"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
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?
Never have I seen your pure standing place
(or sleeping) chamber.³
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,
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 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,
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,
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.
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?

¹ לֹא בְּכֶנֶנָּה כָּמוֹר לְלֶדוֹ:¹² (ב) רַדרְעֵה הָעֲשֵׁקָהָה נֶעָק.
   (ג) רַדרְעֵהּ אָשֶׁרְכָה נֶעָק בְּכָמֶר.
   גִּנּוֹ יִלְבֶּבֶךָ יָמָּה.

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies
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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;

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

my foes exult when I totter.

But 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.

Psalm 88

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

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?