentialism that we saw above. Women only have an obligation to study Torah with the goal of knowing how to observe Halakhah. Men by contrast, have a requirement to study Torah for its own sake, understanding its own inner logic and complexities. As a result, women's education should focus on practical Halakhah and works of religious inspiration. Men, given their different learning obligation, should emphasize the study of Talmud since it helps facilitate a deeper understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of Jewish law. For R. Melamed, teaching Talmud to women is considered *"tiflut"* since it doesn't functionally serve women's larger obligation and can confuse them about their primary purpose. While he does sanction Talmud study for women who deeply desire such learning, his default position remains that female education should focus on aspects of Torah that further his view of Jewish femininity.

Given his stances regarding the status of women joining a male *zimmin* and studying Talmud, one would think that he would be consistently conservative when dealing with other

contentious issues involving Jewish ritual. However, as we will see, the opposite is the case. For example, while R. Melamed discourages the study of Talmud for women, he does demonstrate surprising openness regarding the question of female leadership roles in the Orthodox community. He states that "in principle, it would be ideal for women to be Torah scholars teaching Torah and Halakhah," with those capable becoming formal educators. Moreover, he notes that as "a matter of principle, there is no religious sphere (תחום תורני) that is closed to women." Even in those areas of Halakhah that technically require only male participation (such as rabbinic judges) it is possible to appoint "learned and pious women as spiritual leaders and halakhic decisors." In such cases the woman leader would simply instruct men to fulfill the duties that are gender exclusive. As a proof for this idea, he notes that while Devorah was accepted by the Jewish people as a leader, the midrash notes that it was her husband, Barak who was instructed by her to battle against Sisera.

While he acknowledges the larger educational and sociological challenges with having female Torah leaders, he does say that the proper path forward is to gradually increase female involvement in these realms. Specifically, [he](#)

[thinks that](#) the first stage should be educating “*morot Halakhah*” who will be able to answer halakhic questions for women.⁴⁵ The more that this is successful, the more the Orthodox community will desire to see women in broader roles of religious leadership.

Another example of R. Melamed’s difficult-to-categorize halakhic posture relates to his view regarding women and *tefillin*. In 2014 [a controversy erupted](#) within American Orthodox circles when a Modern Orthodox high school permitted two young women to wear *tefillin* at school.⁴⁶ *Roshei Yeshiva* from Yeshiva University [condemned the decision](#) and said that there is no room for women to wear *tefillin* within normative Orthodoxy.⁴⁷ Around the time of the controversy, R. Shlomo Brody [wrote an extensive article](#) examining the halakhic issues associated with women and *tefillin*.⁴⁸ Interestingly, the only

contemporary *posek* quoted in the entire article permitting women to wear *tefillin* (albeit with certain important caveats) is R. Melamed. While R. Melamed is clear that ideally women should be told not to wear *tefillin*, [he does state that](#) if a woman really desires to perform this *mitzvah*, she should not be prevented from doing so (if she wears the *tefillin* in private and not during her menstrual cycle).⁴⁹ [He similarly permits](#) a woman who desires to wrap herself in a *tallit* to perform this *mitzvah*. While ideally the *tallit* should only be worn in private, [he rules that](#) one need not protest if a woman puts on a *tallit* in public.⁵⁰

Interestingly, in a long footnote, R. Melamed returns to the theme of gender essentialism. [He notes that](#) while many women perform PTBC commandments that they are exempt from, common practice dictates that these same women almost always refrain from wearing

⁴⁵ <https://www.inn.co.il/news/449380>. Interestingly, in the context of this article, he does seem to slightly modify his preference for gender essentialism. For example, while acknowledging the differences between men and women, he states that they are not “deep or decisive.” Moreover, he claims that gender differences are not uniform and don’t impact all women equally. Basing himself on a passage in the Rambam (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 4:13) he additionally argues that ideally women should voluntarily choose to study Torah “in depth” as a precursor to having a maximally evolved relationship with God.

⁴⁶ <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-01-21/ty-article/girls-in-ny-high-school-wear-tefillin/0000017f-e773-d97e-a37f-f7772eff0000>.

⁴⁷ See for example,

https://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2014/rtwe_tefillin.html.

⁴⁸ <https://www.torahmusings.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Women-and-Tefillin-Different-Models.pdf>.

⁴⁹ https://ph.yhb.org.il/07-10-13/#_te01ftn10_11. He also cautions against allowing women to wear *tefillin* who are not careful about observing modestly laws and use the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* as a vehicle to advance certain social agendas.

⁵⁰ https://ph.yhb.org.il/07-09-08/#_te01ftn9_3. Here he also warns against women using the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* as a means to protest halakhic process.

tefillin and *tzitzit* (both PTBC).⁵¹ One reason he posits to explain this asymmetry is that these *mitzvot* are physical reminders intended to activate a more profound connection to God and His laws. Women, who are innately more spiritual, don't need to place these physical reminders of God on their bodies. One would expect a *posek* who is so committed to the recurring theme of gender essentialism to prohibit women from performing *mitzvot* that could easily be seen as an attempt to advocate a more egalitarian ethos. Nonetheless, while not actively encouraging the performance of these practices, he does permit them within certain parameters.

A similarly surprising position of R. Melamed is his lenient approach to the question of women dancing with the Torah on Simhat Torah. Many prominent Orthodox rabbis both in the United States and Israel adamantly oppose this practice. R. Dov Lior, for example, [prohibits](#) women from dancing with a Torah on the grounds that it will blur the lines between the different gender roles.⁵² For R. Lior, these differences are “essential. Moreover, the different roles are

based on mutual respect and appreciation.” Trying to create ritual equality between the sexes will cause each gender “to lose” its sense of uniqueness. One would expect R. Melamed to endorse a similar view. However, when asked whether women may dance with the Torah on Simhat Torah [he simply replied by saying](#) “why not?” adding that he didn’t include a ruling on this topic in his *Peninei Halakha* since it is not a formal halakhic question.⁵³ While he doesn’t endorse or encourage the practice, he certainly does not oppose it either.⁵⁴

Conclusion

R. Melamed’s views on Judaism and gender are consistently difficult to categorize. On the one hand he is a proud traditionalist who espouses views that are to be expected from someone raised and immersed in the Hardal community. For example, gender essentialism is central to his halakhic vision. As a result, he is quite clear about the centrality of motherhood in the Torah’s vision of religious women and sees family building as women’s primary purpose. Practically, he offers conservative rulings about both permitting

⁵¹ https://ph.yhb.org.il/07-10-13/#_te01ftn10_11.

⁵² <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/ask/379>.

⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100005257627694/search/?q=%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%AA%20%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%94>.

⁵⁴ See <https://ph.yhb.org.il/05-15-07/>, where he also permits women to read the *Megillah* for other women.

women to join a *zimmun* as well as the propriety of women studying Talmud. At the same time, he sees religious value in women becoming religious leaders and pursuing demanding careers, and he considers academic training to be a factor in calculating the permissibility of birth control for newly-married parents. Moreover, he is quite open to the possibility of women partaking in rituals where concern for blurring gender lines may nonetheless exist. On the surface, these positions seem to be at odds with each other. What we have seen from this essay, however, is that R. Melamed's unpredictability is part of his larger vision for how Halakhah operates. More specifically, it involves adopting a halakhic paradigm that adjudicates cases individually and doesn't allow tribal assumptions to automatically close off certain conclusions.

To highlight this point further, I want to return to the example of rabbinic opposition to R. Melamed's willingness to sit on a panel with a Reform rabbi. One of the most outspoken critics of R. Melamed's decision was R. Yehoshua Van Dyck. Months after the controversy, R. Van Dyck's stated that "the Reform movement undermines the Torah and causes assimilation amongst the

Jewish people." Moreover, [he added that](#) this assimilation will be a "tragedy for *am Yisrael*."⁵⁵ In response, the Reform movement tried to sue R. Van Dyck. They claimed that since he should be considered a state employee (as a rabbi of a *yishuv*), limitations on freedom of speech preclude him from issuing such "hateful" remarks. Surprisingly, R. Melamed came to R. Van Dyck's defense. R. Melamed is clear that he differs with R. Van Dyck about the proper attitude one should have towards the Reform movement. Nonetheless, he is adamant that if a rabbi truly believes that a group within the Jewish community threatens the future of the Jewish people, he must be able to state his views without fear of legal consequence.

Now that we have seen R. Melamed's insistence that truth must trump tribal identity, this seemingly surprising defense makes perfect sense. R. Melamed is ultimately committed to rabbinic independence for both his supporters⁵⁶ and his opponents. Against his critics, he holds that Orthodoxy is big enough to contain a multiplicity of voices on even the most contentious issues. There are many other dimensions of R. Melamed's halakhic

⁵⁵ <https://www.inn.co.il/news/504994>.

⁵⁶ See <https://yhb.org.il/shiurim/revivim646/>, where he defends R. Shlom Riskin against his detractors.

methodology that require further research. His views on religion and state, conversion, sexuality, the relationship between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox, as well as Jews and Arabs, are only a few examples of the many areas of Halakhah and public policy where R. Melamed's perspective deserves scholarly treatment. Additionally, his unique code, *Peninei Halakha*, also needs to be methodologically studied. One thing, however, remains almost certain. When analyzing any of these issues, it will be difficult to predict his conclusions from the outset. After all, R. Melamed has mastered the art of non-tribal and unpredictable *pesak Halakhah*.

"FOR THESE THINGS I WEEP": PSYCHOLOGICAL READINGS OF LAMENTATIONS

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The Biblical book of Lamentations, *Megillat Eikha*, is fraught with both theological and textual inconsistencies, making it a difficult text to comprehend. Examples are manifold: Was the destruction of the Temple a result of Israel's sins

in that generation—e.g., “woe to us, for we have sinned!” (5:16)—or was it their forefathers' fault—“Our fathers sinned, and are no more, and we bear their iniquities” (2:20)? Is there room for hope—“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases...” (3:21)—or, as many verses imply, is the future bleak—“And I said, My strength and my hope are perished from the Lord” (3:18)? Is God just in His ways—“The Lord is righteous,” (1:18)—or did He unleash his wrath on innocent victims—“Look Lord and see, to whom have You done this” (2:20)? Textually, its asymmetrical meter, abrupt shifts from first person to third person, and lack of a consistent narrative progression make it arduous to ascertain the speaker and goal of each verse.

While this text is traditionally read collectively on the fast of Tisha be-Av, its messages and purpose remain elusive. Certainly, if the sole purpose was to recall the historical event of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people, the text should include dates and the chronological sequence of events. Lamentations, however, lacks them both. In order to make sense of this enigmatic book, scholars have tried to decipher

Lamentations through a variety of novel lenses.¹ Several relatively recent works have utilized psychological theories and research to guide their understanding of this text.² While diverse in content, each one offers a unique perspective on the Book of Lamentations and charts a path to understand many of its inconsistencies. By analyzing the fresh perspective and language that these psychological interpretations give us, we can gain a deeper appreciation of Lamentations and, in turn, transform our Tisha be-Av experience into a day of national healing.

Lamentations Through the Lens of Grief

In 1993, Paul Joyce, of the University of Birmingham, published an interpretation of Lamentations in light of two psychological

theories of grief described in two different books: Yorick Spiegel's [The Grief Process](#) and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' [On Death and Dying](#).³ These two psychologists argued that grief is processed in distinct stages, each one characterized by different emotions. Importantly, both Spiegel and Kübler-Ross acknowledged that these stages don't always occur linearly, and that mourners spend varying amounts of time on each stage. Nevertheless, they claimed that the basic framework of these theories can be appreciated by most mourners. Joyce contended that each of the stages of grief described by these two psychological theorists are apparent in the text of Lamentations, albeit not in the order of which they were originally conceived.⁴ Just as one proceeds through these stages after the loss of a

¹ See Heath A. Thomas, "[A Survey of Research on Lamentations \(2002–2012\)](#)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 1 (2013): 8–38.

² In addition to the ones reviewed here, there have been several other psychological readings of Lamentations that will not be covered in this essay. For example, in Tiffany Houck-Loomis, "[Good God?!? Lamentations as a Model for Mourning the Loss of the Good God](#)," *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 3 (2012): 701–8, Houck-Loomis reads Lamentations as reflecting Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory. In Preston Evangelou, "How Might Lamentations Be Read in the Light of Applying Winnicott's Notion of a 'Holding Environment' to Reconcile the Internal Conflict of the Absent Comforter?" *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 7 (2019): 261-275, Evangelou reads Lamentations as expressing Donald Winnicott's notion of a holding environment to reconcile the internal conflict. An analysis of these interpretations is beyond the purview of this essay. Instead, we will focus on two compelling reads: one that reads Lamentations in light of the psychological study of grief and one in light of trauma therapy.

³ Paul Joyce, "Lamentations and the grief process: a psychological reading," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 3 (1993): 304-320.

⁴ David Reimer in David J. Reimer, "[Good Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations](#)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114, no. 4 (2002): 542-559, also believed that Lamentations can be read in light of Kübler-Ross' five-stage theory. However, whereas Joyce was of the opinion that there was no particular order to its five chapters and that its lack of order resembles the grieving lived experiences, Reimer believed that each of the five chapters of Lamentations correspond to Kübler-Ross' five stages in sequential order. Heath A. Thomas summarizes Reimer's reading:

"Lamentations 1 reflects the stage of denial and isolation. The dominant theme of ch. 2 is anger. God is angry, especially in Lam. 2.1-9, but this anger is tempered by the anger of Zion personified, who protests God's actions (Lam. 2.20-22). Lamentations 3 effects 'a transition from hopelessness to hope through a reflection on the

loved one, the text of Lamentations can be read as a bereaved widow, Jerusalem, mourning the loss of her husband, God, through these stages.

Spiegel lays out four stages in what he calls “the grief process.” The first stage is shock, the immediate pain that follows shortly after the loss. According to Joyce, this stage is exemplified in the opening verse which expresses utter dismay at Jerusalem’s lowly situation: “How does the city sit solitary, that was full of people!” (1:1). The second stage, called the controlled stage, occurs when regression to an immature psychological phase is stalled by the funeral and other mourning rituals. This may be linked to verses that describe rituals of mourning such as, “The elders of the daughter of Ziyon sit upon the ground, and keep silence: they have cast up dust upon their heads; they have girded themselves with sackcloth: the virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground” (2:10). Regression to infantile behavior, Spiegel’s third stage, is expressed in all of the

verses that mention weeping. It is also apparent in verses in which Jerusalem recalls earlier times, such as in the verse, “Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old” (5:21). The last stage is adaptation, in which the bereaved assimilates and adjusts to the death, allowing them to continue living their life with a fresh perspective. This is exemplified in verses of consolation such as “but though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love” (3:32).

More famously, Kübler-Ross presented five distinct stages of mourning. The first is denial and isolation. Joyce writes that this stage is apparent in Lamentations if we read the verses expressing hope—such as the verse, “For the Lord will not cast off forever” (3:31)—as an ironic, passive-aggressive jibe. Themes of isolation are present throughout the book, including the first verse, “How does the city sit solitary, that was full of

character of God. While hope remains uncertain, there is no better option’ (Reimer 2002: 551). This is the bargaining stage. It demonstrates the proper way forward: ‘good behaviour’ will hopefully lead to God’s deliverance, although this deliverance remains uncertain for ‘God is no automaton’ (p. 552). Lamentations 4 reveals depression through the dominant theme of reversal. The former glory of Jerusalem, when contrasted against the present destruction of the people and city, reveals the great reversal God’s people have experienced and the deep sadness that this brings: ‘what was once

precious, good, and vital has become worthless, spoiled, and lifeless’ (p. 552). Especially in Lam. 4.1-20, the poetry mourns the loss and depicts a persistent negativity over the desolation of Jerusalem (p. 552). Lamentations 5 is ‘the most distinctive section of the book’ because prayer frames both this poem and the book as a whole. This poem cries out for future life, refusing to let God see the sufferers perish (p. 555), but it contrasts with Kübler-Ross’s stage of acceptance.” See Thomas, “A Survey of Research on Lamentations.”

people!” (1:1). The second stage is anger, and that can be identified in Israel’s anger at God such as in the verse, “Behold, O Lord, and consider to whom Thou hast done this. Shall the women eat their fruit, their cherished babes?” (2:20). Kübler-Ross’ third stage is bargaining, in which one pleads for relief from pain and the prospect of death. This theme can be seen in verses that are characterized by Jerusalem negotiating with God to ease her pain, such as in the verse, “Let us search and try our ways, and turn back to the Lord” (3:40). Depression, the fourth stage, is easily discernible throughout the book, but perhaps most plainly in the verse, “The joy of our hearts is ceased, our dancing has been turned into mourning” (5:15). Lastly, Kübler-Ross’ final stage, acceptance, where one resigns and “lets go” of the of the pain of the loss that is preventing them from living a healthy life, is expressed in verses such as, “Who is he that says, and it comes to pass, when the Lord commands it not?” (3:37).

Joyce uses this framework to explain some of the inconsistencies within Lamentations. “Such inconsistency of explanation, casting around for some meaning in the darkness” writes Joyce, “is a recurrent feature of both the grieving and the dying process, as presented by Spiegel and Kübler-Ross.”⁵ In other words, the theological and textual inconsistencies that make up Lamentations are not quirks, they are distinctive and literary features. Lamentations lacks coherence, just as a mourner struggles to find coherence in his or her own life. The theological contradictions expressed in Lamentations, such as whether God is benevolent or punitive or whether tragedy is a result of our sins or not, reflect the contradictory thoughts that often are present within the mind of a mourner. Accordingly, Lamentations’ inconsistencies are no longer problematic. After all, Lamentations is not a book of theodicy, but one of raw humanity. It is a descriptive book depicting our reaction to tragedy, not a prescriptive book informing us what God thinks.

⁵ A similar argument is made by Dr. Yael Ziegler where she explains the inconsistencies in light of the amorphous nature of human emotions. She writes, “Eikha’s seemingly inconsistent and rapidly changing attitudes toward God may be explained by the fact that emotions lie at its core. Is God just or not? An intellectual consideration of the matter approaches the question systemically, offering coherent, logical arguments. However, when humans address the same events through an emotional lens, contradictions

abound. God is both just and unjust. Humans are simultaneously baffled, abashed, angered, and comforted by God. The ebb and flow of human emotions and the way they shift and converge, collide and contradict, can account for the rapid swing between different perspectives in Eikha. This represents the emotional condition of humans, offering a realistic and multifaceted portrait of how humans cope with God’s role in their tragedy.” See Dr. Yael Ziegler, [*Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World*](#) (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2021), 35-36.

The exact science behind Spiegel's and Kübler-Ross' theories is hotly debated amongst researchers. Current research confirms what Spiegel and Kübler-Ross established: that the emotions associated with mourning don't occur in distinct stages but rather oscillate back and forth between each other and often occur simultaneously. Grief is also a deeply personal emotion, and expressed differently among people. Nevertheless, most theories maintain that grieving is a period in which the bereaved struggles to both dwell on the enormity of the loss and restore themselves to a level of functioning. This process occurs over time, with setbacks and losses along the way. This struggle is clearly a theme of Lamentations, regardless of which theory of grieving one may subscribe to.

Lamentations Through the Lens of Trauma

Another psychological trend has been to read Lamentations through the lens of trauma studies. "Unlike commonplace misfortunes," trauma researcher Judith Herman writes, "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death."⁶ Traumatic events, whether experienced in real life, or sometimes even

vicariously, alter the brain and body and cause a variety of symptoms, often leading to post-traumatic stress disorder. Before analyzing how elements of trauma can be found in Lamentations, it is important to first clarify the difference between traumatic memories and normal memories.

The French psychologist Pierre Janet was one of the first to accurately explain the difference between regular memories and traumatic memories. Janet writes that regular memory, what he calls "narrative memory," is adaptive and social. The memory is recalled to tell a story for a specific purpose and therefore can be modified and told differently to fit the circumstance. Traumatic memories, in contrast, are more akin to reenactments of the traumatic event. They are often not recalled intentionally, but triggered into memory by stimuli reminiscent of the traumatic event.⁷ A classic example is a war veteran who suffers flashbacks upon hearing fireworks, unintentionally recalling the sounds of gunshots in battle. These flashbacks bring the trauma survivor, in a certain sense, back to the scene of the event, often with the overwhelming sensations that were present there as well. As a

⁶ Judith Herman, [*Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*](#) (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 33.

⁷ Pierre Janet, [*Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study, Volume One*](#) (New York: Macmillan, 1925; reprint CT: Martino Fine Books, 2019), 660.

result, a traumatic memory is not socially adaptive and can't be manipulated to fit the circumstance. It is frozen in time, and reluctantly re-lived.

Traumatic memories also tend to lack the structure of normal memories. One study showed that when people recall non-traumatic events such as weddings, births, and graduations, the events are recalled from the past with a clear narrative; there is a beginning, middle, and end to the story. Traumatic events, by contrast, are remembered in a disorganized manner, with the exact sequences of the events muddled and the insignificant details (such as the smell that accompanied the event) taking a more prominent role in the memory than seems warranted.⁸ Traumatic memories are not cohesive, they are experienced as piecemeal snippets. Sadly, the highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner trauma victims express their story often results in others questioning whether the event actually happened.⁹

Smith-Christopher reads Lamentations in light of this understanding of traumatic memories.¹⁰ The

destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile was a collective traumatic event that dramatically altered the Jewish peoples' lives forever. The incoherence of the book can be explained in light of a trauma survivor suffering through intrusive memories of the past. The traumatic memories of cannibalism (2:20, 4:10), famine (2:12, 4:4-10), and bloodshed (1:1, 2:21) spontaneously interrupt Jerusalem's thoughts and speech. Smith-Christopher also points out the verses of isolation and depression highlight the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

We can add more evidence to Smith-Christopher's argument that Lamentations should be read in light of the psychological phenomenon of trauma. Firstly, Lamentations' many sensory descriptions are akin to trauma survivor's reliving of the sensory details associated with the traumatic event. Secondly, the theological contradictions as well, it can be argued, are representative of the whirling thoughts that often accompany survivors of trauma. With the world as they knew it destroyed, survivors often grapple with beliefs they once thought self-evident and

⁸ B.A. van der Kolk and R. Fisler, "Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories: Overview and Exploratory Study," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8, no. 4 (1995): 505-25.

⁹ Herman, [*Trauma and Recovery*](#), 1.

¹⁰ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, [*A Biblical Theology of Exile*](#) (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress): 75-104.

clear. Their world as a safe place instantly transformed to one of horror, and they consequently question the presence of a just and benevolent God. Furthermore, Lamentations' asymmetrical meter,¹¹ uncharacteristic of Biblical texts, may reflect the inability to feel grounded and in rhythm with one's life, as so many trauma survivors report.

When trauma remains unresolved, it can take a terrible toll on our relationships and lives. "If your heart is still broken because you were assaulted by someone you loved, you are likely to be preoccupied with not getting hurt again and fear opening up to someone new," writes Bessel van der Kolk, a pioneer in the study of trauma.¹² There have been many different techniques advanced to resolve trauma. Interestingly, one aspect that many trauma therapies have in common is the concept of a trauma narrative in which the survivor, guided by a trained clinician, tries to retell the story of the traumatic event. Scholars debate exactly how this is helpful. According to cognitive-behavioral therapy practitioners, the

trauma narrative serves as a type of exposure therapy. Through systematically exposing the survivor to their traumatic memory, the survivor will become desensitized to the intensity of the memory and the trigger reminders associated with them.¹³ Others believe that the main purpose of the trauma narrative is to practice being able to retell it to loved ones, with the hope that their empathic listening will be healing in itself.¹⁴

However, researchers are beginning to learn that the trauma narrative does something even deeper. As we've seen above, traumatic events are experienced as flashbacks frozen in time and qualitatively different from normal memories. According to Janet, these flashbacks are reflective of an "insurmountable obstacle" that prevents the survivor from integrating the traumatic experience and moving on with their lives. They are stuck in the past and therefore find it difficult to integrate new experiences well.¹⁵ Research even shows that survivors often change their tone of voice and speaking style when recalling their

¹¹ K. Budde, "Das hebräisches Klagelied," ZAW 2 (1882), 1-52. See also Dr. Yael Ziegler, *Lamentations*, 49-52.

¹² Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 213.

¹³ Esther Deblinger, Anthony P. Mannarino, Judith A. Cohen, Melissa K. Runyon, and Robert A. Steer, "[Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Children: Impact](#)

[of the Trauma Narrative and Treatment Length](#)," *Depression and Anxiety* 28, no. 1 (2010): 67-75.

¹⁴ Mariagrazia Di Giuseppe, Tracy A. Prout, Timothy Rice, and Leon Hoffman, "[Regulation-Focused Psychotherapy for Children \(RFP-C\): Advances in the Treatment of ADHD and ODD in Childhood and Adolescence](#)," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020).

¹⁵ Janet, *Psychological Healing*, 660.

traumatic event, perhaps indicating that part of their personality is split and held hostage to the past event.¹⁶ Van der Kolk, therefore, explains that telling the trauma narrative heals because it helps in “integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narrative of life, so that the brain can recognize that ‘that was then, and this is now.’”¹⁷ Essentially, by telling the story of the trauma, the survivor will eventually be able to merge the event with the rest of their life into a cohesive unit. The memory will no longer stand apart as a destructive elephant in the room, but rather tamed and put in its proper place.

In much the same way that a trauma narrative helps heal trauma survivors, Leslie Allen argued that Lamentations can be understood as “the script of a liturgy intended as a therapeutic ritual.”¹⁸ According to this approach, Dr. Matthew A. LaPine argues that on Tisha be-Av Jews collectively read Lamentations as a way to construct their collective trauma so that they can retell their story.¹⁹ We are essentially frozen in the past, and try, annually, to put together the broken

pieces of our lives. “While trauma keeps us dumbfounded,” writes van der Kolk, “the path out of it is paved with words, carefully assembled, piece by piece, until the whole story can be revealed.”²⁰

The idea of assembling the shattered pieces of our past trauma may be reflected in the poetic nature of Lamentations as well. Dobbs-Allsopp suggested that the poetry and acrostic structure²¹ of Lamentations allows for “healing through language.”²² By retelling our story we are trying to put order to the scattered pieces of our lives, from *aleph* to *tav*. We may add that, as so often is the case with trauma survivors, we may never truly heal from our trauma in a complete sense. The letters of *ayin* and *peh* are in reversed order in chapters two through four, perhaps indicating that we may never regain perfect harmony. We cannot undo the past, and its memory may still haunt us from time to time, albeit hopefully in a more integrative and less intrusive manner. At the end of Lamentations, we conclude with an open-ended question, “Unless you have utterly rejected

¹⁶ James W. Pennebaker, [Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions](#) (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 50.

¹⁷ van der Kolk, [The Body Keeps the Score](#), 183.

¹⁸ Cited in Matthew A. LaPine, “[The Therapeutic Use of Lamentations after Collective Trauma](#),” The Center for Hebraic Thought, May 25, 2022.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ van der Kolk, [The Body Keeps the Score](#), 234.

²¹ Chapter 5 lacks an acrostic structure but is still twenty-two verses corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

²² F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, [Lamentations: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching](#) (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012).

us and are angry with us beyond measure” (5:22), because sometimes we must accept that we will never fully have all the answers to our painful questions.

It is also notable that the custom is to recite Lamentations specifically in a congregation. Perhaps this reflects the importance of community and relationships in the recovery process. According to Herman, “in her renewed connection with other people, the survivor recreates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic operations of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy.”²³ Not only can Lamentations be read as a depiction of traumatic flashbacks, but, through its poetic nature and collective retelling, as a tool for recovery as well.

Lamentations as a Transformative Experience

These two psychological readings of Lamentations have ramifications for how we understand its role on Tisha be-Av. R. Maurice Lamm writes that mourning in Judaism is supposed to be a healing process:

²³ Herman, [Trauma and Recovery](#), 133.

The Jewish tradition has thus designed a gradual release from grief, and has instituted five successive periods of mourning, each with its own laws governing the expression of grief and the process of return to the normal affairs of society.²⁴

The Jewish mourning stages of *aninut*, *shiva*, *sheloshim*, *yud-bet hodesh* (for the loss of a parent), and *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the day of death) are meant to be healing, allowing the mourner to return to their normal selves and into society. The progressively less restrictive nature of these five stages allows the mourner to achieve *nehama*, comfort, and move on with their life. Halakhic mourning is not only a time for allowed sadness, but a tool that both describes and prescribes mourning to be restorative.

It is then puzzling that the mourning restrictions that commence on the 17th of *Tammuz* and conclude three weeks later on Tisha be-Av become gradually more restrictive over time and are therefore inverse from normal halakhic mourning restrictions which become

²⁴ Maurice Lamm, [The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning](#) (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David, 2000), 75.

progressively less restrictive.²⁵ In explaining this difference, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik argued that this is due to the fact that the loss of a close relative is an *aveilut hadashah*, a new mourning, that is most painful immediately after the loss and gradually eases as time goes on. The mourning of the three weeks, in contrast, are considered *aveilut yeshanah*, an ancient mourning which requires gradual preparation in order to experience “remote events which seem to have forfeited their relevance long ago.”²⁶ If, as we’ve seen, the stages of Jewish mourning are ordered specifically to be healing, how then do we heal from the grief we experience on Tish be-Av if the order is inverted?

One answer to this question may be gleaned if we consider what psychologists call traumatic grief.²⁷

Some people experience uncomplicated

bereavement and some develop post-traumatic stress disorder without any bereavement (in its usual sense). However, when trauma is embedded within the loss of a loved one, the psychological trajectory is qualitatively different. Whereas typical grief (what psychologists may refer to as uncomplicated bereavement), as painful as it may be, is relatively short-lived, traumatic grief can persist for years and even decades.²⁸ Research has also shown that those who suffer from traumatic grief have more severe intrusive symptoms and greater functional impairment in comparison to both those who suffered a non-traumatic loss and those who experienced a traumatic event.²⁹

²⁵ This question assumes, as R. Soloveitchik does below, that the mourning that takes place during the three weeks should be modeled after the mourning rituals that take place after the loss of a relative. One could argue that although they are both mourning rituals, there isn’t a compelling reason that they need to follow the same course.

²⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition](#) (ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler; Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2003), 19.

²⁷ Holly G. Prigerson and Selby C. Jacobs, “Traumatic Grief as a Distinct Disorder: A Rationale, Consensus Criteria, and a Preliminary Empirical Test” in [Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care](#) (ed. Wolfgang Stroebe, Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Henk Schut, H. O. Prigerson, and S.C. Jacobs; Washington, D.C.:

American Psychological Association, 2001), 613–45. Although there exists no traumatic grief diagnosis in the DSM-5 as it is typically seen as too similar to a regular post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, the difference between traumatic grief and post-traumatic stress disorder unrelated to a loss has been studied for the last two decades and is likely to exist as its own diagnosis in the next edition of the DSM. It should also be noted that traumatic grief is sometimes referred to by other names.

²⁸ Yuval Neria, and Brett T. Litz. “[Bereavement by Traumatic Means: The Complex Synergy of Trauma and Grief](#),” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 9, no. 1 (2004): 73–87.

²⁹ Bonnie L. Green, Janice L. Krupnick, Patricia Stockton, Lisa Goodman, Carole Corcoran, and Rachel Petty. “[Psychological Outcomes Associated with Traumatic Loss in a Sample of Young Women](#),” *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 5 (2001): 817–37.

One method of healing traumatic grief is through narrative construction,³⁰ much the same way used for trauma survivors. Constructing a narrative is a gradual process that takes time to develop. Initially, one may only be able to verbalize ambiguous details of the traumatic loss before feeling too overwhelmed to continue. The role of the clinician is to systematically guide the client into being able, over time, to retell the complete story of the traumatic event in a way that puts meaning to their suffering and allows them to move on healthily with their life. The narrative, in these cases, is not only important for helping one cope with the traumatic memory, but with the loss associated with it as well. By being able to tell a cohesive story, the mourner can make some sense of their traumatic loss and heal from it.

The loss of the Temple was certainly an event worthy of traumatic grief. Not only was the Temple the center of Jewish life, it also represented our close relationship and access to God. Its destruction was earth shattering, and we have not yet been able to pick up all the scattered pieces and heal. On Tisha be-Av we are both mourning its loss, but also severely traumatized

by it. We may not perceive the magnitude of this traumatic loss because it occurred thousands of years ago, but that does not mean its effects weren't spiritually catastrophic. We should therefore view our reaction to the loss of Temple as traumatic grief, and read Lamentations through the lenses of both grief and trauma together.

In order to resolve this intergenerational traumatic loss, we need to go through the gradual process of constructing our collective traumatic grief narrative. Perhaps this is why, contrary to the mourning rituals for the loss of a relative, *aveilut hadashah*, the mourning rituals of the three weeks, *aveilut yeshanah*, become increasingly more intense over time. Just as trauma survivors gradually train themselves to be able to retell their full story, starting on the 17th of *Tammuz* we gradually train ourselves to be able to reopen the book of Lamentations on Tisha be-Av and recite our traumatic grief narrative. While at the start of these three weeks we may not be ready to fully confront the memories of our past, the progressively strict mourning rituals prepare us to finally engage with them on Tisha be-Av. In this light, Lamentations is not meant to be a mere

³⁰ Tuvia Peri, Ilanit Hasson-Ohayon, Sharon Garber, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Paul A. Boelen, "[Narrative Reconstruction Therapy for Prolonged Grief Disorder—](#)

[Rationale and Case Study](#)," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 7, no. 1 (2016): 30687.

recording of a historical event or even a mood-setter for the rest of Tisha be-Av. It is meant as the key to help resolve our traumatic grief.³¹

The Sages of the Talmud stated that, “All who mourn [the destruction of] Jerusalem merits to see it in its joy” (*Ta’anit* 30b). Instead of promising us that those who mourn the destruction of Jerusalem *will* merit to see in its joy, as many erroneously translate this passage, the wording of the Sages is that the mourning causes us to see it in its joy *now*. Perhaps the sages were teaching us that if we read mourn through the lens of traumatic grief and use Lamentations as a narrative tool to resolve our ancient trauma, we can begin to put together the broken pieces of our lives, from *aleph* to *tav*, and become sufficiently healed enough to work through our transgenerational flaws and experience true joy. After thousands of years of traumatic grief, we acknowledge that we may never truly be whole.

³¹ Even without the notion of a narrative, reading Lamentations may be healing in another fashion: Whereas traditional post-Freudian clinical analysis implied that grief involves the process of detachment and separation from the loss, more recent research points to the fact that grief actually functions to maintain psychological ties to the deceased. See CM Parkes, “The first year of bereavement: a longitudinal study of the reaction of London widows to the death of their husbands,” *Psychiatry* 33 (1970): 444–46; and John Bowlby, *Loss: Sadness and Depression, Volume 3* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980). Understood in this light, perhaps another function of the mourning commencing on

However, in telling our story as a community, year after year, we may heal.³²

“I WOULD SOAR TO THE SPHERE OF HEAVEN”: ALEPH AND “I” IN A TISHAH BE-AV LAMENT

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The book of Lamentations is devoted to the events surrounding the destruction of Solomon’s temple by the Babylonians. From a structural perspective, the most distinctive feature of Lamentations is that four of its five chapters (all but the last) are acrostics. In chapters 1, 2, and 4, the initial words of each verse begin with each successive letter of the alphabet, from *aleph* to *tav*. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic: The first three verses each begin with *aleph*, the next three with *bet*, and so forth. The fifth chapter contains the

the 17th of *Tammuz* and the reading Lamentations on Tisha be-Av is to rekindle our psychological connection to the Temple and its destruction. By grieving, in a manner that is progressively more intense, we obtain a deeper connection to the loss and strengthen our ties to it.

³² I would like to thank my wife Sonny, my friends Yehuda Fogel and ET Lustiger, my mentor and colleague Dr. Erica Brown, and the Lehrhaus team for their insightful editorial feedback. I would also like to thank my friend Rabbi Elly Deutsch for sharing with me his deep knowledge of grief in both Jewish and psychological literature.

ghost of an acrostic. It does not run from *aleph* to *tav*, but it consists of 22 verses, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Piyyut—the liturgical poetry that Jews began to compose in earnest around roughly the fifth century of the common era—is much enamored of acrostics, and one can only imagine the excitement (tempered by the grimness of the subject matter) with which liturgical poets (*paytanim*) approached the task of writing poems for the Ninth of Av, the day on which Lamentations takes center stage. Here the *paytanic* style met its biblical ancestor, and the *paytan* could take advantage of this coincidence to produce acrostic poetry of dizzying complexity.

There is another feature of Lamentations that yielded notable results in the *paytan*'s workshop: the presence of multiple individual speakers, each with a rich inner life.¹ The characters are mainly anonymous, though sometimes, as in the case of Zion, they are identified. *Paytanim* writing poems for Tishah be-Av could take on these personae,

and voice them anew. The standard voice of prayer in rabbinic Judaism is the collective first-person plural of Israel: “our God, and the God of our fathers”; “heal us”; and so on. But Lamentations offered *paytanim* the opportunity to introduce the emotionally laden perspectives of various characters speaking in the first-person singular.² *Piyyut* invites this rhetorical choice because it is designed to be performed by a prayer leader, distinct from the congregation.

The acrostic aesthetic of Lamentations further encourages the first-person singular for a simple but impactful grammatical reason: first-person singular imperfect verbs in Hebrew are marked at the beginning by an *aleph*. When acrostics multiply, and everything seems like it begins with *aleph*, one is nudged toward composition in the first-person singular.

I offer here a contextual analysis of a *piyyut* that embraces these interlocking potentialities of acrostic and the first-person singular, a *kinnah* (lament) by the great *paytan* Eleazar bi-rabbi Qillir

¹ See on this topic especially Alan Mintz, [Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature](#) (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 17-48.

² On dimensions of the first-person singular in *piyyut*, and, relatedly, the personality of the *paytan*, see Yehoshua Granat, “The ‘Emissary of the Congregation’ as an Individual

in the Early *Reshut*,” in [Jewish Prayer: New Perspectives](#), ed. Uri Ehrlich (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2016), 79-99 (Hebrew); Tzvi Novick, “An Epithalamium for Abraham,” in [Genesis in Late Antique Poetry](#), eds. Andrew Faulkner et al. (Washington, DC: CUA Press), 177-98; Tzvi Novick, “‘Let Me Flee for Help’: Israel as ‘I’ and the *Teqi’ot* of Yose ben Yose,” *EJS* 8 (2014): 147-74.

(or Kalir; the Kaliri, etc.), אָדָה עַד חוּג שָׁמַיִם (*a'adeh ad hug shamayim*) (“I would soar to the sphere of heaven”). (The *kinnah* is presented in full, with translation and notes, in the appendix.) Some background about the performance of *kinnot* at the time of Qillir is necessary to appreciate how the poem works. Today we recite *kinnot* as standalone prayers in the evening and in the morning, but originally—in Qillir’s day—*kinnot* were performed within the framework of the morning *Amidah*. The *paytan* would substitute for the main body of each of the blessings of the *Amidah* one or more strophes on the theme of Tishah be-Av; he would retain from the standard *Amidah* only the concluding blessing formulae (e.g., “Blessed are you, Lord, shield of Abraham,” etc.). When the *paytan* reached the fourteenth blessing, on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, he expanded the composition by introducing a series of *kinnot*. The composition as a whole—the blessing strophes, followed by the *kinnot* series—is called a *kerovah*.³

Qillir wrote multiple *kerovot* for Tishah be-Av; all or parts of five have survived to today. He

composed, too, a remarkably large number of *kinnot*, at least many tens of them. There is every reason to suppose that these *kinnot* were composed in distinct series, each designated for a particular *kerovah*. But over the centuries, these *kinnot* were dislodged from their original liturgical contexts and were mixed and matched in the prayer practices of different communities. It is far from easy to unscramble the egg: to identify the *kinnot* that belonged together, and the *kerovah* for which they were composed. Ezra Fleischer, among the towering figures in the history of *piyyut* scholarship, plausibly linked a series of five *kinnot* with a particular *kerovah* entitled אֵהְלִי אִיכָה (*aholi ekhah*) (“My tent, how”), based on certain structural similarities between the blessing strophes of the *kerovah* and the *kinnot* themselves. The five *qinot* are each structured, successively, by the five chapters of Lamentations, from chapter 1 to chapter 5.⁴

Let us turn now to “I would soar.” I contend, first, that this *kinnah* was composed for a different *kerovah* composed by Qillir, אָבִיךָ בְיוֹם מִבְּרַךְ (*a'avikh be-yom mevekh*) (“I would mourn on a

³ It might be either a *kerovah* 14, if the composition ended with the *kinnot* in the fourteenth blessing, or a *kerovah* 18, if the composition continued to the end of the *Amidah*. For examples of *kerovot* for Tishah be-Av by Qillir see Daniel Goldschmidt, *The Order of Kinnot for Tishah be-Av*

(Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), 147-60; Ezra Fleischer, “The Qillirian Compositions for Tisha b’Av,” *HUCA* 45 (1974): 1-40 (Hebrew section).

⁴ See *ibid.*, 11-30.

day of confusion”). (One of the blessing strophes from this *kerovah* can be found in the appendix.)⁵ This hypothesis rests on the following similarities between the principal blessing strophes of the *kerovah* and the *kinnah*.⁶ In both the blessing strophes of the *kerovah* and in “I would soar,” every line begins with an *aleph*, usually an *aleph* that serves as the prefix for a first-person singular imperfect verb (“I would etc.”). The acrostic is populated by the second letter, i.e., the letter that follows the *aleph*. Likewise, both the blessing strophes and “I would soar” feature a verse quotation in the final line of the strophe.⁷ There are also numerous verbal overlaps between the blessing strophes and the *kinnah*.⁸

In the blessing strophes of the *kerovah*, each strophe begins with four lines in which the initial

word begins with *aleph* followed by the acrostic letter. The fifth line divides (by rhyme) into two short units, each of which opens with a word beginning with *aleph* followed by the acrostic letter. The acrostic is therefore sixfold, though it only runs across five lines. In “I would soar,” the acrostic is threefold: each strophe begins with three lines in which the initial word begins with *aleph* followed by the acrostic letter. The acrostic stretching across five lines in the blessing strophes of the *kerovah* may correspond to the five chapters of Lamentations. The fact that the acrostic is sixfold may likewise be connected to the fact that there are six acrostics in Lamentations (one each in chapters 1, 2, and 4, and three in chapter 3).⁹ I believe that the threefold acrostic of “I will soar” corresponds to the threefold acrostic in chapter 3. Here we begin

⁵ In Goldschmidt, *Kinnot*, 40, 42, “I will soar” is preceded by a bridge strophe—a *salsalah*—that links it backward to the *kinnah* איכה אצת (“How you hurried”), which is in turn linked backward by a *salsalah* to the *kinnah* שבת סורו מני (“It is ended; turn from me”). If these *salsalot* are original, we would be forced to conclude that “I would soar” was written for the *kerovah* זכור איכה (“Remember how”), of which the last *kinnah* is a direct continuation. But I think it unlikely that these *salsalot* are original.

⁶ I call them “principal” blessing strophes because each is followed by a second, shorter strophe that leads into the concluding blessing formula. From this point on I refer to these first strophes simply as the blessing strophes.

⁷ In the blessing strophes, the final lines—the sixth line of each strophe—always begins with איכה (“how”), and the verse quotation occurs in the continuation. These lines do not participate in the acrostic. In “I will soar,” the final lines complete the acrostic. The threefold acrostic across the first

three lines of each strophe runs from *aleph* in the first strophe to *lamed* in the twelfth. The final lines of each strophe feature a reverse acrostic from *tav* in the first strophe to *lamed* in the twelfth. Qillir reverses the order of the *lamed* and *kaf* lines in the last lines of the eleventh and twelfth strophes so that the four lines of the eleventh strophe all begin with *kaf*, and the four lines of the twelfth strophe all begin with *lamed*.

⁸ E.g., פנים בפנים (l. 7 of the *kerovah* in Goldschmidt’s lineation, l. 18 of the *qinah* in my lineation); מחרבי (l. 14; l. 3); אדעה מליון (l. 20; l. 14); אהרו (l. 27; l. 19). See also my note to the word אאדה in the appendix.

⁹ It is also possible, more mundanely, that the sixfold acrostic simply reflects a convention for the *kerovah*. See likewise, e.g., Hadutahu’s *kerovah* (*shiv’ata*) for the Sabbath, ... גבוה ונכון (“... high and fixed”), which is structurally very similar to Qillir’s *kerovah*.

to appreciate the underlying logic of “I would soar”: it is in fact a rewriting of Lamentations 3.

In the blessing strophes, the speaking voice—the “I”—is desultory, sometimes seeming to indicate the prayer leader and sometimes the personification of the congregation. By contrast, the “I” of “I will soar” seems carefully crafted to correspond to the speaker of Lamentations 3. The first-person singular in chapter 3 is very prominent: the opening word of the chapter is *ani* (“I”), and the chapter consists throughout of the theological ruminations of a *gever* (“man”) who has seen much suffering:¹⁰ “I (*ani*) am the man (*gever*) who has known affliction under the rod of His wrath.” (Lamentations 1:1 [NJPS])

Who is this man? Who is the speaker in Lamentations 3? According to a pervasive tradition attested across rabbinic literature and beyond it—as, for example, in the introduction to the Greek translation in the Septuagint—the author of Lamentations is Jeremiah.¹¹ Despite this tradition, the rabbis do not generally take the “I” of Lamentations 3 to be Jeremiah; they take

Jeremiah to be giving voice not to his own thoughts and experiences, but to those of “the assembly of Israel.”¹² The speaker in Qillir’s *piyyut*, by contrast, is an individual, separate from the people of Israel. It is for this reason that he can refer to Israel in the third person, as in l. 7 (“I would join to me in weeping the one who ascended the wilderness,” i.e., I would invite Israel, who entered the wilderness in leaving Egypt, to weep with me).

In fact, the speaker of “I will soar” patterns himself, in the first instance, after Jeremiah. Almost all of the final lines of the strophes quote a verse beginning with *mi yiten* (“would that”), and it is surely not a coincidence that the first two “would that” verses, in the first and second strophes, come from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 8:23 “Would that my head were water” and 9:1 “Would that I were in the wilderness”). The prophetic persona of the speaker emerges also in the fifth strophe, where he expresses the desire to speak to God “face to face,” like Moses (Deuteronomy 5:4). The speaker identifies his suffering throughout the poem with that of Israel,

¹⁰ Is it a coincidence that among the verse quotations that conclude the strophes of “I will soar,” one of them makes reference to a “man” (l. 36), and that this quotation is one of two that violates the convention governing the choice of verses insofar as it does not include the word *yiten* (“would that”)?

¹¹ On this tradition see, e.g., [Jacob Klein](#), *Lamentations: Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2017), 6-7.

¹² See the series of interpretations of Lamentations 3 in *Lamentations Rabbah* (Vilna) 3.

but he nevertheless remains a distinct individual, embodied in the prayer leader who would have recited the *kinnah*.

In the fourth through the sixth strophes, the “would that” verse is drawn from the book of Job, and other allusions to this book are sprinkled throughout the poem. In implicitly taking up the persona of Job after that of Jeremiah, Qillir manifests awareness of the similarities between the depictions of these two suffering individuals in their respective books.¹³ Indeed, there is an allusion near the very beginning of “I would soar” to perhaps the most distinctive point of contact between Jeremiah and Job, the motif of cursing the day on which one was born. At the background of Qillir’s merging of Jeremiah and Job is also, likely, a rabbinic interpretation of Lamentations 3:1 that identifies the speaking “man” with Job:

Another interpretation: “I am the man.” R. Joshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi says: The assembly of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the World, I am the man, i.e., I am Job,

as you say, “What man is like Job, who drinks mockery like water” (Job 34:7 [NJPS]). What came upon Job You wish to bring upon me.

The passage proceeds to identify similarities between Job’s trials and the trials of Israel in connection with the Babylonian conquest.

The lament “I will soar” thus comes into existence within the framework of a complex set of interlocking factors. Lamentations amplifies both the acrostic impulse that is native to *piyyut*, as well as the inclination of *piyyut* toward composition in the first-person singular. The third chapter of Lamentations, the most immediate subtext, furnishes a triple acrostic, and, through the prism of rabbinic and extra-rabbinic tradition, offers two interrelated personae for the *paytan* to inhabit: Jeremiah and Job. The *paytan*, speaking in their voices, gives expression, in a vigorous and animated way, to the suffering occasioned by the destructions commemorated on Tishah be-Av.

¹³ See, e.g., Katharine Dell, “‘Cursed be the Day I was Born!’: Job and Jeremiah Revisited,” in [Reading Job](#)

[Intertextually](#), eds. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 106–117. See also the striking verbal link between Job 9:18 and Lamentations 3:15.

Appendix

1. I first present the fourth blessing strophe of the *kerovah* אָאָבִיךְ בַּיּוֹם מִבְּרַךְ, which I believe to be the *kerovah* for which “I will soar” was composed.

I have chosen the fourth blessing strophe—the blessing strophe that concludes with the blessing of *honen ha-da’at*, “gracing with knowledge” — somewhat arbitrarily to illustrate the key structural features of the blessing strophes for our purposes: the initial *aleph* and the five-line/sixfold acrostic. The first word in each of the first four lines begins with the letter *aleph*, while the second letter of each word is a *dalet*, the fourth letter of the alphabet. The fifth line divides into two units, each of which opens with a word beginning with *aleph* then *dalet*. The sixth line in every blessing strophe begins with the word *eikhah* “how,” and continues with a verse quotation. The translation is provisional and unannotated, as the chief purpose is to illustrate the blessing strophes’ structural features.

אָדוּם וְלֹא אֶצֵּא פֶתַח וְאֶכְבֵּד
אֲדַמִּים כָּל פִּיּוֹת כִּי אֲבִל כָּבֵד
אֲדַעַה מְלִין וּמְלֵל אֶכְבֵּד
אֲדִי כַמָּה שָׁנִים הִמְמִי בַמְכַבֵּד
אֲדַמְתִּי אֲבָד / אֲדִירִי לְהֶאֱבֹד
אֵיכָה נִשְׁכַּחְתִּי כִמֵּת מִלֵּב הַיִּתִּי כְכֹלִי אֲוֹבֵד

I will be silent, not exit the door, sit heavily.

I will silence all mouths because the mourning is heavy.

I would know words, and speak a heavy word.

To my disaster how many years he discomfited me with a broom.

He destroyed my land / and demolished my mighty ones.

How “I am put out of mind like the dead, I am like an object given up for lost” (Psalms 31:13 [NJPS])!

2. Here is the full text of the
אאדה עד חוג השמים *kinnah*

1) אאדה עד חוג שמים
2) אאלה אתי שמים
3) אאור יום מחריבי פעמים
4) אתאון מי יתן ראשי מים

I would soar to the sphere of heaven.¹⁴

I would in wailing join to me the heavens.

I would curse the day that destroyed me twice.¹⁵

I would murmur¹⁶: “Would that my head were
water!”¹⁷

5. אבחינ בבכי ילל מדבר

6. אבחנה ליל מליל ומדבר ממדבר

7. אבכה אתי עולת מדבר

8. אשאג מי יתתני במדבר

I would discern with weeping the howl of the
wilderness.

I would distinguish night from night and
wilderness from wilderness.¹⁸

I would in weeping join to me the one who
ascended the wilderness.¹⁹

I would roar: “Would that I were in the
wilderness!”²⁰

¹⁴ חוג השמים (“the sphere of heaven”) is from Job 23:14. אאדה reflects the otherwise unattested root אד. My rendering accords with Goldschmidt’s view that אד is from דא (“to soar”), metathesized for the sake of the acrostic. Another possibility, suggested to me by Dr. Avi Shmidman, is that the verb is a denominative from אד “vapor,” in which case אאדה would be rendered: “I would rise like vapor.” On this reading, l. 1 anticipates the reference to water in l. 4. A third possibility, which I am inclined to think most likely, is that the אאדה derives from אד (“disaster”). The fact that this word occurs in the fourth blessing strophe of the *kerovah* for which, on my hypothesis, the *kinnah* was originally composed—see the fourth line of the excerpt in the first part of the appendix—is evidence for this possibility. On this approach, the line should be rendered: “I would mark disaster up to the sphere of heaven.”

¹⁵ See Jeremiah 20:14 ארור היום אשר ילדתי בו (“Cursed be the day on which I was born”). Job also curses the day of his birth, albeit without the use of ארר, in Job 3:3.

¹⁶ Reading אתאון (“I would murmur”), against אתרון (“I would sing”) in other manuscripts. If this version is indeed original, the poet evidently draws the word from Lamentations 3:39 יתאון; the form is otherwise attested only in Numbers 11:1.

¹⁷ Jeremiah 8:23.

¹⁸ Qillir refers to the story of the spies in Numbers 13-14. In Numbers 14:1, the people cry at night, and voice their desire to return to Egypt. According to *Yerushalmi Ta’anit* 4:8 (65d), God tells them that they will cry for good reason in the future, hence Lamentations 1:2 בכה תבכה בלילה, perhaps understood non-contextually to mean: “You shall indeed cry at night.” The two wildernesses that the poet distinguishes are presumably the Sinai wilderness and the “wilderness” of the Babylonian exile.

¹⁹ “The one who ascended the wilderness” is a standard epithet for Israel, after Song of Songs 3:6.

²⁰ Jeremiah 9:1.

9. אגוע ואנשל כנקף זית

10. אגרה בי כל בני בית

11. אגרם שיאמר בעל הבית

12. ארשה מי יתתני שמיר ושית

I would expire and drop like a beaten olive tree.

I would provoke against me all the members of the house.

I would move to speech the master of the house.

I would be permitted: "Would that I had thorns and thistles."²¹

13. אדוה בכל לב להמציאהו

14. אדעה מלין במ לאמצהו

15. אדאג רועה ולא אמצאהו

16. אקונן מי ידעתי ואמצאהו

I would be ill in all my heart to make him present.²²

I would know words with which to beseech him.²³

I would worry out the shepherd but not find him.²⁴

²¹ Isaiah 27:4. I believe Qillir depends on the interpretation of this verse attributed to R. Levi in *Exodus Rabbah* (Vilna) 30:1. R. Levi takes the verse to represent God's speech to the nations. God insists that he is the possessor or master (בעל) of wrath, and likewise that Israel belongs to him, and yet the nations "are filled with what is mine (i.e., anger) against what is mine (i.e., Israel)." God will respond by calling for thorns and thistles, i.e., war against the nations. Shmidman suggests that the notion of permission in l. 12 ("I would be permitted") could reflect awareness of the interpretation of Isaiah 27:4 in *Avodah Zarah* 4a, according to which God had constrained himself by means of an oath.

²² Reading להמציאהו, with some manuscripts, against להמצהו in Goldschmidt's edition. Following a suggestion by Shmidman, I take God rather than the heart to be the object of the two verbs in ll. 13-14.

I would lament: "Would that I knew how to find him."²⁵

17. אהפכה ואתהפכה כאופן במילי

18. אהגה פנים בפנים לתנות עמלי

19. אההו חרס וסוהר מלהגיה למולי

20. אצרח מי יתן אפו ויכתבון מילי

I am turned and overturned like a wheel with my words.²⁶

I would speak face to face to tell my burden.

The sun and moon alas-ed, not shining across from me.

I would yell: "Would then that my words were written down."²⁷

²³ The words אדעה מלין ("I would know words") come from Job 23:5.

²⁴ אדאג ("I would worry") carries here the sense of: to stake out, to flush out. Cf. in Qillir's *Tishah be-Av kerovah* זכור איכה ("Remember how"), in the fourth blessing: דוב דואג ("the bear worries") (Goldschmidt, *Kinnot*, 148), rewriting Lamentations 3:10 דב ארב ("a bear lying in wait").

²⁵ Job 23:3. In the appendix to Mandelbaum's edition of *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (455), in a homily for Sukkot, Job 23:3 and 23:5 are introduced together to illustrate Job's challenge to God's justice.

²⁶ Perhaps an allusion to Lamentations 3:3 "Against me again and again He turns his hand." The preceding verse refers, like the continuation of this strophe, to utter darkness.

²⁷ Job 19:23.

21. אורח משפטי גונבי עלי

22. אודיע בבצעי ובמעלי

23. אומללו מזלות בקרעי מעלי

24. אפונה מי יתן שמע לי

The ways of the deeds of the pestle-thieves
I would tell in my wronging and my trespass.²⁸

The constellations languished when I tore my
cloak.

I would say: "Would that I had someone to hear
me."²⁹

25. אזדה כהופרה האביונה

26. אזכרה בהיותי מחתנה

27. אזיל פלגים כברכה העליונה

28. אעגוב מי יתן לי אבר כיונה

It passed, when the fatherbird was annulled.³⁰

I would recall when I was wedded.³¹

I would have channels flow down like the upper
pool.

I would lust³²: "Would that I had the wings of a
dove."³³

29. אח נפשע מקרית-עז אל צור

30. אחו בלי מים באף לעצור

31. אחז קמות לקצור ועוללות לבצור

32. אשיחה מי יובילני עיר מצור

Aha! was the trespass from the strong city to

Tyre,

Rushes without water, to stop up in anger.³⁴

He took standing grain, to cut, and smallest
grapes, to pluck.

I would pronounce: "Who would lead me to the
fortified city?"³⁵

²⁸ גונבי עלי ("pestle-thieves") is a reference to Israel on the basis of a story from *Tosefta Ta'anit* 3:7 and parallels. The "wronging" and the "trespass" probably refer to the ways in which Israel has been wronged, so that the sense of the first two lines is simply: I would tell how Israel has been wronged.

²⁹ Job 31:35.

³⁰ The reference is to Ecclesiastes 12:5, which is interpreted in *Lamentations Rabbah* (Buber) *petihta* 23 as a reference to the dissolution of the merits of the patriarchs in connection with the destruction of the Temple.

³¹ I.e., in the midst of these dark times, I recall the passionate relationship between God and Israel in times past, specifically Israel's betrothal to God in the Sinai wilderness; see note 32 to l. 28 below.

³² Reading אעגוב, with many manuscripts, against Goldschmidt's אענה. Could it be that Qillir has in mind

Leviticus Rabbah 18:1 (Margulies ed., 395), where אביונה in Ecclesiastes 12:5 is rendered as desire (תאוה)? See also *Shabbat* 152a, where a similar exegesis associates the preceding phrase in Ecclesiastes 12:5 with עגבות ("lusting").³³ Psalms 55:7. In the next verse, the speaker indicates that he would wish to fly to the wilderness.

³⁴ I take the couplet to mean that the courier arrived from Jerusalem to Tyre bearing news of the destruction of Jerusalem, whose inhabitants were like rushes without water. The first line is based on a combination of Proverbs 18:19 and Ezekiel 26:2, as the latter is interpreted in *Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 4:5 (68c).

³⁵ Psalms 60:11. Perhaps Qillir knows the interpretation of this verse attested in *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (Lieberman) *Devarim* 20, according to which the speaker seeks the punishment of the fortified city, Rome.

33. אטע ת אהלי אפדני בצלמו

34. אטוסה ואשכונה עד חצר מות

35. אטפל את המחכים למות

36. אנהה מי גבר יחיה ולא יראה-מות

I would pitch my pavilion tent in the shadow of death.

I would fly and settle unto the court of death.

I would be joined to them who await death.

I would wail: "What man should live and not see death?"³⁶

37. אילותי לעזרתי חושה

38. אימתי בכל-שנה אומרת היא השנה הזאת

39. אידע לכל כי מודעת זאת

40. אם לא כי יד ה' עשתה זאת

My strength to my aid I sought to see.

My fearsome one every year says: This is the year.³⁷

I would make known to all, for this is known:

Is it not "that the hand of the Lord has done this?"³⁸

41. אכופ לך ראש חילי

42. אכרע לך ברך לחתל מחלי

43. אכתירך בשיר משירי מחולי

44. אכון מי יתנך כאח לי

I would bow my head to you, my Strength.

I would bend a knee to you to bind my wound.

I would crown you with a song from songs of my dance.

I would pose: "Would that you were as a brother to me."³⁹

³⁶ Psalms 89:49.

³⁷ These two lines depend on the wordplay of אילותי ("my strength"), a reference to God drawn from Psalms 22:20, and אימתי ("my fearsome one"), a reference to Israel drawn (with the addition of a suffix) from Song of Songs 6:4. The poet says that he seeks divine aid, and likewise Israel looks forward to redemption.

³⁸ Goldschmidt suggests that the quotation is from Isaiah 41:20. The previous line alludes to Isaiah 12:5, and both verses (Isaiah 12:5, 41:20) refer in context to God's redemption of Israel. On this reading, then, the poet evidently looks forward to a time when he can announce God's redemption of Israel. It is possible, however, that the quotation in l. 20 is from the end of Job 12:9. The beginning

of Job 12:9 refers to the notion of everyone knowing, and it could be that l. 19 rewrites the beginning of Job 12:9 through the words of Isaiah 12:5. In that case, the poet in these lines is not specifically envisioning redemption, but rather insisting on God's responsibility for all that happens in the world. It is notable that l. 20 violates the poem's structural rules governing the final stich in two ways: first, it does not begin with a quotation word, and second, the verse does not begin with *mi yiten* ("would that"), as in every other strophe but one, or even מי, as in the previous strophe. I am not sure why Qillir abandons these rules at this point and only at this point.

³⁹ Song of Songs 8:1.

45. אל תשכח צעקת אריאל

46. אליו לאגור יהודה וישראל

47. אלפי שנאן אשר מסר אל

48. לאמר מי יתן מציון ישועת ישראל

Do not forget the cry of Ariel,⁴⁰

To gather to it Judah and Israel;

The thousands of ministers whom God has
committed,⁴¹

Saying: "Would that from Zion was the salvation
of Israel."⁴²

49. ישראל למעת בדרכי לא הלכו

50. עזבוני ועזבתים לפני מהם נהפכו

51. רגנתי והיללתי ולבי נשפכו

52. איכה תפארתי מראשותי השליכו

Israel, from the time they in my path did not
go,⁴³

They left me and I left them, and my face turned
from them.

I murmured and wailed and my innards and heart
were poured out:

How from my head did they cast off my glory?

⁴⁰ Ariel is the temple; see Isaiah 29:1; *Mishnah Middot* 4:7.

⁴¹ I take the poet to be saying: gather likewise to the Temple the ministering angels whom God will entrust with the care of Zion.

⁴² Psalms 53:7.

⁴³ The concluding *salsalah* incorporates a name acrostic (לעזר, i.e., Eleazar be-rabbi Qillir), and represents God's response to the speaker. On my reconstruction, this *salsalah* is not original to the *piyyut*.

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