"Practice Corporeal Politics": Grief and Resistance in Our Time

hum first, chant to start

אֵיכָה ׀ יָשְׁבָה בָדָד הָעִיר רַבָּתִי עָם הָיְתָה כְּאַלְמָנָה רַבָּתִי בַגּוֹיִם שָׂרָתִי בַּמְּדִינוֹת הָיְתָה לָמַס׃

About tragedy, Anne Carson writes: "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief."[1] What we get from tragedy is catharsis for the large and small tragedies that have have played out in our own lives. We see ourselves, our friends, lovers, families experience horrible things. But they are not really us, not really our beloveds. We can move through the rocky terrain of rage, fear, and grief because the terribleness has been outsourced to characters playing out horrors on the stage. The separation just enough to hit us with what we've been holding back from ourselves: rage, fear, grief. Too much to bear, too much to let free on its own. It's not possible to live with the level of grief many of us hold for too long, so we make, and pursue, art.

The ancients knew this just as well. We know from plays in that tragic form, but we also know from other texts, biblical and otherwise. *Eichah*, the Hebrew name for the book of Lamentations, was written around the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th century BCE. Babylon came in, razed Jerusalem, and many Jews were forcibly removed to Babylonia. The city and temple laid in waste, everyone stunned into silence. The text itself is terrifying. A city bereft, surviving off of its remains. A people trying to make sense out of what was happening to them. It was written by Judeans who had remained in Judah after

[1] Anne Carson, "Tragedy: A Curious Art Form," in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York: New York Review, 2006), 7.

This is a performance art piece in the loose style of a sermon created for Macon Reed's installation, A Pressing Conference at BRIC Open Fest 27 April and Spring/Break Art Show on 9 March 2018 bringing together organizers and cultural workers based on Timothy Snyder's book On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century,[1] *published after Trump's election.*

the destruction—can you imagine, looking around and seeing your world laid bare, most of your people deported. Only rubble, grief, and conquest surrounding you.

The Temple was razed again in the year 70 by Rome, and rabbis writing four generations later built midrashim, a sort of devotional fan fic, out of *Eicha*. They couldn't help but to read the destruction of the Second Temple and their own continued lives under Roman rule into the text. *Eicha Rabbah* is a multi-layered meditation on destruction, exile, occupation, and survival. It is uncharacteristically wild, imaginative, expressive. Everyone mourns, even God. Everyone continues to try to find some reason this has all happened, but no reason emerges. The world is upside down. Even God is put in God's place. At one point, the matriarch Rachel scolds God for not having Their rage and jealousy in check. "I managed myself, God, and was not jealous of my sister Leah, and I'm just a human" she said. "But you are God. What do you even have to be jealous of?! Why can't you get yourself together? Look what you've done to my people. We are in exile, and you have let our enemies do what they want with us."[2] The rage is palpable. *Why* has this happened to us. This is the core meaning of *Eicha*. In Hebrew, it means *Why*, or *Where*. Both fit. *Why* did this happen? *Where* the hell were you, God? Or, for God: *Why* did this happen? *Where* the hell are you, my people? God's own grief exposed after the temple lies in empty rubble.

Another scene: Metatron the angel comes to God, seeing that God has been bereft for days. He falls in front of God and says: "God, I see you are in pain. Let me mourn for you, and you can stop crying." God yells back: "Fuck off, Metatron! What are you saying?! If you insist on this, I'm going to go somewhere you can't go. I will get as far from you as I can."[3] This feeling we know. When a well-meaning person tries to get too close to our grief: What the fuck do you know about my pain? Go away and leave me be. This failure of empathy fails to recognize the specificness of our pain, of the catastrophe we are living through. Fails to match witness to grief. Fails to allow grief to settle in, move through our body in its own time, to move towards catharsis, the release of all that pent up grief and rage. Catharsis

[2] Eicha Rabbah 1:1, Petichta 24
[3] *ibid.*

comes not from taking someone's apocalypse off their hands, but by coming close to someone else's apocalypse and joining ours to theirs.

Every summer, the Jewish liturgical calendar moves us through the Three Weeks of Sorrow to Tisha b'Av, the day we remember the destruction of both temples, and a wake of other apocalypses that have happened around this date since: the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, from Spain in 1492; formal approval given for the Final Solution given on Tisha b'Av in 1941; the beginning of mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka in 1942. Today, people add present destructions that occur around Tisha b'Av to the litany we already grieve: the Gaza war in 2014, in 2015 the shootings at Mother Emanuel AME and the fires set on black churches that summer. The calendar gives us a forced period of grieving, its makers understanding that grief is a core part of our lives, that the things that have brought us sorrow in the past will likely continue to bring sorrow, however dulled. And, I think, some recognition that by attending to the large-scale griefs over the apocalypses that have faced our own people, we afford ourselves the space and energy to collapse under the weight of our own personal apocalypses, even if just for a moment.

By the 8th century in Palestine, the practice of chanting Eicha on Tisha b'Av was codified in the Talmud.[4] The practice continues today in many ways. Generally, we fast, are solemn, we gather together to sit on the floor as we do when we are sitting shiva for loved ones, and we listen to Eicha chanted. We don't study, celebrate, listen to music, have sex, dance, cut our hair. We grieve, and reflect.

In my first years of being Jewish I couldn't stand this day. The temple, what does it mean to us now, I said. It is not the point. The Temple is not the body of Judaism: we are. The state is not the body of Judaism: we are. All we have is the Jewish worlds we make wherever and whenever we are. Many years later, now, Tisha b'Av is a day closest to my heart. Not for the destruction of the Temple: I still believe the same things. No. Tisha b'Av captured me

[4] Masechet Soferim 18:5

because it makes us come together in one communal body to grieve together about the apocalypses of the past. But it does that through spectacle, through tragedy.

The stage is set as we sit on the floor in darkness, candles softly lighting the room. As the lines of Eicha are chanted over the community people read along, or are swept away with its wails: {{*chant*}}

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בָּכוֹ תִבְכֶּה בַּלַּיְלָה וְדִמְעָתָהּ עַל לֶחֱיָהּ אֵין־לָהּ מְנַחֵם מִכָּל־אֹהֲבֶיהָ כָּל־רֵעֶיהָ
בָּגְדוּ בָהּ הָיוּ לָהּ לְאֹיְבִים:
גָּלְתָה יְהוּדָה מֵעֹנִי וּמֵרֹב עֲבֹדָה הִיא יָשְׁבָה בַגּוֹיִם לֹא מָצְאָה מָנוֹחַ כָּל־רֹדְפֶיהָ
הִשִּׂיגוּהָ בֵּין הַמְּצָרִים:

The text is horrifying, violent, relentless. Later, it reads:

> See, God, and behold, who You have done this to! Woe! Women eat their own fruit, their own newborns! Woe! Priest and prophet are slain in God's sanctuary! Both young and old lie flat in the streets; my maidens and youth. All dead by sword.[5]

How to even begin making sense out of this, a world so desolate, where women are so hungry they are lead to eat their newborns. This world, so wildly broken. These characters, our own ancestors, they become real to us, visceral. We feel their anguish, not taking it from them, but feeling it with them. We become intimate with them as they live through this apocalypse, as we stand by and watch it. This intimacy that plays out through tragedy creates a connection to the large and small destructions in our own lives. Their apocalypses come alive. The griefs and apocalypses of our own histories rise up to meet them. Tisha b'Av works because we need to move that grief around in our bodies. We cannot sit with it alone.

This is true for us all. We live in the wakes of apocalypses. We face them, we fear them, we fight against them, we remember them. In order to keep on living, keep on loving, keep on fighting, we have to move the grief through our bodies. This terrifying world, in which

[5] Eicha 2:20-21

human bodies are disposed of in every imaginable way—we cannot live in this world without grieving it. And we certainly cannot resist the destructions of this world if we don't make ourselves physically, bodily present to the reality of what living in this world means. Living does not just mean dying in the "everyone dies" way. Living means constant proximity to destruction and death at every corner, and living on in spite of it. Finding ways to celebrate, to create, to find joy, to inhabit anger, to laugh, to have sex, to lose ourselves—all in spite of death and destruction. We can try to avoid or ignore our grief and rage, yes. But catharsis, the embodied experience of processing through grief and rage, is the key to being fully present in our own lives. To soar as much as we crash.

We live in these miraculous, vulnerable bodies. In this miraculous, vulnerable, terrifying world. To bear our way through it, to live and to resist, we must inhabit the whole of ourselves. Timothy Snyder writes, in *On Tyranny*:

> **Practice corporeal politics.** Power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside. Put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them.[6]

Corporeal politics are not just about marching in the streets, getting your body in the way of glory and fun, not just about making friends. Not even just about righteous anger or revolutionary self care. Corporeal politics are about everything—inhabiting the entire range of human emotion in your one tiny human body. And then, when we come together, experiencing the miracle of human emotion shared among one collective, corporate body. This corporately embodied feeling of joy or love, we might call that communion. Of sadness and rage, that too, is communion. At their best, this is what communal catharsis rituals like Tisha b'Av do. They provide an opportunity for emotive and embodied connection that fights against the lull of complacency and fear. If "power wants your body softening in its chair, lulled to sleep by your cell phones," it surely doesn't want you to experience joy, much less rage and grief.

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[6] Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Crown, 2017), 83.

Our religious traditions offer us more than balm for the hard times. They offer us opportunities for living into our corporeal selves, individually and collectively. Holiday cycles give structure for meaning-making, mourning, celebration. They put our strong and frail human bodies in contact with each other, ask that we either eat our fill or fast in earnest, either way making us contend with the reality of the body and its needs. Ask that we stay up all night, party until we can't till which way is up and which way is down. Ask that we sit low together, grieving a destruction 2400 years old because the terror that made that destruction--colonization, exile, and human domination--continues still today. Sometimes by our own hands.

The resistance our time calls for is vast. We need imagination beyond imagination, joy beyond joy, fight beyond fight, grief beyond grief. What will unlock your body to what lies beyond it? Not just for your individual self, but for us all. Each of us singular, one body with with its wracking sobs and ecstatic sighs and raucous laughter and ferocious yells. Each community a corporate, corporeal body, bringing out the same—bodies en masse, crying, sighing, laughing, roaring. That is resistance. That is what they are afraid of. Our people, rising up together as one body, one voice, in protest, in song, in joy, in lament. We would be unstoppable.