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“If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem”¹

Michael K. Cantwell

Psalm 137 is set during the Babylonian exile, following the deportation of the ancient Israelites to Babylon in the wake of Nebuchadnezzar II’s levelling of Jerusalem and destruction of the first temple.

Its most well-known verses impose on the reader a duty of remembrance and have been repeated through the millennia of the Jewish diaspora before the founding of Israel.

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember thee not; if I set not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy.

The mood changes immediately thereafter as in the next verse, as sorrow gives way to calls for vengeance:

Remember, O LORD, against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem; who said: 'Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.'

The final two verses, far less well known than the rest of psalm, viscerally celebrate the form that vengeance will take:

O daughter of Babylon, that art to be destroyed;
happy shall he be, that repayeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock.

Psalm 137 is rarely read to the end. In the words of a commentator who cited the psalm in a sermon delivered in the aftermath of 9/11,

We have moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocence. We want revenge.

That, he concluded, “is a dangerous place to be.” And yet it is a place humanity has inhabited through much of history. Hindus versus Muslims, Croats versus Serbs, Armenians versus Azerbaijanians, Sunnis versus Shia, Palestinians versus Israelis. It is the unending legacy of twin scourges of religion and nationalism.

Yet nothing in the history of this conflict can justify Hamas’s murderous attack, which President Biden trenchantly and accurately condemned as an act of “pure, unadulterated evil.”

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), October 2023, page 1.

Breaking the Silence is a group of Israeli veterans that bear witness to “the reality of life in the Occupied Territories.” They publicize the abuses suffered by Palestinians but deny that these can justify the butchering of over 1200 civilians:

Those who find some kind of twisted theoretical logic in order to justify a massacre are not fighting for human rights, and push the goal of liberation further out of reach.

As Israel prepares to invade Gaza. Tom Friedman rightly [warns](#) her about the consequences:

There will be no one to extract Israel and no one to help Israel pay the cost of caring for more than two million Gazans — not if Israel is run by a government that thinks, and acts, as if it can justifiably exact its revenge on Hamas while unjustifiably building an apartheidlike society run by Jewish supremacists in the West Bank. That is a completely incoherent policy.”