



## **A MODERN LAMENTATION**

**By Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

*New York City marked the first anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks with a public memorial that included the recitation of famous speeches from other times and other places that, it was hoped, would provide inspiration and meaning to this solemn day.*

*It occurred to me that, as Jews, perhaps we have our own famous speeches and comforting messages to draw upon for moments like this. And so I have re-read the prophets, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Psalms, and, of course, the Book of Lamentations, in the hope of finding the appropriate passage for this occasion.*

*The results of my search were mixed. I could not embrace the pervasive Biblical message of punishment for one's sins, and, by extension, for one's nation's sins, in the form of a foreign invasion and the destruction of one's city. That is not to say that there are no consequences to our actions, or inactions, including war, but I reject the Biblical equation, which essentially is a cruel form of blaming the victim.*

*On the other hand, as I engaged in the texts, I was often moved and inspired by individual lines and thoughts. The tone, the cadence, and, occasionally, the remarkable application to our own situation, brought poignancy and, ultimately, comfort and inspiration. As I reflected on these lines, I had the thought of weaving them together, with some interpolation of my own, to produce a new composition I that I entitled, "A Modern Lamentation." It is dedicated to those who died on September 11.*

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**H**ow lonely sits the city that once was great among the nations! <sup>2</sup>She that was a princess among the provinces has become (cloaked in shrouds.) [Lam. 1:1] <sup>3</sup>She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; (who is there to) comfort her (?) <sup>4</sup>(Will her friends stand loyal beside her, or will they stand away?) [Lam. 1:2]

<sup>5</sup>Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? <sup>6</sup>Look and see if there is any sorrow like the sorrow (of my city.) [Lam. 1:12] <sup>7</sup>(The city) has gone into (mourning). <sup>8</sup>She finds (only sadness.) [Lam 1:3] <sup>9</sup>All her people groan. [Lam. 1:11] <sup>10</sup>Her gates are desolate. <sup>11</sup>The roads to (the city) mourn. [Lam. 1:4]

<sup>12</sup>From on high, enemies stretched out their hands over all her precious things [Lam.1:10, 13] <sup>13</sup>Her young and her old have (been) slaughtered without mercy. [Lam. 2:21] <sup>14</sup>Precious (lives,) worth their weight in fine gold, lay perished in the rubble. [Lam. 4:2,5] <sup>15</sup>Their bodies were more ruddy than coral, their hair like sapphire, now their visage is blacker than soot, they are no longer recognized, (or they are vanished altogether into thin air.) [Lam. 4:7-8]

<sup>16</sup>(We) remember the days of (our) affliction, when panic and pitfall came upon the city, when her people fell into the hand of the foe. <sup>17</sup>There was no one to help her, the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. [Lam. 1:7] <sup>18</sup>There was devastation and destruction, (and death.) [Lam. 1,7; 3:47] <sup>19</sup>In all the squares there was wailing.

**2** Without mercy, they destroyed the (high places.) [Lam. 1:10, 2:9] <sup>2</sup>In [their] wrath they brought down (mighty towers.) [Lam. 1:10] <sup>3</sup>(They) invaded her (harbors.) [Lam. 1:10, 13] <sup>4</sup>(They) brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers [Lam 2:2] <sup>5</sup>(Now,) children are desolate, (wives and husbands, fathers and mothers), for the enemy has prevailed. [Lam. 1:16] <sup>6</sup>(On that day,) we looked for light and beheld darkness, and for brightness, but we walked in gloom. [Isa. 59:9] <sup>7</sup>On that day the sun went down at noon, and darkened the earth in broad daylight. [Amos 8:9]

<sup>8</sup>(The) enemies opened their mouths against (her), they hissed, they gnashed their teeth, they cried, "We have devoured her! Ah, this is the day we longed for; at last we have seen it!" [Lam. 2:16] <sup>9</sup>The rulers of the earth did not believe nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of (the city.) [Lam. 4:12] <sup>10</sup>(But) the (enemy) has done what he purposed, he has carried out his threat; as he ordained long ago, he has demolished without pity; and he has rejoiced over us. [Lam. 2:17]

**3** (He sent) fire deep into my bones. [Lam. 1:13] <sup>2</sup>My strength was sapped. [Lam. 1:14] <sup>3</sup>[My] eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; watching eagerly for (rescue). [Lam. 4:17] <sup>4</sup>I was left stunned and faint all day long. [Lam. 1:13] <sup>5</sup>For these things I weep; my eyes flow with rivers of tears. [Lam. 1:16; 3:48]

<sup>6</sup>I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. [Ps. 5:6-7] <sup>7</sup>My eyes are spent with weeping because of the destruction of my people. [Lam 2:11] <sup>8</sup>Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my people! [Jer. 9:1]

<sup>9</sup>Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? [Jer. 8:22] <sup>10</sup>My groans are many and my heart is faint. [Lam. 1:22] <sup>11</sup>All my sleep has fled, because of the bitterness of my soul. [Isa. 38:15] <sup>12</sup>I lie awake, I am like a lonely bird on the housetop [Ps. 102:7] <sup>13</sup>My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. [Ps. 102:11] <sup>14</sup>See how distressed I am, my heart is wrung within me. [Lam. 1:20] <sup>15</sup>I cower in ashes, my soul is bereft of peace. <sup>16</sup>I have forgotten what happiness is, and all that I had hoped for. [Lam. 3:17]

<sup>17</sup>What is my strength? Is my strength the strength of stones, or is my flesh bronze? [Job 6:11] <sup>18</sup>I will not restrain my mouth, I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. [Job 7:11] <sup>19</sup>I will give free utterance to my complaint, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. [Job 10:1] <sup>20</sup>I loathe my life. [Job 10:1] <sup>21</sup>My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me [Job 17:1] <sup>22</sup>How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? [Ps. 13:2] <sup>23</sup>(Who is there to comfort me? Who will revive my courage?) [Lam. 1:16] <sup>24</sup>Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? [Jer. 15:18] <sup>25</sup>Cursed be the day on which I was born! [Jer. 20:14] <sup>26</sup>Why did I come forth from the womb to see (grief) and sorrow and spend my days in (sadness.) [Jer. 20:18]

**4** What can I say for you, O (beloved) city? For vast as the sea is your ruin, who can heal you? [Lam. 2:13] <sup>2</sup>(Sadness is) multiplied, mourning and lamentation. [Lam. 2:5] <sup>3</sup>The elders sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; they have bowed their heads to the ground. [Lam. 2:10] <sup>4</sup>The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased. [Isa. 24:8] <sup>5</sup>No more do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. [Isa. 24:9] <sup>6</sup>The city is broken down. [Isa. 24:10] <sup>7</sup>The gladness of the earth is banished. [Isa. 24: 11]

<sup>8</sup>What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed? [Jer. 16:10] <sup>9</sup>(Why has all this great evil come to us?) <sup>10</sup>(Is it) because we trampled upon the poor? [Amos 5:11] <sup>11</sup>(Because) we turned aside from the needy? [Amos 5:12]

<sup>12</sup>When they say to you, we are punished for sins, destroyed for our transgressions, say to them, (No! We) are innocent. [Job 9:15], (No! We) are blameless. [Job 9:21] <sup>13</sup>(Say to them,) the earth is given into the hands of the wicked. <sup>14</sup>When disaster brings sudden death, [it] mocks at the calamity of the innocent. [Job 9:2-34]

**5** (Some will also say), Pursue (the wicked) in anger and destroy them. [Lam. 3:66] Pay them back for their deeds. [Lam. 3:64] <sup>2</sup>Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous. [Ps. 69:28] <sup>3</sup>Behold, the wicked man makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole which he has made. <sup>4</sup>His (wrong-doing) returns upon his own head, on his own crown his violence descends. [Ps. 7:15-6] <sup>5</sup>His day is coming. [Ps. 37:13]

<sup>6</sup>(But others say), Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! <sup>7</sup>Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. [Ps. 37:8] <sup>8</sup>Seek good, and not evil, that you may live. [Amos 5:14] <sup>9</sup>Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate. [Amos 5:15] <sup>10</sup>Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. [Amos 5:24] <sup>11</sup>If you pour yourself out for the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. [Isa. 58:10] <sup>12</sup>Light dawns for the righteous and joy for the upright in heart. [Ps. 97:11] <sup>13</sup>He is not afraid of evil tidings, her heart is firm. [Ps.112:7] <sup>14</sup>His heart is steady, she will not be afraid. [Ps.112:8] <sup>15</sup>Fear not, be not confounded. [Isa. 54:4] <sup>16</sup>Justice will return to the righteous. [Ps. 94:15]

**6** [Now] hearken diligently to me, incline your ear. [Isa. 55:3] <sup>2</sup>(Let us learn) to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. [Ps. 90:12] <sup>3</sup>(We are but) sojourners on earth. [Ps. 119:19] <sup>4</sup>No person has power to retain the spirit, or authority over the day of death. [Eccl. 8:8] <sup>5</sup>(As it says,) For everything there is a season...a time to be born and a time to die. [Eccl. 3:1-2] <sup>6</sup>If a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let her remember that the days of darkness will be many. [Eccl. 11:8] <sup>7</sup>Woe is me for my hurt! My wound is grievous; but I said, Truly this is a grief, and I must bear it. [Jer. 10:19]

<sup>8</sup>How long shall the land mourn? [Jer. 12:4] <sup>9</sup>How long shall the wicked exult? [Ps. 94:3] <sup>10</sup>My soul waits - more than watchmen for the morning. [Ps. 130:5] <sup>11</sup>(May the day come soon when we can) wipe away tears. [Isa. 25:6]

<sup>12</sup>The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place. [Isa. 9:10] <sup>13</sup>The city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the (towers) shall stand where (they) used to be. [Jer. 30:18] <sup>14</sup>(Our) builders will outstrip (our) destroyers. His day is coming. [Ps. 37:12-13]

<sup>15</sup>(We) will build houses and inhabit them; (we) will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. [Isa. 65:22] <sup>16</sup>(Our city will be) a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm. [Isa 25:4] <sup>17</sup>In that day, this song will be sung in the land: “We have a strong city. Open the gates, that the righteous may enter in.” [Isa. 26:1-2]

<sup>18</sup>Comfort, comfort, my people. [Isa. 40:1] <sup>19</sup>Awake, awake, put on your strength, put on your beautiful garments, shake yourself from the dust, loose the bonds of your (grief.) [Isa. 52:1-2]

<sup>20</sup>Let this be recorded for a generation to come. [Ps. 102:18] <sup>21</sup>Peace, peace, to the far and near. [Isa 57:19]