



המרכז האקדמי

— שלם —

SHALEM COLLEGE

The Community in Lamentations

Final Assignment

The Biblical Narrative: From Eros to Crisis – The Widowed Beloved

Comparative Readings in Song of Songs and Lamentations

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In the following essay, I will attempt to reexamine the book of Lamentations in light of the concept of community-based recovery from trauma, as well as offer what a community-centered reading of the text might provide for a reinterpretation. My goal is to demonstrate why it is appropriate for the fifth and final chapter to be written in plural subjective, being that the communal voice can incorporate the concept of trauma recovery in its own unique style and context. Of course, it is obvious that the trauma is Jerusalem's destruction, which is so vividly depicted throughout the megillah.

Arguments made in Mary Conway's "Metaphor and Dialogue in Lamentations," and David Reimer's "Good Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations," both of which have greatly influenced this paper's discussion, are summarized in the first section. After, I briefly review recent psychological research that supports the widely held belief that trauma recovery is facilitated by community-centered care. I conclude with a discussion of the concepts raised, speculating on the benefits of this rereading for the megillah, particularly when included into Conway and Reimer's distinctive interpretations.

I think it is important to immediately note how the fifth and final chapter of Lamentations differs from the other four. The first detail to catch my attention: The final chapter is written in a first-person plural form. Other than a few brief instances throughout the entire book (3: 40-47; 4: 17-20), the other chapters are written in third-person, or first-person singular, and either in a descriptive or dialogue format. The final chapter, which begins with the words "Remember, Hashem, what has befallen us," and consists primarily of subjective depictions of the destruction of Jerusalem, also appears to be solely addressed to God. It concludes with the words, "You have already raged sufficiently against us." While the other chapters may mention God, none of them are as one-sided as in chapter five. The final distinction that leaps out to me, although I do not address it here, is that the concluding chapter is not written in alphabetical order, unlike the other four, despite it having 22 verses – the exact number needed to match the Hebrew alphabet.

Repentance, or Defiance?

In her article, "Metaphor and Dialogue in Lamentations," Mary Conway offers a fresh reading of Lamentations that gives a coherent, holistic message to all five chapters.¹ Conway asserts that the megillah is written in such a way that the indicated reader experiences a process of identification and progressive understanding. This is because, she claims, the dialogue and content of the megillah are written in a progressive manner. This process begins with condemnation of the suffering, and

¹ Mary L. Conway, "Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations," in Mark K. Boda et al. (eds), *Daughter Zion: Her Portrait, Her Response*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 102.

concludes with a desire to join the collective chorus of repentance, forgiveness, and recovery from loss.

Lamentations contains four voices, claims Conway. (1) The Geber, (2) the Speaker, (3) Daughter Zion –the personification of Jerusalem – (4) and the collective voice of the community. Conway is aware that in the first chapter, the implied reader is testament harsh expression of suffering. In contrast, the reader gains empathy and sadness for the predicament in the second chapter. The interaction between the Speaker and Daughter Zion demonstrates this, as the Speaker's voice softens and changes tone from one chapter to the next. The discussion in the third and fourth chapters is between what Conway refers to as the community, a collective subjective voice, and the Geber, an individual who Conway recognizes as being noteworthy in contrast to Daughter Zion.

According to Conway, the dialogue between the two involves two key layers of contrast: (1) Between the individual and the corporate, as well as (2) between grief over the past and the active pursuit of reconciliation. Conway claims that the discussion that results allows the reader to sympathize with both sides of the dialogue, as the Geber emerging from the collective seeks to guide the community toward relief from distress. As a result, a desire to move forward progressively emerges from the current situation's despair. The community appears to follow the Geber's example, and cries out to God for redemption in the fifth chapter. The intended reader is now prepared to join the group and progress forward in repentance and resolution. Conway's approach to the structure and imagery of Lamentations is in my opinion an interesting attempt to find a universal message by examining dialogue and content. Conway emphasizes the journey that the suggested reader experiences while reading the megillah, highlighting in particular the profound shift from a basic recognition of pain to complete identification and the desire to find reconciliation and healing.

Although Conway, in my opinion, makes a number of interesting points that have merited further examination and criticism, her analysis raises questions regarding the exact importance of a corporate, collective voice in the book's concluding chapter. Following her line of reasoning, it would seem that Conway's conclusion begs the question as to why repentance must be collective – in other words, why is collective repentance the proper finale for Lamentations?

Before I continue, I believe it would be helpful to add another perspective to this discussion, regarding the final chapter of Lamentations. David J. Reimer wrote "Good Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations," in which he reexamines the megillah in light of recent psychological research on the grieving process. Instead of searching for a unifying theme, he attempts to identify which distinct stage of recovery is prevalent in each of the five chapters.² In his analysis, Reimer

² David J. Reimer, "Good Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations," 114, no. 4 (2002), 543.

links each of the five chapters to one of the five phases of grieving using psychological research based on the Kubler-Ross model: Denial or isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Interestingly, Reimer learns that the fifth chapter, which he had intended to associate with the acceptance stage, does not follow model he established:³ “The poet ... launches the most sustained attack on God seen in the book ... posed to God only here in Lamentations: why (למה)? This, then, is something like the opposite of acceptance or restoration.”⁴ Reimer asserts that despite the fact that this anomaly appears to be in conflict with his general psychological interpretation, it actually supports Lamentations’ central theme of “lamentations” – or the poetry of grief. As he states, “It is the extended protest of the fifth poem that shapes the book as a whole into a lament addressed to God.”⁵

Both Conway and Reimer’s methods are unique in their efforts to explain the general diversity found in the megillah, and they even appear to contradict with one another. Conway contends that the intended reader of Lamentations is brought to the book’s conclusion prepared for a group discussion with God and a wish for reconciliation.⁶ This penultimate verse, “Bring us back to You, Hashem, and we shall return, renew our days of old,” (5: 21) perfectly captures this. Reimer, on the other hand, argues that the fifth chapter falls short of presenting the final stage of grief – acceptance – as best portrayed in the defiance implied in the reactionary question of “why” in verse 20.

Recovery Together

While Conway and Reimer’s conclusions are far from similar, it is apparent that both examined Lamentations and in order to understand how it dealt with loss. In my perspective, current research on community-based trauma rehabilitation will help illustrate the growing significance of the concept of “community” in psychological and sociological paradigms, particularly with regard to crisis recovery. I will provide two examples.

Theresa D. O’Neill, in her paper “‘Coming Home’ among Northern Plains Vietnam Veterans: Psychological Transformations in Pragmatic Perspective,” describes her observations in the 90s of two groups of American veterans of the Vietnam War, from two separate yet nearby Native American tribes. Her objective was to investigate why one was able to mentally “come home” and re-enter society, while the other had less success.⁷ According to her research, although

³ Ibid., 556.

⁴ Ibid., 556.

⁵ Ibid., 557.

⁶ Conway, “Daughter Zion: Metaphor and Dialogue in the Book of Lamentations,” 124.

⁷ Theresa O’Neill, “‘Coming Home’ among Northern Plains Vietnam Veterans: Psychological Transformations in Pragmatic Perspective,” *Ethos* 27(4) (2000), 441.

both tribes' veterans had publicly discussed their military experiences in their communities, how they did so varied.⁸ The “weaker” tribe, with less observable recovery from trauma, utilized humor and profanity to remember the war. The “stronger” tribe saw “combat experiences against the broader horizon of each generation’s duty to the continuation of the family and tribe.”⁹ To put it another way, the latter tribe found that using a respectful tone of discourse in the larger context of the tribe was a successful strategy for reintegrating traumatized veterans into society.¹⁰ The weaker tribe’s comic response to its trauma did not have the desired impact of enabling its veterans to properly cope with its painful weight.

Another project, by Shaul Kimhi and Yohanan Eshel of Tel Hai College, was conducted to determine whether positive and negative symptoms of post-war trauma differed noticeably depending on whether one’s recovery was based individually or publicly.¹¹ By examining 870 adults in Northern Israel one year after a war, it was found that “the best predictor of recovery is public resilience, whereas the best predictor of symptoms is individual resilience.”¹² In their discussion of the results, Kimhi and Eshel speculate that “public resilience pertains to public morale, that is, the public belief in a better future, and belief in its ability to overcome hardship and to strive for improvement despite current anxiety and distressing conditions.”¹³ In other words, the public’s capacity to overcome crises may be heavily dependent on their ability to first accept the crisis, particularly when there does not appear to be a way to cure it, and to then move forward from within that state.

Although neither of these projects provide evidence as to why community-based trauma recovery is more effective than that which is dependent on the individual’s process, I do believe that both projects follow sound intuition, which is that people, as social creatures, do better in crises when they are together, rather than when they are alone. This issue was particularly underscored in the second project’s discussion of post-war trauma experienced in group therapy as opposed to individual therapy. The first project looked at the practical impacts of various discourses—whether naturally unifying or polarizing—on the widespread healing of war veterans.

Discussion

I believe that Mary Conway’s conclusions regarding chapter five take on new meaning, when the idea of community as a component of effective recovery is applied. Not only is the reader led to reconciliation through the megillah’s progressive dialogue, but also into the community, the

⁸ Ibid., 454.

⁹ Ibid., 456.

¹⁰ Ibid., 457.

¹¹ Saul Kimhi and Yohanan Eshel, “Individual and Public Resilience and Coping with Long-Term Outcomes of War,” *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research* 14(2) (2009), 70-89.

¹² Ibid., 70.

¹³ Ibid., 83.

appropriate setting for collective healing from collective trauma. This perspective holds that the community itself receives the highest significance in the conclusion of Lamentations because it seems to serve as the final vehicle for genuine reconciliation. Conway concentrates on the community's repentance – or lack thereof – after realizing the depth of its suffering brought on by sin. She notes that the end of Lamentations is the only passage in which “everyone wants the same thing”¹⁴ – that is, penitence. Recognizing the significance of collective healing in this context adds the crucial component of community to the necessary steps that an individual must take to achieve full moral restoration following a tragedy.

In light of the significance of community-based healing, I also find Reimer's assertion that the final chapter lacks any indications of acceptance to be fascinating. “Why..?” is no longer a problem for the afflicted person; it is a problem for the community as a whole. The question then arises as to how a good community can coexist with an inability to accept change, advance, and move on? In my opinion, Yehezkel Kauffman's work, “Exile and Estrangement,” already provides a synthesis of the two.¹⁵ In his writings, he asserts that the Jewish people have been exceptional in their double-sided relation to having been scattered, including their complete rejection of exile as a nation in the name of a messianic resurrection. This historical model could clarify Reimer's contention that the entire book of Lamentations falls short of demonstrating the crucial stage of acceptance, which is necessary for moving on. While the group (the collective community) does not learn to recover, the individual (the Geber) does.

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This above paper has explored how the synthesis of community, when considered as effective to catalyze the recovery from disaster, enables a new method of interpreting Lamentations. By contrasting the final chapter to the rest of the megillah, and by merging aspects of both Reimer and Conway's theses, we have seen how the exact nature of the megillah's progression – its telos – is a legitimate inquiry to pursue. Specifically, the theme of the collective voice is an worthy topic to further endeavor.

¹⁴ Conway 124

¹⁵ יחזקאל קויפמן, *גולה ונכר* כרך א' ספר שני (תל אביב: דביר, תשי"ד), 506-505.

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