

“A Time to Weep”: The Power of Lament in Times of Crisis

Two Mesopotamian Laments [fr. Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses*]

(a) GOD OF MY FAMILY

O my god, my lord, who created my name,¹ (1)
Guardian of my life, producer of my progeny,
O angry god, may your heart be calmed,
O angry goddess, be reconciled with me.
Who knows where you dwell, O my god? (5)
Never have I seen your pure standing place
(or sleeping) chamber.²
I am constantly in great distress: O my god, where are you?
You who have been angry with me, turn towards me,
Turn your face to the pure godly meal of fat and oil,
That your lips receive goodness. Command that I thrive, (10)
Command (long) life with your pure utterance.
Bring me away from evil that, through you, I be saved.
Ordain for me a destiny of (long) life,
Prolong my days, grant me (long) life!

(b) FURIOUS GOD

My god, I did not know (how) [har]sh (1)
your punishment would be!
I have sworn lightly a solemn oath by your name,
I have disregarded your rites, I went too far,
I have skirted(?)* your duty in difficulty, (5)
I have trespassed far beyond your limits.
I certainly did not know, much [].
My crimes being (so) numerous, I do not know all I did.
O my god, clear, forego, dispel your ire,
Disregard my iniquities, accept my entreaties, (10)
Transmute my sins into good deeds.
Your hand is harsh, I have seen your punishment.
Let him who does not revere his god and goddess
learn from my example.
O my god, be reconciled, O my goddess, relent!
Turn hither your faces to the entreaty of my prayer. (15)
May your angry hearts be calmed,¹
May your feelings be soothed, permit me reconciliation,
Let me ever sing your praises, not to be forgotten,
to the numerous peoples.

Psalm 13 [JPS translation]

¹ For the leader. A psalm of David.

² How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

³ How long will I have cares on my mind,
grief in my heart all day?

(א) לְמַנְצַח מְזִמּוֹר לְדָוִד:

(ב) עַד־אָנָּה ה' תִּשְׁכַּחֲנִי נָצַח

עַד־אָנָּה תִסְתִּיר אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

(ג) עַד־אָנָּה אֲשִׁית עֲצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי

יְגֹז בְּלִבִּי יוֹמָם



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How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

⁴Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God!

Restore the luster to my eyes,

lest I sleep the sleep of death;

⁵lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him,”

my foes exult when I totter.

⁶But I trust in Your faithfulness,

my heart will exult in Your deliverance.

I will sing to the Lord,

for He has been good to me.

עַד-אַנָּה יְרוּם אֵיבֵי עָלָי:

(ד) הַבִּיטָה עֲנֵנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵי

הָאִירָה עֵינַי פְּנֵי-אִישׁן הַמָּוֹת :

(ה) פְּנֵי-אִמֵּר אֵיבֵי יִכְלְתֵנוּ

צָרֵי יִגְלוּ כִּי אָמוּט :

(ו) וְאֲנִי בַחֲסֶדְךָ בְּטַחְתִּי

יִגַּל לְבִי בִישׁוּעַתְךָ

אֲשִׁירָה לַה' כִּי גָמַל עָלָי:

Psalm 88

(א) שִׁיר מִזְמוֹר לְבְנֵי קֹרַח לְמִנְצַח עַל מַחְלַת לְעֵנוֹת מִשְׁכִּיל לְהִימָן הָאֶזְרָחִי:

¹A song. A psalm of the Korahites. For the leader; on mahalath leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

²O Lord, God of my deliverance,

when I cry out in the night before You,

³let my prayer reach You;

incline Your ear to my cry.

⁴For I am sated with misfortune;

I am at the brink of Sheol.

⁵I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit;

I am a helpless man

⁶abandoned among the dead,

like bodies lying in the grave

of whom You are mindful no more,

and who are cut off from Your care.

⁷You have put me at the bottom of the Pit,

in the darkest places, in the depths.

⁸Your fury lies heavy upon me;

You afflict me with all Your breakers. Selah.

⁹You make my companions shun me;

(ב) ה' אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי

יוֹם צַעֲקָתִי בַלַּיְלָה נִגְדָּדְךָ:

(ג) תָּבוֹא לְפָנַי תִּפְלֵתִי

הַטָּה אֲזַנְךָ לְרִנָּתִי:

(ד) כִּי שָׁבַעָה בְרַעוֹת נַפְשִׁי

וְחַיִּי לְשֹׁאֵל הַגֵּיעוּ:

(ה) נָחַשְׁתִּי עִם יוֹרְדֵי בּוֹר

הַיִּיתִי כְגֹבֵר אִין אֵיל:

(ו) בְּמַתִּים חָפְשִׁי

כְּמוֹ חֲלָלִים שִׁכְבֵי קֶבֶר

אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתָּם עוֹד

וְהִמָּה מִיָּדְךָ נִגְזְרוּ:

(ז) שִׁתַּנִּי בְבוֹר תַּחְתִּיּוֹת

בְּמַחְשָׁבִים בְּמַצְלוֹת:

(ח) עָלֵי סִמְכָה חֲמַתְךָ

וְכָל מִשְׁבָּרֶיךָ עֲנִיתָ סֵלָה:

(ט) הִרְחַקְתָּ מִיָּדַעִי מִמְּנֵי

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You make me abhorrent to them;
I am shut in and do not go out.
¹⁰My eyes pine away from affliction;
I call to You, O Lord, each day;
I stretch out my hands to You.
¹¹Do You work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise to praise You? Selah.
¹²Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave,
Your constancy in the place of perdition?
¹³Are Your wonders made known in the
netherworld,
Your beneficent deeds in the land of oblivion?
¹⁴As for me, I cry out to You, O Lord;
each morning my prayer greets You.
¹⁵Why, O Lord, do You reject me,
do You hide Your face from me?
¹⁶From my youth I have been afflicted
and near death;
I suffer Your terrors wherever I turn.
¹⁷Your fury overwhelms me;
Your terrors destroy me.
¹⁸They swirl about me like water all day long;
they encircle me on every side.
¹⁹You have put friend and neighbor far from me

שְׁתַּנִּי תוֹעֲבוֹת לְמוֹ
כָּלֵא וְלֹא אֲצֵא:
(י) עֵינַי דָּאֲבָה מִנִּי עֲנִי
קְרֵאתִיךָ ה' בְּכֹל יוֹם
שִׁטְחֹתַי אֲלִיךָ כַּפִּי:
(יא) הֲלִמְתִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה פְּלֵא
אִם רְפָאִים יִקְוֹמוּ יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה:
(יב) הִסְפֵּר בַּקֶּבֶר חֲסֵדְךָ
אֲמוֹנָתְךָ בְּאֲבֵדוֹן:
(יג) הִיָּדַע בַּחֲשֵׁךְ פְּלֵאָךְ
וְצִדְקָתְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ נְשִׁיָּה:
(יד) וְאֲנִי אֲלִיךָ ה' שׁוֹעֲתִי
וּבִבְקָר תִּפְלִתִי תִקְדֶּמְךָ:
(טו) לָמָּה ה' תִּזְנַח נַפְשִׁי
תִּסְתִּיר פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי:
(טז) עֲנִי אֲנִי וְגִוַע מִזֶּעַר
נְשָׂאתִי אֲמִיךָ אֶפְוֶנָה:
(יז) עָלַי עָבְרוּ חֲרוֹנֶיךָ
בַּעוֹתֶיךָ צִמְתוֹנִי:
(יח) סָבוּנִי כַּמִּים כָּל הַיּוֹם
הַקִּיפוּ עָלַי יְחָד:
(יט) הֲרַחֲקֵת מִמֶּנִּי אֱהָב וְרַע
מִדְּעִי מִחֲשָׁד:

Two Improvised Laments by HIV-positive South Africans [fr. Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo, *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts*]

God the Father, you can see the trials and tribulations we are faced with in our daily lives. We are sick and tired; we ask you to diminish HIV/AIDS, let it not spread inside our bodies, so that our people are able to live longer, prosperous lives. Our Father God, you see our anger, pain and suffering; we have no power. We ask you Lord to suppress HIV so that it will not spread, and that more people will live healthy lives.

O Lord, why me; why have you deserted me; what have I done to deserve such punishment?

