



“Let it Not Totter and Fall”

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Beresheit Rabbah (3:7) teaches that God created and destroyed many worlds before finally allowing this world, our world, to stand. This *midrash* is teaching us three things. First, destruction and loss are a part of the fabric of our very existence. There is no avoiding it; there is only wrestling and reconciling and accepting it. Second, the *midrash* contains in it a promise or a hope that even after each destruction, a new world is created. After loss, there is rebirth. After the destruction of one world, there is the creation of the next.

Based on this *midrash*, R. Natan Zvi Finkel, a 20th century Musar thinker, teaches:

We are forced to say that also in the destruction of the worlds, there is great wisdom, and from this wisdom, emerged the world that exists. As the Scripture writes about this, “The Lord founded the earth by wisdom” (Proverbs 3:19). However, this is not really destruction at all, rather it is the way of wisdom that through the different attempts to build worlds and their

ובעל כורחנו שגם בחורבן העולמות יש חכמה רבה, שמתוך חכמה זו צמח בנין העולם הקיים, שהכתוב אומר עליו: "בחכמה יסד ארץ" (משלי ג:ט). אין זה, איפא, חורבן כלל אלא זוהי דרך החכמה, שעל ידי הנסיונות השונים של



destruction that the foundation is established upon which the world is based.¹

בנין העולמות וחורבנם הוקם היסוד
שממנו נתבסס העולם.

The creation of the new world is not disconnected from the destruction of the previous world. Rather, in his language, "we are forced to say," against our natural inclination, that there is great wisdom in the destruction of the worlds and it is from this wisdom that the new world emerges. Our world exists on the backs of all of the previous attempts, of these heartbreaking losses and moments of destruction.

On Tisha b'Av we commemorate the destruction of not one but two Temples separated by a span of about 650 years. We finally come back from the destruction and long exile of the First Temple, and rebuild, only to have the Second Temple destroyed as well. The prophet Jeremiah, in both the Book of Jeremiah as well as the Book of Lamentations (traditionally ascribed to him), acts as a first-person witness to the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of the Babylonians. Overcome with grief as he witnesses the ruin of a nation, he writes of the anguish and sickness of his heart (Lamentations 1:20-22). He bewails, "I will sit in darkness, like those long dead" (3:6). On Tisha b'Av, when we read the Book of Lamentations, we bear witness to Jeremiah's grief as he watches a city laid to waste and given over to its enemies (2:2).

In Tamar Biala's moving, modern *midrash*, "Midrash on Miscarriage and Creation" published in *Dirshuni*,² she places God in the role of Jeremiah, who like Jeremiah, witnesses the destruction of Her beloved worlds, falling at her feet.

¹ R. Natan Zvi Finkel, Or ha-Tzafun, Destruction and Building.

² A collection of modern *midrashim* written by Israeli women. Biala is both a contributor and the co-editor of this two volume collection. The translation here is based on Yehudah Mirsky's in Tamar Biala (ed.), *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2022).



And God saw all Her worlds falling at Her feet, and She said to Herself: I will just let my heart fall along with them, and "I will sit in darkness, like those long dead" (Lamentations 3:6).

ותרא ה' כל עולמותיה נפולים לרגליה,
ותאמר בלבה: אניח ללבי ליפול עמהם
ואשב במחשכים כמתי עולם.

She places Jeremiah's language in God's mouth and God says to Herself, "I will sit in darkness, like those long dead." It is God who is at the center of this loss and it is God who is broken in mourning, watching her worlds pool at her feet.

Her tears and blood were scattering in space, searching for land that would absorb them, and they wept to fragments and pieces, until all of existence was the cloud and fog of the great deep. God tried to look again at the ruins of Her worlds, and just couldn't. She covered Herself with this great deep, as is written, "You made the deep, covered it as a garment" (Psalm 104:6), and She beat Her chest and wailed: for "I shall be a desolation forever" (Jeremiah 51:26).

היו דמעותיה ודמיה מתפזרים בחלל והיו
מחזרים אחר אדמה שתאספם ובוכים אף
הם לרסיסי רסיסים, עד שהיה היקום כולו
ענן וערפל של תהום רבה. ביקשה ה'
לראות שוב את חורבות עולמותיה ולא עלה
בידה. כיסתה עצמה בתהום זו, שנאמר
'תהום כְּלְבוּשׁ כְּסִיתוֹ' (תהלים קד, ו) והייתה
טופחת על לבה ומייבבת: כי שממות עולם
אהיה.

Like a person deep in depression buried on the covers, God cannot bear to look at Her world. She covers herself in the *tehom* (deep), woven together from Her blood and Her tears. Whereas in the Book of Jeremiah (51:26), an angry, disappointed God wounds the people and promises "You will be a desolation forever," in Biala's midrash, God "beats Her chest and wails, 'I will be a desolation forever.'" It is not the people who are alone and in despair but rather God, who is alone and in despair, buried in the *tehom* of her own scattered tears and blood.

Time passes. Slowly, something changes.



What did She think at that moment, when She could no longer bear to look on those worlds? She remembered that it is said of Her, "You brought forth the earth and the world" (Psalm 90:2) "and her womb, eternal" (Jeremiah 20:17), and She felt her sons and daughters straining to be born so that they could say in gratitude, "for I was not killed in the womb" (20:17). She closed Her eyes, swallowed the pain lodged in Her throat, and pleaded for Herself, that She might find more loving-mercy, and faith, as is written, "I declare, a world of loving-mercy will be built, Your faithfulness will be established in the heavens" (Psalm 89:3). And from that She went and created new heavens and a new earth.

אותה שעה שלא עלה בידה לראות את
אותן עולמות שאבדו, מה עלה על לבה?
הייתה זכרת שעליה נאמר 'וַתַּחֲלֵל אֶרֶץ
וַתִּבֵּל' (תהלים צ, ב) ו'וַרְחַמָּה הָרַת עוֹלָם'
(ירמיה כ, יז) והייתה רואה שבניה ובנותיה
מבקשים להיוולד ולומר בתודה 'אֲשֶׁר לֹא
מוֹתַתִּנִּי מִרְחָם' (שם). עצמה עיניה,
הבליעה הכאב בגרונה, ביקשה על עצמה
שתמצא בתוכה עוד חסד ואמונה, שנאמר
'כִּי אֶמְרֵתִי עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה שְׁמַיִם תִּכֵּן
אֶמְוִינֶתָּ בָּהֶם' (תהלים פט, ג), ומתוך כך
הלכה ובראה שמים חדשים וארץ חדשה.

She feels her sons and daughters, Her future worlds, straining to be born. God closes Her eyes and pleads with herself for the hesed, the capacity for loving-kindness, and *emunah*, faith to begin to create again and bring new worlds into existence. Before God can create, She must mourn. Time must pass. She must feel the pressing call of these future worlds. And then, she prays to Herself for the capacity for *emunah* and hesed.

God takes off Her garment, she removes the *tehom*, the great deep of her own tears and blood, the scattered worlds previously destroyed, and she gathers together the living waters and hovers over them:

When the heavens and earth stood, in wonderment and bewilderment, *tohim uvohim*, She took off the garment of the deep with which She had been covering Herself, and that deep of cloud and fog, Her blood and tears, went and

עמדו להם שמים וארץ תוהים ובוהים,
פשטה אותו לבוש של תהום שהייתה
מתכסה בו, והייתה תהום זו של ענן וערפל
דמיה ודמעותיה הולכת ונקווית שוב למים



gathered into living waters, and She hovered over them back and forth, as is written "when the earth was *tohu vavohu*, darkness over the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

חיים, והיא מרחפת עליהם הלך ושוב,
שנאמר 'וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל
פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵי
הַמָּיִם' (בראשית א, ב).

Biala's *midrash* closes with prayer. She writes of God:

And what was She saying at that moment? "That it should not totter and fall, forever" (Psalm 104:5). And Her sons and daughters joined their prayers to Hers, and they themselves said: "That it should not totter and fall, forever; that it should not totter and fall, forever."

ומה הייתה אומרת באותה השעה? 'אָרֶץ עַל
מְכוּנָה בַּל תִּמוּט עוֹלָם וָעֶד' (תהלים קד, ה) והיו
בניה ובנותיה הנולדים לה חוזרים ומצרפים
תפילתם לתפילותיה והיו אומרים אף הם: 'בַּל
תִּמוּט עוֹלָם וָעֶד', 'בַּל תִּמוּט עוֹלָם וָעֶד'.

Biala imagines a devastated God who finds the capacity despite loss, and from within loss, to begin to create again. She draws together living waters and creates anew the heavens and the earth. But, in this new creation, there is fear and tentativeness. There is new life and there is loss. There is pushing forward and there is a newly enhanced awareness of fragility. God prays, "that it should not totter and fall, that it should not tottle and fall" and Her sons and daughters join their prayer alongside Hers. Together, all of creation prays.

Biala's stunning *midrash* is teaching us several things. First, sometimes we have to just take the time to mourn and grieve the loss. Sometimes we are like God, covering ourselves in the *tehom*, unable to face the world. Second, we can't always get out from under the *tehom* on our own. Sometimes we need to be pulled gently out from under it, as God's future sons and daughters call out to Her, as they join their prayers to God's. Finally, the new world is created out of the blood and tears we cry over the previous worlds. These blood and tears are real and important and they are what literally get drawn together to constitute new life, the living



waters. We could not create this new world were it not for the blood and tears we shed over loss.

Adrienne Rich offers us these beautiful poetic lines:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those, who, age after age,
Perversely, with no extraordinary
Power, reconstitute the world.³

In the last line here, Rich could have written "create the world," but she did not. She wrote, "**reconstitute** the world." The world is created out of destruction. It is shaped through our loss. It is reconstituted through our blood and our tears. Perhaps this is precisely what the Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 2:4) is trying to express when it states that the Messiah was born on the same day as the destruction of the Temple. Our ultimate redemption rises from the ashes of our quintessential ruination. They are inextricably linked. One necessarily emerges from the other.

This has been a year of devastating destruction. I hope and I pray that together we will have the power to reconstitute the world through our blood and our tears, building a new world, a better world out of destruction.

³ Excerpt from Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," in *Dream of a Common Language*, copyright (c) 1978 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

