

From Wood and Stone to the Aleph - Tav of Rebuilt Jews & Zion

The Acrostic of Return

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In the Name of the One Who Said It

Our Sages taught that attribution is itself a form of repair: כָּל הָאוֹמֵר דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ מְבִיא גְּאֻלָּה — “Whoever reports a teaching in the name of the one who said it brings redemption into the world” (Pirkei Avot 6:6). On a day when we sit on the ground amid a world unmade, there is something quietly restorative about building on another’s Torah and naming him aloud. This teaching begins from “Wood and Stone,” a Tisha B’Av *drashah* by my colleague Rabbi Elazar Symon of Hadar, and it means to carry his insight one step further — from the ruins into the rebuilding.

What My Colleague Taught

Rabbi Symon begins with the rawest verse in the fourth chapter of *Eikhah* and refuses every comforting gloss:

איכה ד:יא

כָּלָה ה' אֶת חֲמָתוֹ שָׂפָךְ חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ
וַיִּצֵת אֵשׁ בְּצִיּוֹן וַתֹּאכַל יְסוֹדֶתֶיהָ:

Lamentations 4:11

The Eternal spent His wrath, poured out His blazing anger, kindled a fire in Zion, and it consumed her foundations.

This is not a patient parent’s discipline, he insists, nor a judge’s reluctant sentence, nor a hidden blueprint in which catastrophe is merely a way-station to redemption. It is fury, poured out. Yet the *midrash*, he shows, hears something else inside that fury. The Tanhuma dares to call the spending of wrath a *טוֹבָה*, a mercy: had the rage not been discharged, “all of Israel would have been destroyed” (Tanhuma Tazria 13). And Eikhah Rabbah, puzzling over why Asaf titles his dirge a *מְזִמּוֹר* — a song — answers with a parable: a king in his anger tears down the wedding canopy he had built for his son, and the tutor sits singing, because the wrath fell on the canopy and not on the child. So too Asaf sings: God poured out fury *עַל עֵצִים וְאֶבְנִים* — on wood and stone — and not on Israel (Eikhah Rabbah 4:14).

From this Rabbi Symon draws two conclusions I want to hold onto. First, that the true scandal of this day is not “How could the Temple fall?” but “How did the Jewish people survive?” And second, that the *midrash* deliberately reduces the holiest building imaginable to “wood and stone” in order to teach that people matter more than structures. The נְחִמָּה we are after, he concludes, is not the cheap reassurance that God still loves us; it is the courage to face the terrifying possibility that the destruction was the final chapter — and then to refuse that ending, and to write the next chapter ourselves. I want to take up that invitation and ask the question he leaves open: what does the next chapter say?

Another colleague whose voice resonates with me, Rabbi David Wolkenfeld wrote: Precisely because we blamed ourselves after the destruction, we ensured the survival of Judaism. Had we blamed God (or the Babylonians), that would have been the end of the story because the covenant would have “failed.” Instead, because we say that “we failed” the covenant survived. The kernel of that idea was one found in the writings of Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel z”l according to Rav Wolkenfeld.

But I believe we can find a rejection of the “blame ourselves theology” in the grain of the wood, in the structure of the Book of Lamentations. It may be difficult for modern readers to grasp, but the third chapter which gets intensely personal and has the poet’s voice in the singular and deeply self-reflective mode rejects the idea that we are done, done for or on our way to becoming grains of sand on the shores of history. The acrostic poetry of chapter 3 is the alphabet of re-creation and affirming the solid ground of Jerusalem, Zion and the Jewish People’s eternal connection to both our land and our destiny, as a people - as Am Yisrael.

The Theology We Read — and Refuse to Accept on Its Face

To write forward, we first have to reckon with a theology this day hands us almost by reflex. In fact, we are no strangers to it. Three times on every festival of the Jewish year we rise for Musaf and confess:

מוסף לשלוש רגלים

וּמִפְנֵי חַטָּאתֵינוּ גָּלִינוּ מֵאֶרֶץנוּ:

Festival Musaf Amidah

“And because of our sins we were exiled from our land.”

And *Eikhah* seems to underwrite the verdict at every turn. The book confesses, names the sin, ratifies the sentence — and even concedes that forgiveness has not yet come:

איכה איח | גמב

צִדִּיק הוּא ה' כִּי פִיהוּ מְרִיתִי:

נַחֲנוּ פָשַׁעְנוּ וּמָרִינוּ אֶתְּהָ לֹא סָלַחְתָּ:

Lamentations 1:18a; 3:42

The Lord is just, for I have defied His word.

We have transgressed and rebelled; You have not forgiven.

We do not pretend those verses are absent. On Tisha B'Av we read them, review them, and sit with them in the dust. But there is a difference between reading a theology and accepting it as the whole truth — between **הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַשְּׁבוּן**, honest self-accounting, and a theology of deserved exile that would keep us forever penitent, forever waiting, forever suspicious that to return home and defend it is somehow to defy a divine sentence. This we refuse. And — this is the heart of the matter — we refuse it not by turning away from *Eikhah*, but by reading it all the way to its own center.

The Center of the Book — and the Building Blocks of Creation

Eikhah is built as an alphabet. Chapters one, two, and four march once through the letters, אָלף to תּוּ; chapter five, though it has abandoned the acrostic, still keeps twenty-two verses, as if the form were holding on by its fingernails. And at the exact center of the scroll stands chapter three — not a single acrostic but a triple one, sixty-six verses, three lines for every letter, the alphabet sounded three times over. The most intense concentration of form arrives at the book's lowest point. That is not decoration. Our tradition understands the letters as nothing less than the raw material of creation:

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות נו"א

יֵדַע הָיָה בְּצִלְאֵל לְצַרְף אוֹתִיּוֹת שֶׁנִּבְרָאוּ בְּהֵן שְׁמִים וְאָרֶץ:

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 55a

Betzael knew how to combine the letters by which heaven and earth were created.

The Sefer Yetzirah says it outright: through the twenty-two foundational letters, the אוֹתִיּוֹת יסוד, God “formed all that is formed and all that is destined to be formed”:

ספר יצירה ב"ב

עֲשָׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם אוֹתִיּוֹת יסוד ... וְצָר בָּהֶם אֶת כָּל הַיְצוּר וְאֵת כָּל הַעֲתִיד לְצוּר:

Sefer Yetzirah 2:2

Twenty-two foundational letters ... and through them He formed all that is formed and all that is destined to be formed.

Editorial note: the recensions of Sefer Yetzirah (Short, Long, Sa'adyan, Gra) differ in wording and versification; the clause above follows the widely-cited short recension.)

Read against that backdrop, the acrostic of chapter three is a theological act. The poet has watched a world come undone — the Temple returned to ash, the order of things collapsing back toward תהו. And his response is to reach for the building blocks of creation themselves and lay them down again, one letter at a time, and then again, and a third time, until a new structure stands where the old one fell. In the rubble, the full alphabet is intact and in his hands. The tools that made the world have not been confiscated. This is the answer to Rabbi Symon's question — how did we survive? — rendered in form rather than argument: we survived with the whole אֶל־פִּי, and the next chapter will be written with the very letters that wrote the first.

From the Depths, a Turn

Listen to what the poet builds. He begins in the first person, alone:

איכה ג:א

אֲנִי הַגֹּבֵר רָאָה עָנִי בְּשִׁבְט עֲבָרְתִּי:

Lamentations 3:1

I am the man who has seen affliction beneath the rod of His wrath.

Then, at the letter ז, at the book's darkest floor, he performs the most consequential act in all of *Eikhah*: he turns.

איכה ג:כד

זֹאת אָשִׁיב אֶל־לִבִּי עַל־כֵּן אוֹחִיל:

חֲסִדֵּי ה' כִּי לֹא־תִמְנֹו כִּי לֹא־כָלוּ רַחֲמָיו:

חֲדָשִׁים לְבָקָרִים רַבָּה אֲמוֹנָתְךָ:

חֲלָקִי ה' אֶמְרָה נַפְשִׁי עַל־כֵּן אוֹחִיל לוֹ:

Lamentations 3:21–24

This I bring back to my heart, therefore I have hope: the kindnesses of the Lord never cease, His mercies never end; they are new every morning — great is Your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in Him.”

זֹאת אָשִׁיב אֶל־לִבִּי — “This I bring back to my heart” — and notice the verb: אָשִׁיב, from the root שׁוּב, to return. Hope here is not a mood that descends; it is a decision, an act of return performed inside the self. He brings something back to the center — and the instant he does, the mercies are new every morning and God is once again his portion. The gyroscope has been set spinning. A gyroscope holds its bearing not by resisting the chaos around it but by its own inner motion; the more the world tumbles, the more steadily its axis points. So the poet, spinning on

the axis of אוֹחִיל — “I will hope” — keeps a fixed heading while everything around him falls. And then he says the thing that unravels the entire theology of deserved destruction:

איכה ג:לא-לג

כִּי לֹא יִזְנַח לְעוֹלָם אֲדֹנָי:

כִּי אִם־הוֹגָה וְרַחֵם כָּרֵב חֲסָדָיו:

כִּי לֹא עָנָה מִלְּבוֹ נִיגָה בְּנִי־אִישׁ:

Lamentations 3:31–33

For the Lord will not reject forever; though He brings grief, He shows compassion in the abundance of His kindness. For He does not afflict from His heart, nor grieve the children of men.

כִּי לֹא עָנָה מִלְּבוֹ — “For He does not afflict from His heart.” The suffering was real; the poet does not deny it. But it is not God’s essence, not what God most deeply wills, not the truth of the relationship. Affliction is something God *does*; compassion is who God is. Whatever the sins, the punishment does not go all the way down. Here is the textual refusal at the book’s own center: even inside the scroll of catastrophe, the poet insists that the fury is not the divine face.

The Singular and the Plural — Each of Us, and Then All of Us

The genius of chapter three is that it is written almost entirely in the singular. אֲנִי הַגָּבֵר — I am the man; אֶמְרָה נַפְשִׁי — my soul says; אוֹחִיל — I will hope. The catastrophe is national, but the turning is staged in a single heart. Each of us is placed alone at the center of the maelstrom and asked to do the inner work no one can do for us: to bring hope back to the heart, to find the fixed point, to become a small instrument of holiness holding steady in a swirling world. And then, precisely once, the verbs open into the plural:

איכה ג:מ

נַחֲפֹשֶׁה דְרָכֵינוּ וְנַחֲקֶרֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה עַד־ה':

Lamentations 3:40

Let us search and examine our ways, and return to the Lord.

This is תָּשׁוּבָה — but hear the word again: וְנָשׁוּבָה, we will return, the same root that will carry the whole vocabulary of homecoming. The re-centered individuals gather into a people, and the people turns. Self-contemplation becomes national direction; the gyroscopes align into a single heading.

And the Heading Is Homeward

For in *Eikhah*'s own idiom — and in the Psalms that answer it — to return, לָשׁוּב, is never only to repent. It is to come home.

תהלים קכ"א, ה

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים:
הַזֵּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרִנָּה יִקְצְרוּ:

Psalms 126:1, 5

A song of ascents. When the Lord returns the exiles of Zion, we will be like dreamers. ...
Those who sow in tears shall reap in song.

בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן — the same root once more — and those who sowed in tears reap in song.
The vow the exiles swore never expired:

תהלים קל"ז:ה"ו

אִם־אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:
תִּדְבַק־לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכִּי אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחָתִי:

Psalms 137:5–6

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue cling to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not raise Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Memory here is not nostalgia; it is a commitment kept across millennia, a refusal to let Jerusalem slide out of the center of our joy. This is why the covenant that endured — the covenant that, as Rabbi Symon taught, God spared even while the stones burned — was never a covenant of people alone. It was a promise to our ancestors of a people *and* a land together. If the wrath fell on wood and stone so that Israel would live, then Israel was meant to live — and to live somewhere: in the land pledged to Avraham, to Yitzhak, to Ya'akov. To return to that land, to rebuild on it, and yes, to guard it, is no defiance of the Tisha B'Av verdict. It is the verdict's expiration. Hear the book say so in its own voice:

איכה ד:כב

תָּמַעֲוֹנְךָ בֵּת־צִיּוֹן לֹא יוֹסִיף לְהִגְלוֹתְךָ...

Lamentations 4:22a

Your punishment is complete, O daughter of Zion; He will not exile you again...

The sentence has been served. What a penitential theology imagines as an endless exile, the text itself declares finished. And when a sentence is complete, the one released does not linger in the cell out of guilt. She goes home — and she does not apologize for locking the door behind her.

The Liturgy That Refuses the Last Word

Even the way we chant *Eikhah* enacts this refusal. The scroll ends on a verse of terror:

איכה ה:כב

כִּי אִם־מָאֵס מְאֹסָתָנוּ קִצְפָּת עָלֵינוּ עַד־מָאֵד:

Lamentations 5:22

For even had You utterly rejected us, and raged against us beyond measure —

A book cannot be allowed to end there, and so the age-old custom is to return and repeat the verse before it:

איכה ה:כא

הֲשִׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יִמֵּינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:

Lamentations 5:21

Bring us back to You, O Lord, and we shall return; renew our days as of old.

We literally will not let rejection be the final word; we spin back, one verse, to return and renewal. *הֲשִׁיבֵנו ... וְנִשׁוּבָה* — You return us, and we return: the covenant as call and response, divine initiative and human answer braided together. Our generation has heard that call and answered it with our feet, gathering in *שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן*, the returning of Zion, that earlier generations could only pray for *כְּחֻלָּמִים* — as dreamers.

The Nechamah We Build

So this is the next chapter, written in the letters that built the world. Not “God still loves us despite the ruins,” but: the punishment is complete; the alphabet is whole; the covenant of people and land endured the fire; rise and build. The *נְחֻמָּה* of Tisha B'Av is not passive consolation. It is the discovery that each of us, alone in the singular at the center of the storm, can bring hope back to the heart and hold a steady axis — and that all of us together, in the plural, can turn that steadiness into a homecoming, and guard the home we have come back to.

The Temple was wood and stone. The people are letters — the living *אֱלֹהֵי־בֵית* of creation, indestructible because the One who does not afflict from the heart keeps handing us the tools to build again. From *אֱלֹהֵי* to *תָּנוּ*, three times over, out of the deepest pit: this is how a mourning people learns to sing a *מְזֻמֹּר*. And this is how, on the saddest day of the year, we take up the pen and write the next chapter — *בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ* — as of old, like the authors of long ago.

— **Rabbi Scott Bolton**
with hakarat ha-tov to R. Elazar Symon (Hadar), “Wood and Stone”