

How Can We Sing a Song of the LORD on Alien Soil?: Disability, Disaster, and the Idea of Music in Judaism

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Abstract: An analysis of Psalm 137, a poetic chronicle of the Babylonian captivity following the destruction of the First Temple, Judaism's paradigm of disaster, is poetically represented through images of music and disability. This Psalm's influence on Jewish attitudes regarding music, which have served as a barometer of the Jewish people's sense of their collective social welfare, is discussed. Of special importance is Abrams' idea, derived from the Deutero-Isaiah, of the Jews, living in exile after the destruction of the Temple, as Israel disabled; an entire people's calamity understood metaphorically as a single individual's impairment. Particular attention is given to the discourse surrounding Late Renaissance Italian Jewish composer Salamone Rossi, who challenged the idea that the "disability" of exile required Jewish musical expression only to mourn the state of post-Temple Diaspora.

Key Words: disaster, music, Judaism

By the Rivers of Babylon

That *Parting the Waters* refers to the divine intervention of disaster rescue in the book of *Exodus* is hardly subtle. (Of course, the divine intervention of the Ten Plagues is, from the Egyptian perspective, an unambiguous narrative of disaster *as* disability). The Israelites' plight of long wandering in *Exodus* presages a recurrent theme of exile and Diaspora in Jewish history that has served as a paradigm for many people's struggles. For Jews, physical and spiritual exile, the exemplar of disaster, is powerfully associated with disability and poetically expressed in musical terms.

Nowhere is Jewry's understanding of the binding of disability and disaster with historical and musical themes more clear than in Psalm 137:1-6:

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we thought of Zion.

²There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,
³for our tormentors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

⁴How can we sing a song of the LORD
On alien soil?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
⁶let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you.
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory

even at my happiest hour.

This translation is from the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 1435). The familiar “forget its cunning,” (“her cunning” in the King James version) which JPS attributes to (earlier) “Others,” has been replaced with “wither.” “Forget its cunning,” exquisitely expresses rabbinic Judaism’s attitude toward disability and ability; that cognition, including memory, is primary. Thus even physical skill is characterized as cognitive. Although this image is rich and poetic, JPS no longer considers the translation accurate.

The historical moment chronicled in Psalm 137 is obvious and hugely formative in the Jewish ethos. The Babylonian exile (597-538 BCE)¹ was the first, albeit temporary, involuntary Diaspora, an important psychological foundation for the subsequent transformation of Judaism from its *Torah*/Temple/Priestly to its *Talmud*/Synagogue/rabbinic praxes, in the early Common Era. Notably, the more authoritative of Judaism’s two *Talmud* (Oral Law) compilations, from the 5th-7th centuries CE, is the *Bavli*, or “Babylonian.”

That exile is regarded as a disaster in Psalm 137 is immediately and utterly apparent. The Judaism of the time – and thus the ethos of the Jewish people – was entirely rooted in Jerusalem’s Temple cult and in the landed nation of Israel. Thus the psalmist weeps at the thought of Zion lost. That Zion is “thought of” is a more than casual word choice, as becomes evident later in the text. In exile, cognitive ability is privileged, along with the ability to communicate one’s thoughts, as the Jewish asset par excellence. Not so within the ancient land of Israel, where the idealized human type was the physically blemishless “perfect priest” (Abrams, 1998, p. 69), able to withstand the rigors of Temple worship.

The dilemma and danger of the liminality of Judaism in exile per these conflicting systems of idealized human valuation – physical perfection versus cognitive acumen – is posited eloquently in terms of disability in verses 5-6. If the psalmist loses his cognizance -- forgetting Jerusalem -- he invites punishment in the form of physical disability, the loss of right hand skill. Even this corporeal trauma is expressed in cognitive terms; as forgetting the hand’s “cunning.”

Cognition, though, is only half the story. Deeply communal, Judaism requires not only understanding, but also powers of articulation with which to share it. Failure to recall Jerusalem -- a lapse in cognition -- must also be punished by speech dysfluency, the tongue adhering to the palate – a communication impairment.

There is more here than the psalmist’s partnering of physical disability imposed upon the human body with exilic disaster inflicted upon the body politic. The 137 is the only Psalm that chronicles explicitly the Babylonian exile, which sowed the first seeds of the transformation from Temple Judaism, which celebrates place (Israel and the Temple) and idealizes the perfect priestly body, to rabbinic Judaism –which idealizes *Torah* study. Scholarship it seems, then as now, was anything but the province of athletes such as Temple priests.

In *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli* (1998, p. 76-78), Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams observes that God’s “suffering servant” of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah, chapters 40-55) was the creation of an author living in exile in Babylonia. According to Isaiah 52 (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 889-891):

¹³My servant shall prosper,
Be exalted and raised to great heights.

He is nonetheless, as Abrams observes (1998, p. 76), “clearly disabled and wounded”:

^{14J}Just as the many were appalled at him—
So marred was his appearance, unlike that of man,
His form beyond human semblance—

It gets worse. In verse 53:3 (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p.891):

He was despised, shunned by men,
A man of suffering, familiar with disease.
As one who hid his face from us,
He was despised, we held him of no account.

Isaiah 53:4-5 (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p.891) explains, though, that the servant suffers on behalf of all Israel:

⁴Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing,
Our suffering that he endured.
We accounted him plagued,
Smitten and afflicted by God;
⁵But he was wounded because of our sins,
Crushed because of our iniquities,
He bore the chastisement that made us whole,
And by his bruises we were healed.

The significance of this prophecy can hardly be underestimated, for either Judaism or disability studies. According to Abrams (2004, p. 77), the suffering servant might represent either the entire Jewish people or its religiously faithful core-in-exile, but not Israel the state. Rather, “Israel is idealized, either in whole or in part, as a person with disabilities.”

This is heady stuff for disability studies and disability pride, though not quite so heady or inclusive as one might wish. Abrams is always clear that in ancient Israel (as everywhere) that until very recent times no single category of “disability” existed. The impaired hero whose praises are sung in Isaiah is auspiciously proposed as a replacement, during Israel’s first exile, for the idealized perfect physical specimen, the Temple Priest. But this suffering servant can be accepted as a role model only with certain impairments and not others, those that would not impede his functioning as the new type of ideal:

“The servant’s strengths come from his intellectual and spiritual qualities, not from his physical, ascribed attainments. He is the literary creation of a stateless teacher, trying to define Judaism in exile” (Abrams, 1998, p. 77-78).

But:

“We should also note that the suffering servant is not described as blind, deaf, or mentally disabled. In other words, his ability to learn and teach [the idealized skills of a Diaspora Jew] is unimpaired by his disabilities; he is not debilitated intellectually or spiritually, only physically. These disabilities, and indeed this image as a whole, could

naturally be seen as political metaphors, not only moral ones, for Jewry as a whole, by Jewish readers of later eras. The servant suffers as the faithful of Israel suffer. He is downcast as the exiles are downcast. To be stripped of one's country and one's [Temple] cult is to be disabled" (Abrams, 1998, p. 77).

In modern Israel, only the country and not the cult is restored. The Temple is yet unrebuilt. Most who believe in the restoration of the priestly rite believe the Temple may only be resurrected pending a sign from God. Judaism in Israel as elsewhere remains in its rabbinic form; religiously uncompleted, it adherents unhealed. The attributes of the "suffering servant" would become the paradigm for the new, intellectual, Jewish ideal-in-exile, the sage whose status would later be formalized in the rabbinate:

"He has no role in politics, war, or the cult (McKenzie [1968, p.] lii). Rather it is through his devotion in the face of suffering that he attains his purpose. This description could also fit the situation of the sages after 70 C.E. [following the destruction of the Second Temple], and significantly, they are the ones who will later emphasize the concept he so vividly illustrates – that suffering may replace the atonement previously found in the cult" (Abrams, 1998, p. 78).

We Hung Up Our Lyres

The Psalms are strongly associated with music. "Psalms" derives from the Greek *psalmos*, a translation of the Hebrew *mizmor*, "A song with the accompaniment of a stringed instrument" (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 1282). Psalm 137 is particularly musical, especially its second verse:

³for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement...

The Israelites' storing away their stringed instruments should be taken principally at face value (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 1282). They refused to perform for their captors, particularly their own repertoire: sacred, patriotic, and/or nostalgic. That they not only refuse to sing but also to play is prophetic, applying not only to the destruction of the First Temple, but the Second as well (Shiloah, 1992, p.73). Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, in a gesture of mourning, instruments were banned from use in Jewish worship.²

Circumspection regarding instruments, particularly though not exclusively in worship, occurs in much of Islam and some Christian denominations. However, the association of instrumental music with well-being, mirrored by extensive restrictions on its use as a gesture of loss is particularly Jewish.

Three of six verses of (the final) Psalm 150 enumerate the instruments of Temple worship:

³Praise Him with blasts of the horn;
Praise Him with harp and lyre.

⁴Praise Him with timbrel and dance;
Praise Him with lute and pipe.

⁵Praise Him with resounding cymbals;
Praise Him with loud-crashing cymbals (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 1445-46).

Temple music (of whose actual sound we know little more than scripture provides) and other Temple attributes such as architecture have long served as ideals in Judaism. In the Renaissance, not only the Temple orchestra's impressive instrumentarium and "joyful noise," but also its apparent rhythmic vitality (its percussion section of timbrel and cymbals) and possibly its polyphony (five different types of melody instrument) were admired. In Jewish Renaissance Mantua, Italy, where circa 1600 life was somewhat better and less-restricted for Jews than elsewhere in Europe, Biblical Israel and the Temple cult were icons of Humanism for Jews, much as Gentiles cleaved to the glories of Classical Greece and Rome (Harrán, 1999, p. 204).

A controversy ensued among Mantuan Jews regarding the right and duty to emulate the Humanistic musical qualities of exuberance, instrumental color, meter, and counterpoint, aesthetic foundations of secular and sacred Gentile Renaissance art music. The debate focused on the innovative sacred music of Mantuan Jewish composer Salamone Rossi (ca. 1570-ca. 1630). This question engaged many Jewish intellectuals, including six rabbis who contributed to the prefaces to the premiere publication of Rossi's *Songs of Solomon* (1622-23), the first publication of Hebrew texts set to polyphonic music (Harrán, 1999, p. 201). The rabbinical apologetics were largely a response to critics (Harrán, 1999, p. 201-218). Difference of opinion and praxis remains ongoing, largely regarding instruments, among and within the various movements in Judaism.

Whether Jews must still musically mourn ancient disasters (arguably at least partially mended by Israeli independence in 1948) remains divisive. And, recalling Abrams, despite restoration of the Jewish state, the sense of incompleteness accompanying the unrebuilt Temple is still regarded as a collective disability.

From a disability perspective, rabbinic Judaism's idealization of cognitive and expressive gifts seems progressive, at least in its considerable acceptance of physical disability. Although the "suffering servant" of Isaiah, as Abrams notes, could not have fulfilled his role had he sensory or cognitive impairments, Judaism has always been relatively empathetic to blindness as well. For example, the Talmudic sage Rav Yosef was blind (Abrams, 1998, p. 193-96). And Judaism, unlike ancient Greek and Roman culture, always forbade infanticide (Abrams, 1998, p. 119-122). Where ancient Judaism seems least enlightened by contemporary standards is, not surprisingly, in regards to cognitive and communication impairments, a category in which Jewry included deafness (Abrams, 1998, p. 168-190).

Let My Tongue Stick to My Palate

If Psalm 137:2 lays precedent for Judaism's proscriptions upon instrumental music, is captive Israel's refusal also to sing for its oppressors similarly prophetic? Jewish sacred music, especially of the synagogue and the Sabbath, is mostly, in most congregations exclusively, what Western typology calls "singing." But Western definitions of music and singing are currently so prevalent even beyond the West that it may be difficult even to imagine alternative taxonomies.

Many cultures have traditionally lacked an overarching category of "music." Others have distinguished music from "singing." Clearly, Judaism treats instrumental music as a highly distinct category, for handling or eschewing with care. The often simple cantillation of sacred text prevalent in worship in Rossi's Italy and, it would seem, dominant throughout most of the

rabbinic period, has at times been regarded as distinct from music (Harrán, 1999, p. 204) or at least exempt from the condemnation of all other musics by some ultra-Orthodox commentators, who argue that perpetual mourning is mandated by the Second Temple's destruction (Shiloah, 1992, p. 73-80).

Rossi's sacred choral works were highly innovative, the first clear, extant exceptions among a repertoire otherwise comprised (almost?) exclusively of cantillation, the latter arguably a liminal category between music and declamation. In Rossi's time, the answer to the psalmist's, "How can we sing a song of the LORD on alien soil?" was, "We couldn't, we can only chant," but for Rossi. Notably, though his *Songs of Solomon* embodied of Jewish Renaissance musical Humanism -- rhythmic, polyphonic, and joyous -- they were nonetheless a cappella, still honoring Jewry's strictest exilic musical prohibition.

Strikingly, one of the two laments among the 33 *Songs of Solomon* is Psalm 137. Ironically, given Rossi's Humanism, the Mantua ghetto, less oppressive than most of its time, was sacked, its residents expelled in 1630, likely around the time of Rossi's death (Harrán, 1999, p. 12). By virtue of his musicianship privileged for a Jew, exempt from wearing the yellow badge (Harrán, 1999, p. 25-26), and an optimistic musical advocate for the potentials of Diaspora life, Rossi appears likely nonetheless to have perished in a pogrom, one of many reprises of the Babylonian captivity, Jewry's paradigm of disaster.

Returning to Psalm 137 and to disability, the psalmist's refusal to sing is not a choice, but something that *can't* be done, lest "my tongue stick to my palate." Neither is playing the lyre possible, lest "my right hand lose its cunning." Verse 2's musical "work stoppages" are paired respectively with impairments that impede instrumental and vocal performance in verse 3, a subtle poetic expression of Israel's self-perceived disability.

Rendsberg and Rendsberg (1993, p. 399) (who attribute the above poetic analysis to medieval rabbi David Qimhi), diagnose both these hand and speech impairments as symptoms of "a stroke, localized in the left side of the brain" (1993, 386). They prefer the translation "become paralyzed" to "forget its cunning" or "wither" (1993, 386).³ The Rendsbergs (1993, p. 388-390) show that strokes were both known and survived in the Ancient Near East, observing that: "Quite clearly, the ancient Jewish poet utilized the stroke victim to evoke the emotional ties of exilic Israel to its capital city."

Quoting R. Westbrook (1990, p. 577), they observe that if a point "is to be explained by a metaphor drawing upon the everyday life of the audience, then that metaphor, to be effective, must reflect accurately the reality known to the audience."

Stroke, as now, appears to have worried the psalmist's audience. Baynton's observation that "disability is everywhere in history..." also applies to Judaism.

I would propose that -- metaphorically, at least -- the history of the place of music in Judaism carries an implicit endorsement of the social model of disability. Among the musical qualities defended in the rabbinic apologetics prefacing the debut publication of Rossi's *Songs of Solomon* was their joyousness (Harrán, 1999), an emotion some among Jewry disdain. Psalm 137 is the most ancient source cited by scholars for the need to mourn without music (Shiloah: 73). The anonymous ultra-Orthodox Israeli author of *El gil ka'ammin* ("Rejoice not, O Israel... as other people," Hosea 9:1) (1999) declares that:

"When the Temple was destroyed it was decreed not to play any instrument of music or sing any songs and all who sing songs are forbidden to be joyful and it is forbidden to let

them be heard because of the destruction..." (1969, quoted in Shiloah, 1992, p. 74).
[Cantillation is exempt from this decree, even among adherents of this view].

Implicit in this plaint is that perpetual despair is the only appropriate, dignified response to exilic disaster – Jewry’s collective disability – until the “cure” of the World to Come; the Messianic Age, when the Temple and its cult are resurrected. Rossi and his defenders proposed instead that a joyous life – despite the disability of exile and with no reasonable expectation of its “cure” at hand -- is nonetheless attainable through such acts as music making. In the prefaces to the *Songs of Solomon*, Rossi’s leading advocate, cantor Leon Modena, charged those who would sing these works to:

“... Give honour to the Lord and glorify the place of His Lesser Sanctuary [the synagogue] and the festivities of His commandments by singing them [the ‘Songs’] each in its proper time [many being occasional works]” (Harrán, 1999, p. 213).

Thus life’s purposes are to be fulfilled in “His Lesser Sanctuary,” despite lacking the Greater Sanctuary of the Temple. Rossi et al. were declaring symbolically and sonically not just the possibility of having a full and joyous life in a disabled, exilic body, but the supremely ordained Jewish duty – the Commandment – to do so.

Music has long loomed large in Judaism’s ongoing “culture war” over the appropriate countenance for Temple-less times. At a unique moment in Jewish music history, Rossi and his allies made extensive, eloquent pleas for a “social model of Diaspora,” rejecting stateless exile – Jewry’s paradigmatic disaster -- as a pathology requiring a Messianic “cure.” But they were neither unique in this stance, nor in stressing music’s vital spiritual role. For Hasidic Jews, the Lubavitcher sect in particular:

“[Music is] one of the most powerful forms of human expression, it is a part of prayer, celebration, and teaching. Music and its performance have the potential to elevate the soul, inspire a student, open up the gates of joy” (Koskoff, 2001, p. 72).

Rossi and the Lubavitchers, though united in their esteem for music, differ markedly with regard to musical style. Rossi answered the question of how to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land in the style of the art music of the late Italian Renaissance, by absorbing local culture and eschewing Jewish cantillation altogether. In contrast, the nigunim, the archetypal and distinctive Lubavitcher musical genre (while hardly devoid of non-Jewish influence) is certainly stylistically Jewish (Koskoff, 2001). Lubavitchers, unlike Rossi, are circumspect about what they see as the seductive power of classical music (Koskoff 2001, p. 156-159).

Thus, post-Temple exile – which has disabled Israel as a people – is accommodated through rabbinic Judaism and its Lesser Sanctuary the synagogue. Both Rossi and his allies and those influenced by Hasidism have regarded music as among Diaspora’s most potent accommodations.

And It Was So

If this essay seems a strange greeting for this forum, its aims ultimately transcend its esoteric subject. My first goal has been to provide a case study that shows that the disability and disaster motifs of Psalm 137 are as timeless as any themes we have available.

My second purpose has been to exemplify how disaster, like disability, is socially constructed. As a nation and a people, Israel has endured much that is universally understood as tragic, much of it as manifestations of exile. But Jewry's collective and long-standing – if much renegotiated – reactive grief has been a social response, sometimes blessedly aestheticized in musical and literary imagination.

Finally, I note how our forum's seemingly dual themes of disability and disaster might be read as one. Much of Jewry's self-perception is as a nation and people whose archetypal, ethos-forming disasters of Temples destroyed and subsequent exile rendered its body politic disabled. While massive devastation and individual impairment are events experienced, disaster and disability are their respective social constructions; related to each other as culturally significant articulations of loss, though vastly different in scale. If this is convincing and helpful, then we have begun this auspicious forum well. In the word of the psalmist, "Hallelujah!"

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Endnotes

¹ Editor's Note: "BCE" stands for "Before the Common Era (CE)" which is the equivalent of "BC." "CE," or "Common Era," is the equivalent of "AD."

² The ban on the use of instruments applies primarily to the Sabbath and its devotions, although much of Jewry excludes them from worship more extensively. This restriction ended in Reform Judaism in the early 19th century and later in some Conservative congregation, but remains prevalent. Amnon Shiloah (74) reports that some ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews eschew instruments entirely, including radios, phonographs and tape machines.

³ Berlin and Brettler's *The Jewish Study Bible*, based on the JPS translation used here, also accepts "become paralyzed" as an alternative.