

How the City Sits in Mourning

Reflections on Police Shootings in Chicago and Beyond

Behind my desk in my office, there are two beautiful stained-glass windows. One is a striking image of the Prophet Jeremiah. So, I have the distinction of spending a great deal of time with the image of one of our great Prophets before me. Though I have not been spending a significant amount of time in my office during this past year, I have been thinking about Jeremiah quite a bit lately.

Jeremiah was one of our great Prophets and one of the most tragic. He had the dubious distinction of watching Jerusalem burn and was carried away into exile along with the people of Israel. His faith in the face of tragedy continues to inspire to this day. His prophecy that Mother Rachel will one day welcome her children back to Israel has inspired Jews throughout the ages to cling to hope when everything around us argues against it. What set the Prophet Jeremiah apart from the other Prophets was his ability to embody the anger and disappointment of God and at the same time the fear and pain of the Jewish people. Abraham Joshua Heschel refers to this ability as Anthropopathy in his book, *The Prophets*. To experience the feelings of both God and Israel at once is a remarkable ability and a terrible burden. One of the places where Jeremiah most powerfully portrays these emotions is in the Book of Lamentations, which is attributed to the prophet. Jeremiah looks out over a destroyed Jerusalem as the people of Judea are carried away into the night of exile. His words embody the anger of God and the terror of the people in the manifestation of Jerusalem as a woman scorned. Jerusalem, that place where God and Israel literally made a home together, lies in ruins, as does the covenant. Jeremiah begins with a cry:

Eicha: A word that embodies the anguish of God and Israel at once.

אַיִכָּה יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד, הָעִיר רַבַּתִּי עַם--
 הִיְתָה, כְּאַלְמָנָה; רַבַּתִּי בְּגוֹיִם, שְׂרָתִי
 בְּמַדְיָנוֹת--הִיְתָה, לְמַס. {ס}

1 How doth the city sit solitary,
 that was full of people! How is she
 become as a widow! She that was
 great among the nations, and
 princess among the provinces,
 how is she become tributary! {S}

Eicha: The cry of Jeremiah came to mind on Wednesday night. I was invited, along with other leaders of the faith community, to a Zoom meeting called by representatives of the Mayor's Office. They announced that there was a video of the shooting of Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old shot by a Chicago Policeman.

The Mayor's Office was doing its best to get out front of the video. To do whatever it took to create a sense of calm. To do what it could to not have a repetition of the violence that took place this past summer.

I listened to Adam's family pastor and heard the heartbreak in his voice, in his portrayal of the Toledo family. There was also a discussion of the anguish of the policeman after the shooting, and the plight of a great American city awash in a sea of emotion, anger, fear, and outrage. Throughout the meeting, the words of Jeremiah kept repeating themselves in my mind:

אַיִכָּה יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד, הָעִיר רַבַּתִּי עַם--
 הִיְתָה, כְּאַלְמָנָה; רַבַּתִּי בְּגוֹיִם, שְׂרָתִי
 בְּמַדְיָנוֹת--הִיְתָה, לְמַס. {ס}

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I tried to prepare myself to watch the video, but I didn't really know how to ready myself for the shooting of a 13-year-old. The jostling of the screen, the shouts to *Stop, put your hands up*, seeing the young man turn around with his hands up, and hearing the gunfire. I was unprepared for the tears in my eyes as I watched, and then saw the policeman sitting on

the curb, clearly traumatized by what had happened. My mind raced to other videos that we have seen more recently. The killing of Duante Wright and the anguished cry of the officer who thought she was using a taser. And, of course, the killing of George Floyd and those excruciating 9 ½ minutes of hearing him cry *I can't breathe* with the knee of a policeman on his neck.

As I sat in horror and revulsion, other words came to me from Eicha. Jeremiah continued to speak to me from Lamentations:

“For these things do I weep;
my eyes, my eyes run down with water,
because the One who comforts me, who revives my spirit, is far from
me;
my children are desolate . . .
(Lamentations 1:16)

טז על-אֵלֶּה אָנֹכִי בּוֹכֶיָה, עֵינַי עֵינַי יִרְדּוּ מֵיַם--כִּי-רַחֵם מִמֶּנִּי מְנַחֵם, מְשִׁיב נְפָשַׁי;
הֵיוּ בְנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים, כִּי גִבֹר אֹיֵב. {ס}

I am privileged to be part of a study group of Black and Jewish clergy from around the country who study sacred texts, speak together of our past partnership, and work together to fight hate and racism. This morning, I will read from a statement that was produced by this group which focuses on that same verse from Lamentations:

“For these things do I weep;
my eyes, my eyes run down with water,
because the One who comforts me, who revives my spirit, is far from
me;
my children are desolate . . .
(Lamentations 1:16)

For these things do we weep:

- For the existential and justifiable fear that fills the heart of a young Black man pulled over by police;
- For the unconscious and unexamined anxiety that plagues the spirit of a white police officer who must pull over that young Black man for a minor traffic violation or an outstanding warrant, causing her to shoot too quickly or to inadvertently pull the trigger of the wrong gun;
- For the callous disregard for life that enables one man to place a knee on another man's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, until the breath of life finally departs from that man's prone and defenseless body;
- For the unfathomable, unnecessary, and utterly tragic loss of life of too many black and brown men, women, and children growing from the toxic roots of such senseless disregard;
- For the insidious tendrils of systemic racism that continue to wind through institutions in our society in ways that will, sadly, take decades or even generations to fully root out;
- For the countless families whose lives have been forever marred and destroyed by the systemic racism that is the Original Sin of our national birth;
- And finally, for this country, which has not yet fulfilled the lofty vision of its founders: To create a "more perfect Union," with justice, domestic tranquility, and the blessings of liberty for all.

We who weep are a group of Black and Jewish clergy who have spent the last two years studying sacred texts, seeing our own lives and the lives of our peoples refracted through the lenses of those texts. We are building and deepening our bonds of love and respect, exploring how together we might work toward building Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideal of the Beloved Community:

"The aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of non-violence is the creation of beloved community, so that when the battle

is over, a new relationship comes into being. The end is reconciliation. The end is redemption. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.”

(Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Power of Non-Violence” June 1957)

We long for the creation of that Beloved Community here, in this country. We long for an end to all forms of violence perpetrated against people because of the color of their skin. At this pivotal moment in our nation’s history, when far too many people of color have died at the hands of those who are entrusted to serve and protect, we—religious and spiritual leaders in the Black and Jewish communities—are compelled to speak out and call for a period of national soul-searching that will lead to an overhaul of our nation’s police policies and practices. We must not leave this important and necessary work to those within police departments and the unions that support them, nor can we leave it to local municipalities or city governments. This soul-searching and reformation must be undertaken at the national level, with federal oversight and a comprehensive system of accountability. As German Lopez writes in his article, “How to Reform American Police, According to Experts” (Vox, June 1, 2020), these steps would include addressing racial biases, limiting use of force, and holding police accountable for their actions—whether those actions are committed intentionally or by “mistake.”

My friends, let us dare to imagine what law enforcement could and should look like in the Beloved Community that Dr. King envisioned, and then let us work together to build and implement that vision. Anything less will be tantamount to our standing by as more innocent blood is shed, as too many more people of color continue to be killed, and too many more families are destroyed along the way. Let us all dare to imagine an America where there is truly “justice for all”, and then commit to the work that will bring us closer to realizing that beloved community.

Until that day comes, let us not turn away or change the channel; let us not shirk our responsibility to be part of the solution. Rather, let us continue to stand with Jeremiah and do what he did, to hear the cry of Eicha, the pain of all who suffer: the victims, their families, their communities. Let us also hear the concerns of those in law enforcement as well as their families, and the challenges they face in the midst of the need for reform. Let us remember, amid the chaos in which we live, that Jeremiah never lost faith in who we are as people created in the image of God, who we could yet be, and what together We The People could yet accomplish.

א איכה ישבה בדד, העיר רבתי עם--
היתה, כאלמנה; רבתי בגוים, שרתי
במדינות--היתה, למס. {ס}

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