

Weeping With All the Letters of the Alphabet

The Book of Lamentations
in Acrostic Translation

Rabbi Joseph H. Prouser

“I weep for you with all the letters of the alphabet”

- Chaim Grade

*Yiddish novelist, mourning the 1952 murder, ordered by Stalin,
of 24 Jewish Russian intellectuals*

Chapter 1

1 **A**las! How Jerusalem, the once great and populous city, the crown jewel among city states, now sits alone, like a widow: forlorn, bereft, servile!

2 **B**itterly she weeps through the night, tears running down her cheeks. There is no one to tender her loving comfort. All her presumed friends have betrayed her. They are now her enemies.

3 **C**onsumed by misery and overwhelmed by abject servitude, Judah is consigned to exile, with no prospect of rest or respite. All the forces of persecution have placed her in dire straits.

4 **D**esolate of holiday pilgrims, the very streets of Zion mourn. Her gates are all deserted. Her priests sigh in despair; her young daughters anguish. She is bitter and disconsolate.

5 **E**nemies of Zion are ascendant! Her detractors are serene and sated. God has chastened Jerusalem for her many transgressions. She sees her infant young led into captivity by the enemy.

6 **F**air Zion is deprived of all her glory. Her princely leaders now roam about like deer: in desperate search of pasture, powerless as they flee before the predator.

7 **G**one is all she cherished in former times. Now suffering pain and degradation, Jerusalem has no one to support her. Her people have fallen into the hands of an enemy who derides her undoing.

8 **H**ow grievous must be Jerusalem's sin! She is an outcast. Those who once esteemed her now hold her in contempt, for they have seen her debased and dishonored. She herself gasps and recoils.

9 **I**mpurity sullies her! She can give no thought to the future. She has fallen so terribly low; she is disconsolate. See, Lord, how the enemy has compounded my anguish!

10 **J**erusalem's enemies have laid hands upon her and all she holds dear. She has beheld foreigners – debarred by Your Command from even entering Your covenantal community – invading her very Sanctuary.

11 **K**eeping themselves alive by trading prized possessions for food, her groaning populace searches for bread. Look, Lord! See my wretchedness!

12 **L**ook about, all you passersby, and see. Is there any pain like that which I have suffered? That which I have borne? That which the Lord, in His righteous wrath, has inflicted upon me? May you never know the like!

13 **M**y very bones burn with the fire God dispatched from on high; I am beset: ensnared in the net God Himself spread for me. He has left me desolate in an age of misery.

14 **N**eck bowed by the heavy yoke of my transgressions, I bear a burden imposed on me by God's own hand. My strength is gone. The Lord has reduced me to so lowly a state, I shall never rise again.

15 **O**ur God has repudiated all the men of stature in my midst. He has designated this season for the predation of our youth. He has trampled, as in a wine press, virginal Fair Judea.

16 **P**laintively I bewail these losses, my eyes filled with tears. Any measure of comfort, of spiritual recovery, is but a distant hope. My children, too, are inconsolable. The enemy is triumphant.

17 **Q**uite without anyone to comfort her, Zion extends her hands in vain supplication. At God's command, Jacob is beset, surrounded by his enemies. Jerusalem is a befouled outcast in their midst.

18 **R**ight the Lord is, for I have violated His word. Hear me, fellow nations; behold my anguish: my young sons and daughters have been taken into captivity.

19 **S**o I call out to those who have professed their love for me, but they have deceitfully turned against me. My priests and my elders have perished in the city, as they searched for food in a desperate effort to survive.

20 **T**ake note of my distress, Lord: my innermost soul is in torment! My heart is broken within me, for I know how wrong, how faithless I have been. The sword may threaten outside, but it is my inner recesses where I sense death.

21 **U**pon hearing my sighs, none came to comfort me. All my enemies heard of my misfortune and rejoiced that You have brought about the recompense You threatened. May they suffer the same fate!

22 **V**iew their **W**ickedness, and **eX**ecute justice upon them, just as **Y**ou have penali**Z**ed me for my many transgressions. My sighing is endless; I am sick at heart.

Chapter 2

1 **A**las! How the Lord in His anger has utterly rejected Fair Zion. From the very heavens, He has cast majestic Israel down to Earth, sparing, in His day of wrath, not even the Sanctuary that was His footstool.

2 **B**roken and battered are the dwelling places of Jacob. Mercilessly, the Lord has, in His anger, razed to the very ground the fortress strongholds of Fair Judea. The kingdom and its nobles are profaned.

3 **C**ut down is the pride of Israel! In His anger, God has withdrawn His protective, right hand in the very presence of the foe! He has loosed a raging, all-consuming fire upon Jacob.

4 **D**eploying His bow like a sworn enemy, taking aim like a bitter foe, God has slain all He formerly looked upon with such favor and delight. He has poured out His wrath like fire upon Fair Zion's shrine.

5 **E**xecuting His onslaught like a foe, God has laid waste to Israel, laid waste her fortifications, destroyed her fortress strongholds. He has multiplied weeping and wailing, keening and crying in Fair Judea.

6 **F**elling His own Tabernacle like a crop ripe for harvest, the Lord has destroyed His cultic center. Zion's Festivals and Sabbaths are consigned to oblivion. In His fierce anger, God has renounced king and priest.

7 **G**od has rejected His altar. He has spurned His Temple, and ceded to the enemy the walls of our sacred citadel. It is now they who raise a commotion in the House of the Lord, as on a Festival day.

8 **H**e determined to destroy the walls of Fair Zion: the Lord was calculating in His resolve and did not withdraw His hand from the destructive plan. He brought grief to every wall and rampart; they anguish together.

9 **I**n ruins lie her gates; her beams and buttresses are broken. Her king and her nobles have been exiled. Torah is no more. Her prophets are granted no further vision from the Lord.

10 **J**erusalem's elders sit low on the ground, wrapped in sackcloth, placing dust upon their heads in mourning for Fair Zion. The young daughters of Jerusalem are bowed in abject grief.

11 **K**eeening and weeping at such length that my eyes have no more tears, I am aggrieved to my very core. I spew bitter bile on the ground at the downfall of my beautiful nation, at the sight of children and suckling infants sheltering in the streets of a once renowned city.

12 **L**anguishing like those mortally wounded, asking for their mothers: “Where is the grain and wine?” Their tender lives expire in the street, clutched to their mothers’ bosom.

13 **M**y beloved Jerusalem, how can I do you justice in describing your beauty? With what images can I console you, innocent Fair Zion? Your tragedy is as profound as the sea. Who will bring you healing?

14 **N**egligent prophets spoke only of trivial, unimportant matters. They did not address your corruption so as to restore you to your proper course. Their prophecies dwelt on superficial trivialities.

15 **O**nlookers wave dismissively at the very sight of you. They hiss and shake their heads at Fair Jerusalem: the city once celebrated for its consummate beauty, a joy to all the Earth.

16 **P**etulant enemies jeer at you, hissing and gnashing their teeth. They say: “We have destroyed her! How we have waited for this day: now it has finally come about!”

17 **Q**uashing His own inclination to mercy, the Lord has made good His threatened course. He has carried out the devastating sentence He prescribed in ages past. Now your prideful enemies, your bitter foes can rejoice over You.

18 **R**est not your eyes! Grant yourself no respite! The walls of Fair Zion cry their hearts out; let your tears flow like a mighty stream, day and night.

19 **S**tand ready! Call out in the night, at the earliest of watches. Pour out your heart like water in the very presence of the Lord. Extend your hands to Him in prayerful intercession for the lives of starving infants, expiring at every street corner!

20 **T**ake note, Lord! Behold: who are Your victims? Mothers consuming their own fruit: newborn babies! Priest and prophet: slain, Lord, in Your own Temple!

21 **U**nderfoot, young and old alike lie in the street. Our young daughters and our sons, felled by the sword. It is You who killed them on Your day of anger. You butchered them. You showed no mercy.

22 **V**indictive foes have done away with children I struggled to raise and to nurture. On the Lord's day of **W**rath, none survived e**X**termination, none whom **Y**ou called to account escaped Your bla**Z**ing fury.

Chapter 3

1 **A**ffliction has been my constant lot, subject to the rod of God's own wrath.

2 **A**bsolute darkness drives my destiny, impels me to my fate.

3 **A**gain and again, throughout the day, His hand has struck at me.

4 **B**eaten until my flesh and skin are worn away, He has broken my bones.

5 **B**uffeted by misfortune, I am immured in my own misery.

6 **B**enighted as those long dead, I dwell in gloom and obscurity.

7 **C**onfined as I am, I cannot escape. My chains weigh heavily upon me.

8 **C**ry and plead as I may, my prayers go unheeded.

9 **C**onfounding my path with great obstacles, He has left me nowhere to turn.

10 **D**oom portends from the Lord; He is a bear on the hunt, a prowling lion.

11 **D**isrupting my life's course, He has left me in a wretched state.

12 **D**eploying His bow against me, He takes aim and looses His arrows.

13 **E**viscerated am I by the lethal cache within his quiver.
14 **E**nduring the mockery of the nations, I am made a laughingstock.
15 **E**nduring a full portion of bitterness, I have had my fill of gall.
16 **F**linging me down into the dust, He has ground my teeth with gravel.
17 **F**orget contentment! My soul is bereft of peace.
18 **F**orsaking all hope of recovery, I acknowledge before God: "I am lost."
19 **G**all and poison recall my affliction, they mirror my misery.
20 **G**rieved by recurring memories, my spirit is brought so very low.
21 **G**rasping for hope, I take this truth to heart:
22 **H**eavenly grace is not entirely ended; God's mercy is never exhausted.
23 **H**ow abundant is Your faithfulness: renewed with every morning.
24 **H**e is my portion, my soul insists. I therefore maintain hope in Him.
25 **I**t is good to trust in the Lord, to seek Him and so gain His favor.
26 **I**t is good to nurture silent hope, to await the Lord's salvation.
27 **I**t is good to shoulder this task beginning in one's youth.
28 **J**ust wait in lonely silence, for this is the moral load imposed by God.
29 **J**udicious abasement is our course: there may still be hope.
30 **J**ust or not, forbear, welcome the humiliating blows of your attackers.
31 **K**now that the Lord does not reject in perpetuity.
32 **K**indness abounding, God shows mercy after His corrective measures.
33 **K**ey to His justice: God does not inflict gratuitous suffering.
34 **L**owly prisoners trampled underfoot?
35 **L**awful rights shamelessly denied?
36 **L**axity in defense of justice? These the Lord will not abide.

37 **M**an's plans will come to naught, unless the Lord ordains it.
38 **M**isfortune and success alike emanate from the divine will.
39 **M**isguided are our grievances. Let us regret only our own sins.
40 **N**ote well and thoughtfully our ways: let us turn back to the Lord.
41 **N**ot our hands but our hearts we must lift up to God in Heaven.
42 **N**oxious sins we have committed, and You have not forgiven us.
43 **O**penly pursuing us, and cloaked in anger, You have slain without mercy.
44 **O**bscuring Yourself as in a cloud, you remain impervious to our pleas.
45 **O**bjects of disgust and revulsion have You made us among the nations.
46 **P**erpetually, our enemies decry us.
47 **P**anic and peril are our lot, insecurity and instability.
48 **P**ools of water issue from my eyes at the downfall of my beautiful people.
49 **Q**uailing and crying without end, I find no relief.
50 **Q**uietude eludes me. May God in Heaven look upon my plight.
51 **Q**uaking with grief, I see all that has befallen the daughters of my people.
52 **R**elentlessly my foes hunt me, as those who track a game bird.
53 **R**elegating my life to the pit, they hurled rocks at me.
54 **R**ising waters engulfed me; I was sure I was finished.
55 **S**inking to the darkest depths, I called upon Your name, O Lord!
56 **S**hut not Your ears: hear my voice, my plea, my entreaty!
57 **S**alvation was forthcoming as I called upon You. You said: Have no fear!
58 **T**aking up my cause, Lord, You redeemed my life.
59 **T**hink of the wrongs my enemies have inflicted. Bring me justice!
60 **T**heir vindictive plots against me surely do not escape Your attention.

61 **U**gly invective and unseemly scheming against me: You have heard it all.

62 **U**ttering threats, my enemies plot against me all day long.

63 **U**nstinting, my foes' every movement is orchestrated to harm me.

64 **V**engeance **W**ill be Yours, Lord. **V**e**X** them as befits their crimes.

65 **V**ouchsafe for them only heartache. **Y**our curse be upon them!

66 **V**anquish them! In Your **Z**ealous wrath, root them out
from under the very heavens of God!

Chapter 4

1 **A**las! How that which was golden has grown tarnished. Once lustrous gold is dull and debased. Precious gems lie discarded in the gutter.

2 **B**eloved children of Zion – gold in their own right – Alas! They are now discounted as earthen shards, the leavings of some unknown artisan.

3 **C**ould jackals deny their young? Refuse to suckle their pups? Yet my once beautiful nation has descended into just such cruelty, like scavenger birds abandoning their nestlings in the desert.

4 **D**esperate and destitute, suckling infants thrust out their tongues in thirst; young children ask for bread, but not a slice is to be had.

5 **E**lites who once feasted on delicacies expire in the streets; those raised in luxury are glad to eat from garbage heaps.

6 **F**orsooth, the punishment of my beloved nation exceeds even that imposed upon Sodom, which was destroyed in but a passing moment, with no such protracted suffering.

7 **G**entlemen once purer than the driven snow, as wholesome and hale as milk, their radiant complexions ruddier than rubies,

8 **H**ave grown ashen and sickly, unrecognizable as they roam the streets, their skin hanging on bones now brittle as kindling wood.

9 **I**t is better to die by the sword than to fall victim to hunger, succumbing to stabbing hunger pangs, without even weeds or wild plants to sustain you.

10 **J**udean women, renowned for their compassion, have been reduced to cannibalizing their own children, just to survive amid the destruction of a once beautiful nation.

11 **K**indling a fire in Zion which razed it to its very foundations, the Lord has loosed His full measure of fury, pouring out His blazing wrath.

12 **L**anded nobles, kings and their peoples will hardly believe that such vile enemies could penetrate the gates of Jerusalem.

13 **M**easured was this punishment, for the sins of her prophets, the iniquity of her priests, who tolerated the shedding of innocent blood in her midst.

14 **N**one could so much as touch their garments in veneration, so soiled were they with blood, as they wandered aimlessly through the streets.

15 “**O**ff with you! You carriers of defilement!” they would cry at their approach. “Stay away! Do not touch us!” So they just roamed about endlessly. Even other nations said, “You may no longer dwell among us.”

16 **P**rovidence has expelled them. God will watch over them no more, for they no longer show deference to their priests, nor are they gracious toward their elders.

17 **Q**uietly we have waited; expectantly we wait still, but the nation is powerless to act. Even now it is in vain: our search for assistance only strains our eyes.

18 **R**outed and driven from the very streets, our end is at hand. Our days are done; the end has come.

19 **S**wifter than eagles in flight were those who pursued us. They drove us into the mountains; in the wilderness they lay in wait for us.

20 **T**he Lord's anointed king, our very life's breath, was caught up in their snares: he whose protection afforded us the opportunity to live as a nation among others.

21 **U**nto you, Fair Edom – dwelling in the Land of Uz – this bitter cup will pass in due course. In your drunkenness, you will reveal your shame.

22 **V**isiting fitting punishment upon you, Fair Edom, God will expose your sinfulness. But He **W**ill **eX**ile **Y**ou no further, Fair **Z**ion: your punishment is complete.

Chapter 5

1 Remember what has become of us, Lord. Just look and see our deplorable condition.

2 Our rightful inheritance has been usurped by strangers. Our homes have gone to outsiders.

3 We have been orphaned, bereft of a father. Our mothers are as widows.

4 We must pay to drink our own water. Every scrap of firewood comes at a price.

5 Our pursuers are breathing down our very necks. Though exhausted, we have no prospect of rest.

6 We have turned to Egypt, imploring them for relief, and to Assyria to provide us with bread.

7 Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we suffer the consequences of their transgressions.

8 Slaves rule over us and there is no one to free us from their clutches.

9 We obtain bread at the risk of our very lives; the danger is everywhere.

10 Our skin burns like an oven; our hunger has left us feverish.

11 They have ravished women in Zion, our young daughters in the towns of Judah.

12 They have hanged our princely leaders with their own hands, sparing not even the elderly.

13 Young men are forced to carry millstones; youths stumble under the weight of firewood.

14 The men of experience and wisdom no longer convene to offer counsel; young men have desisted from their music.

15 Our very capacity for joy is extinguished; our jubilation has turned into mourning.

16 The crown has fallen from our head. Oh! Woe! All because of our sins.

17 Our hearts are sick over this! Our eyes are beclouded,

18 Because of Mount Zion, reduced to ruins, now the haunt of foxes.

19 Though You, Lord, will reign forever. Your throne is secure for all generations.

20 How could You so thoroughly forsake us, abandoning us for so very long?

21 Allow us to return to You, Lord, and we will return in sincere contrition: renew us as in days long ago!

22 Or have You absolutely rejected us? Are You that thoroughly infuriated with us?

Allow us to return to You, Lord, and we will return in sincere contrition: renew us as in days long ago!