

“Jewish Perspective on Mercy”

March 15, 2016 – Scarboro Missions

Source I: Lamentations Rabba, proem 24

When the Temple was destroyed, Abraham came weeping before the Holy One, plucking his beard, pulling out the hair of his head, striking his face, rending his garments.

The Holy One frowned upon the ministering angels and asked: Why did you arrange yourselves in row upon row, like mourners, composing a dirge [about the just punishment of Israel]? They replied: Master of the universe, for the sake of Abraham, Your friend who loves You. He came to Your house, lamenting and weeping— why did You not respond to him? He replied: Ever since My friend departed from My Presence to his eternal abode, he came not to My house, but now, “why should My beloved be in My house?” (Jer. 11:15). Then Abraham spoke up again to the Holy One: Master of the universe, why did You exile my children and turn them over to heathen nations, who put them to death in all kinds of unnatural ways and destroyed the Temple on whose site I once brought my son Isaac as a burnt offering before You? The Holy One replied: Your children sinned and transgressed against the entire Torah and against the twenty-two letters in which it is written. Abraham spoke further to the Holy One: Master of the universe, who will testify against them, against Israel, that they have indeed transgressed Your Torah? God: Let the Torah herself come and testify against them, against Israel.

At once the Torah came to testify against Israel. But Abraham said to her: My daughter, have you come to testify against Israel, that they transgressed your commandments? Have you no shame in my presence? Remember the day when the Holy One went around with you to every nation and tongue, and not one of them would have you until my children came to Mount Sinai and accepted you and honored you. Yet now you come to testify against them in the day of their misfortune. Upon hearing this, the Torah stood aside and gave no testimony against them.

Then the Holy One said to Abraham: Let the twenty-two letters of the alphabet come and testify against them, against Israel. At once the twenty-two letters came. As the *alef* came forward to testify against Israel, that they transgressed the Torah, Abraham said to her: *Alef*, you who are the first among the letters would testify against Israel in the day of their misfortune? Remember the day the Holy One appeared on Mount Sinai and began [the Ten Commandments] with you: *Anokhi*, “I am the Lord your God” (Exod. 20:2)? No nation or tongue would have you, save only my children, yet you are here to testify against my children. At once the *alef* stepped back and gave no testimony against them.

Then the *bet* came to testify against them, against Israel. Abraham said to her: My daughter, you come to testify against my children who are diligent in the study of the Five Books, at whose beginning you stand? At once the *bet*, too, stepped back and gave no testimony whatever.

Moses began and said: Master of the universe, was I not a faithful shepherd of Israel for forty years, trotting before them like a horse in the wilderness? Yet when the time came for them to enter the Land, You decreed for me that my bones were to fall in that wilderness. And now that they are exiled, You send for me to lament and weep over them. It is as the proverb puts it: “I have no share in my master’s good fortune, but a full share of his misfortune.”

Without waiting for a reply, Moses said to Jeremiah: You go before me, so that I may lead them [back to the Land of Israel] and see who dares to lay a hand upon them. Jeremiah replied: It is impossible to walk along the road because of the slain. Moses said: Nevertheless, let us go. Moses went on defying the Holy One: Master of the universe, in Your Torah You wrote, “Whether it be a cow or ewe, ye shall not kill it and its young both in one day” (Lev. 22:28). But have not mothers and sons been killed again and again? Yet You remain silent!

At that moment our mother Rachel broke forth into speech before the Holy One and said: Master of the universe, it is revealed and known to You that Your servant Jacob cherished a great love for me; indeed, because of me he worked for my father seven years. When the time for the marriage to my husband arrived, my father conspired to substitute my sister for me. Yet I was not jealous of my sister and did not expose her to shame. Now if I, who am flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my rival, then why should You—the King, living, enduring, merciful—be jealous of idols, which have no substance, and banish my children because of them?

At once the mercy of the Holy One crested, and he said: For your sake, O Rachel, I will restore Israel to their place. Of this it is said:

Thus saith the Lord:

A cry was heard in Ramah,
Wailing, and bitter weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children.
She refuseth to be comforted for her children
Who are gone

(Jer. 31:15).

These words are followed by:

Restrain thy voice from weeping,
Thine eyes from shedding tears;
For there is a reward for thy labor . . .
There is hope for thy future,
Thy children shall return to their country

(Jer. 31:16).

Source II: Yom Kippur Liturgy

PRAYER ACCOMPANYING THE CONFESSION

We have turned from Your goodly laws and commandments, but it has not profited us. Surely, You are in the right with respect to all that comes upon us, for You have acted faithfully, but we have been in the wrong. What can we say to You who sit on high, and what can we tell You who dwell in heaven, for You know all that is hidden as well as all that is revealed.

You extend Your hand to those who sin, Your right hand to receive those who return. You have taught us, ADONAI our God, to confess each of our transgressions to You, so that we cease using our hands for oppression. Accept us fully when we turn to You, as You promised to accept the sweet-smelling sacrifices. Endless are the guilt-offerings that would have been required of us even in ancient Temple times, and You know that we will ultimately atone for our sins with our death. Accordingly, You have forgiven us many times over.

What are we? What is our life? Our goodness? Our righteousness? Our achievement? Our power? Our victories?

What shall we say in Your presence,

ADONAI our God and God of our ancestors?

Heroes count as nothing in Your presence,
famous people are as if they never existed,
the wise seem ignorant,
and clever ones as if they lack reason.

The sum of their acts is chaos;

in Your presence the days of their lives are futile.

Human beings have no superiority over beasts;
all life is vanity.

You, forgiving God, are compassionate and merciful, patient, abounding in love and goodness, and desire the return of the evildoers—not their death. For You instructed Your prophet Ezekiel: "Say to them, 'As I live,' declares our Lord, ADONAI, 'I do not desire the death of the evildoers, but that they turn from their paths, and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil paths that you may not die, House of Israel!...' 'Is it My desire that the evildoer die,' declares the Lord, ADONAI, 'Is it not that they turn from their ways and live?'... 'It is not My desire that the wicked shall die, but that the wicked turn from their evil ways and live.' ... For You forgive Israel and pardon the tribes of Jeshurun in every generation. Beside You, we have no sovereign who pardons and forgives.

My God, before I was created I was entirely lacking in substance; and now that I have been created, it is as if I never was. Dust and ashes am I in life, all the more so in death. I stand before You as a vessel full of embarrassment and shame. May it be Your will, ADONAI my God and God of my ancestors, that I sin no more, and that in Your great mercy You erase the sins I have sinned before You, but not through great pain and suffering.