

Psalm 137 expresses powerfully the depth of grief and trauma felt by the Judean exiles to Babylon: “By the waters there we hung up our lyres, for our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” It’s almost a howl of despair and refusal and yet, ironically, it *is* now a song of Zion. It’s a song about Zion in exile. But the hymns that have been written based on Psalm 137 always stop short of using its last lines: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

That’s where you realize that these Judeans are not just draping themselves glumly on the riverbank and grieving picturesquely; they are deranged with grief and anger. They are ready to murder small children. The loss of their home and the God of their home doesn’t make them sad. It devastates them. The Babylonian Exile *was* a national trauma for the Judeans; it necessitated radical changes in the ways they thought about God and their relationship to God—but changes like that come about because of more concrete losses: the losses of one’s own children, perhaps, the loss of one’s neighborhood and way of making a living, the loss of the future that one had expected. Our friend Sadagat has said that being refugees here made them feel like babies again, in the sense that they were helpless and that all their education and accomplishments back home were useless in this new place. That kind of personal trauma, we’ve discovered, is transmitted over generations so that, for instance, the pernicious alcoholism among First Nations can be traced to collective trauma from displacement and violation of their cultures, which took

place before the births of the individuals who are now suffering.

In light of what we know about the disruptive effects of exile, Jeremiah's words to the people in Babylon are deeply poignant. He has been warning since before the Exile that such a thing could happen, and now it is happening. Some people are in exile already, while some, including him, are still in Jerusalem at this writing. There is no consensus on what is likely to happen next or what the best way would be to live into this future. In fact, in the previous chapter, Jeremiah had disputed sharply with another prophet, Hananiah, who was encouraging everyone to keep their spirits up because he didn't think this whole dispute with Babylon would last more than a couple years. Hananiah says, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back . . . King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." Jeremiah took exception to this sunny view of the future, and literally put on a big heavy yoke and walked around Jerusalem making a spectacle of himself to publicize his disagreement with Hananiah. "Amen!" he said. "May the Lord do so, but . . . when the word of [a] prophet comes true, *then* it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet." Hananiah got really irritated and broke the yoke off of Jeremiah, but Jeremiah told him, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord. And that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

Jeremiah's unwelcome, unpalatable advice to the exiles is to embrace Babylon. Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the produce. Start families. *And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.* Seek the welfare of Babylon, that hateful people! And settle in to do so for seventy years, because this is not going to be over in your lifetime. That cannot have made Jeremiah popular. Who wants to hear that kind of advice? But I think that adaptation and adoption of the new community reduced the collective trauma and even widened the people's vision of who God loves. Seeking the welfare of Babylon, they had to find what was lovable in Babylon, and discover their kinship with the Babylonians. Much like the little slave girl in last week's play, the Judeans' capacity to have compassion for the neighbors they'd never wanted turned out to be life-giving.

Recently in my ethics class we were discussing Kant's idea of retributive justice, which is essentially payback. If you are a rational adult and you murder someone, you should be executed. What you deal out, you get. Students tend to like this idea, even the gentle-natured ones, because it seems logical. We discussed some of the problems with retributive justice, but still they seemed pretty satisfied with it. After class, though (and why is it always *after* class?), a student from Rwanda came up and said, you know, the problem with an eye for an eye is that if we applied this principle in my country, it would be another bloodbath. Rwanda was racked by a horrendous genocide in the 1990s, and countless ordinary citizens killed their own neighbors. My student said, "This is not something you can forget. I have seen it, although I was only three, but you cannot forget such a thing."

He told me about gacaca courts, which I'd never heard of before. This is an indigenous Rwandan mechanism used to resolve conflict at the grassroots level through dialogue and community justice. Literally, *gacaca* means "justice on the grass," because you'd go outside and sit on the grass in public to settle your disputes, which usually had to do with land use rights, cattle ownership, marriage, inheritance rights and petty theft. The system is based on voluntary confessions and apologies by wrongdoers. The courts were revived and amplified after the 1994 genocide when over 800,000 Rwandans were killed and two million fled the country. The fundamental aspect of post-genocide Rwandan society and politics has been the need for reconciliation to mollify the ethnic tensions characterizing Rwandan society—the need to heal the collective trauma.

There are problems with the gacaca courts; they're no panacea. But in a society with as staggering a collective wound as Rwanda, ordinary criminal proceedings are clearly inadequate as a way to restore wholeness. And, as my student points out, the numbers are so great that any criminal penalty, even-handedly applied, would further damage the population. What this mechanism does, to the extent possible, is encourage people who have damaged and been damaged to seek the welfare of their enemy neighbors and thus find reconciliation.

There is a fundamental injustice in Jeremiah in putting the burden of neighborliness on the people who have been dislocated. What about the Babylonians, I want to know. What about those who have done the harm, who have more resources to bring? Jeremiah does not address this and, quite frankly, he doesn't have any jurisdiction over the Babylonians. All he can influence are the

Judean exiles. What he tells them is that they have a kind of spiritual power that the Babylonians can't take from them—the power of love, of being able to step outside of oneself, the power to widen their sense of who belongs to God.

There are ways in which even we non-refugees can feel like exiles in a strange land. Many of us are not digital natives, and find our grasp on adulthood slipping as more and more tasks are digitized. We are grounded in a concept of the common good that seems to have been hollowed out since the 1970s, so that our public discourse is endlessly frustrating. The forms of church that have been developing over the last several hundred years are collapsing, along with a wealth of hymnody that I for one will still have emblazoned in my memory long after all other memory has faded. I could go on, but what for? We know the nature of our exile. It ain't right, but it's there.

Jeremiah's words open up a sense of possibility, hard as it is to give it shape. We should not define "home" too narrowly. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." The fact is that the Judean community in Babylon thrived. The Babylonian Talmud, written by scholars who stayed rather than return to Jerusalem, is one of the great works of Judaism. The Jewish Diaspora, at first a necessity and a tragedy, actually did become a gift to the world and life-giving to Jews. In Jeremiah's tough love message of 70 years' exile I find more hope than I would have found in Hananiah's empty optimism. "When you search for me, you will find me, . . . says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the

places where I have driven you, . . . and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” In widening our community we heal trauma and make home.

God of hope,

How often have we found ourselves in exile, separated from your presence! Restore us, restore our sisters and brothers in exile, and let us find you when we seek you. Amen.