

**The Description of the Crying God in Rabbinic Literature:  
Literary, Cultural and Ideological Aspects.**

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By

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## Abstract

My dissertation addresses descriptions of the weeping God in rabbinic literature. Forty-seven midrashic texts featuring such descriptions are included in this survey, ranging from Tannaitic sources to later midrashic works. Forty of these sources describe weeping in the wake of the Destruction of the Temple and Israel's exile, and two of these further mention divine weeping on earlier occasions (Adam's sin and his banishment from the Garden of Eden, the annihilation of the world at the time of the Flood, and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea). Four teachings describe God weeping in identification with the troubles of His people, without any direct connection to the Destruction: here the weeping arises from the deeds of the wicked, or from difficulties and barriers to Torah study amongst the Jewish people. Three of the teachings describe God weeping over the death of Moses. This study reviews this corpus, analyzing the central texts philologically, literarily and ideologically, I will further seek to understand the processes leading to the creation of these texts, to analyze the characteristics of their descriptions of God, and to understand their diachronic development.

The introduction presents the dissertation topic and surveys existing research on related topics in rabbinic literature, Jewish history, and rabbinic thought. This is followed by discussion of different theories that explain the phenomenon of weeping from physiological, psychological and cultural perspectives. Weeping is perceived as a human action expressing emotions such as sadness, frustration, protest, and – in some instances – joy. We find that weeping also conveys cultural messages pertaining to gender, social status, and cultural ceremonies, and that these messages vary in different eras and in different cultures. Following survey of various psychological theories concerning weeping, I will expand on Bowlby's attachment theory and discuss its contribution to understanding the phenomenon of weeping. According to this theory, weeping is a communicative act both within the weeper himself and towards others. Weeping is a common, acceptable, and healthy element in the process of coping with significant loss. Different stages of weeping may be discerned, reflecting the progression of the mourning process. The initial stage involves weeping in protest, often accompanied by a note of violence. Later stages of weeping, stemming from coming to terms with the loss, generally express despair and sadness, and their tone is more subdued. By the end of the processing of his mourning, the mourner usually reaches a stage of reconciliation. In contrast, in cases where there is no possibility of weeping, whether because of a person's difficulty in communicating with himself, or because he lacks someone who can respond to his weeping with empathy, the mourner may suffer acute psychological distress, because weeping itself is liberating; it gives expression to his feelings and facilitates a responsive and accepting confrontation. The perception of weeping as a communicative act is central to our approach of the corpus of midrashic teachings that we examine here, since God's quest for consolation, the inability of the angels to understand His weeping, and God's sharing in the weeping of His people, are among the most salient characteristics of these sources.

The introduction also addresses the issue of gender and of its relation to weeping in changing cultures. Inasmuch as the midrashim discussed here present a masculine

image of God, awareness of this cultural issue may contribute to our understanding of the sources and their ideological role.

The **first section of the dissertation** deals with the period antecedent to rabbinic literature, examining depictions of weeping deities in ancient cultures, as well as descriptions of God weeping in the biblical text.

**The first chapter** surveys portrayals of weeping deities in mythological literature throughout Mesopotamia, Sumer and Canaan; in Greek literature from the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.; in the literary works of Homer, Sophocles and Euripides; and in the philosophical works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. I will further discuss the attitude towards weeping deities in the Greco-Roman culture in the writings of Ovid, Seneca, Livy and Tacitus, and in the writings of the Church fathers in the early period of Christianity.

The texts presented in this chapter demonstrate a shift in the ways that weeping deities are portrayed in different cultures and different periods. In ancient works, gods are portrayed with a broad range of emotions that includes weeping and mourning. In some instances, not only is their weeping not presented as negative or embarrassing, but it is perceived as testimony to the maturity and nobility of the god or hero in question. In the works of the Greek philosophers, we find reservations concerning these descriptions of weeping. They argue that it is improper for a deity to weep, since this testifies to weakness and deficiency. Accordingly, they accommodate descriptions of deities weeping by reading them metaphorically rather than literally. The Roman Empire increasingly resisted descriptions of deities weeping, and there is evidence of efforts during this period to eradicate any indication of emotion among the gods. Not only do Roman gods not weep; they do not express much emotion at all, to the point of lacking any emotional depth. In the early period of Christianity, as part of the battle against paganism, portrayals of weeping on the part of the deities were presented as proof that they were not real, and texts that included such descriptions were ridiculed and attacked.

The **second chapter** is devoted to the Bible. Here there is almost no mention of God weeping: the Pentateuch contains verses that mention Divine sadness or anger, but no outright weeping. In the books of the Prophets and the Five Scrolls, there are one or two verses that explicitly mention God weeping. Additionally, classical exegesis and modern scholarship noted additional instances where it is unclear whether the text attributes weeping to the prophet or to God Himself. In any event, the vast majority of verses interpreted in rabbinic teachings as describing Divine weeping do not, interpreted literally, attribute weeping to God, but rather to “the daughter of Zion”(Israel) or to the prophet.

The **second section** of the dissertation addresses fifteen central midrashic texts of this corpus, analyzing their philological, literary, cultural and ideological aspects. The first five chapters in this section – **chapters 3-7** – each deal with one text, analyzing all its variants, synchronically and diachronically, and discussing the role of God’s weeping within the narrative.

**Chapter 8** examines six sources that comprise a series of stories in Eikha Rabba, all sharing the same concluding line: “And the Divine spirit cried out and said, For these I weep”. Even though this conclusion appears to be a latter addendum, it has significance for an understanding of the series of stories in its entirety, as I shall demonstrate.

The final chapter in this section, **chapter 9**, is devoted to sources that mention God’s weeping in the wake of Moses’ death. These sources, in all their variants, reflect an interesting development in the description of God’s weeping: in earlier sources, including some from the Tannaitic period, God’s weeping is presented as arising from His own mourning over Moses’ death. Later parallels attempt to distance themselves from this simplistic understanding, viewing God’s weeping as an expression of concern for the Jewish People which is now bereft of Moses’ leadership.

The **third section** of the dissertation presents general conclusions and an overview of the phenomenon of God weeping in rabbinic literature. This section comprises five chapters. **Chapter 10** seeks to understand God’s character as depicted in the collection



of teachings. The descriptions of weeping are overwhelmingly attributed to God Himself, using the appellation “the Holy One, blessed be He”, and there are only a few exceptional instances where feminine appellations are used (“the Divine Presence” [*Shekhina*], a “Heavenly voice” [*Bat-Kol*], or the “holy spirit” [*Ruah ha-Kodesh*]). The descriptions of God weeping are very human, expressing weakness and helplessness, as well as empathy, compassion and gentleness. This singular depiction of the divine reaction to the destruction of the Temple, contrasts sharply with biblical portrayals of a vengeful God Who angrily brings destruction upon His people. This contrast reflects a shift in the way God’s character is conceived. Sources portraying a weeping God, reflecting His identification with His people and His participation in their affliction, reflect the mood of the Sages – or of the nation – during this historic period of crisis and rebuilding. The descriptions of God identifying and suffering with His people also lead the reader through a process of identification with and compassion for God, as it were, countering the feelings of anger or alienation, which appear to have been dominant in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. A prominent characteristic of the sources regarding divine weeping is the description of His loneliness, His search for consolation, which he fails to receive among the angels, motivating Him to seek consolation among humans, “who know how to cry”, in the language of the midrash.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding consolation, the corpus of teachings offers a wide range of attitudes, reflecting a complex process. At first there seems to be no possibility of consoling God after the Destruction. By contrast other sources express a cry from God Himself, seeking partners in His sorrow as a way of alleviating His loneliness. Here the depiction of God serves as a mirror image illuminating the world of the creators of the homilies. The quest for consolation and connection attributed to God expresses the need of Israel and the Sages for consolation, and their cry to ease their pain to extricate themselves from gloomy isolation. The paradox inherent in the description of God in these sources is the same paradox faced by the Sages in view of the Destruction – on the one hand, the horrors of the Destruction including death, disintegration, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Eikha Rabba petihta 24, Buber edition, p. 30; Eikha Zuta, Buber edition, p. 72.

lack of any possibility of rehabilitation; on the other hand, the search for compassion and the desire to be comforted, to escape abandonment and reestablish the connection to God.

Three chapters in this section deal with diachronic aspects of the descriptions of God's weeping: the reasons for the weeping; the descriptions of God weeping in the Babylonian Talmud; and the characteristics of the weeping God in later midrashic sources.

**Chapter 11** addresses the reasons for the weeping. While the great majority of our corpus identifies the destruction of the Temple as the reason for God's weeping, the question may still be asked: What is it in the Destruction that causes God to weep? An overall view of the sources shows that in the earlier teachings, what stands out most prominently is the sense that the Destruction is not only a tremendous blow to Israel, but also a blow to God Himself. In some instances it is depicted as a physical blow to God's House, which has been destroyed, such that "I no longer have a dwelling in the world",<sup>2</sup> while in other instances it is depicted as a psychological blow, with God described as a father bereaved of his children and devastated by sorrow and longing. In these teachings God weeps over His own agony caused by the Destruction. The later sources, along with those found in the Babylonian Talmud, generally describe God as weeping out of identification and empathy for the suffering of His people, rather than as arising from His own affliction.

**Chapter 12** examines descriptions of God weeping in the Babylonian Talmud. Despite the vast scope of this work, there are only four such instances. The Babylonian Talmud differs from the parallel midrashic literature from the Land of Israel not only regarding the number of references, but also in regard to the reasons for the weeping. Whereas God's weeping in works redacted in the Land of Israel is occasioned mainly by the destruction of the Temple, the Babylonian Talmud notes additional reasons, including identification with the Jewish People's troubles in every generation, and one source

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<sup>2</sup> Eikha Rabba petihta 24, Buber edition, p. 13; Eikha Zuta 26, Buber edition, p. 71.

goes so far as to depict God weeping daily (!) over obstacles that hinder Jews in their study of Torah. The pattern emerging from the convergence of these features is familiar to us from many studies indicating the shift in perception amongst Babylonian Sages regarding the destruction of the Temple and the focus on the centrality of Torah study in the Babylonian Jewish center.

**Chapter 13** reviews portrayals of God weeping in later midrashic sources. While each of the later works is discussed separately, I also attempt to illustrate a trend common to all of them. The later midrashic sources regarding God weeping are marked, on one hand, by broader and more intense descriptions of the expressions of weeping, while attempting, on the other hand, to avoid presenting God's weeping as arising from weakness, deficiency or vulnerability on His part. Many of these texts describe God weeping out of identification with and compassion for His people and concern for their welfare, rather than out of His own sorrow. Some of the later midrashim also treat God's weeping as a negative phenomenon – a perception not found in earlier sources. Some midrashim even accuse Israel of having caused God to weep through their sins, thereby weakening and dishonoring Him. Different explanations might be offered for these phenomena, and it is possible that different factors and influences converge here. Controversies over anthropomorphic descriptions of God weeping are known to us from different time periods and cultural settings, including Christian attacks on such portrayals, as well as Karaite claims that depictions of this kind dishonor God. The changes in the descriptions of God weeping may be a reaction to these controversies.

Alternately, the explanation for the shift might be rooted not in polemics from without, but rather in the shifting attitudes to the destruction of the Temple. The descriptions of God weeping in relation to the destruction of the Temple testify to the profound and acute crisis faced by the authors of these earlier sources. We may reasonably assume that geographic and temporal distance from the events dulled the overwhelming sharpness of this pain. The mood in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Land of Israel, where the destruction of the Temple was still strongly evident as part of the day-to-day reality, differed from the situation in Babylon during the redaction of the Talmud, and from conditions in other lands at yet later times (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries).

In addition to all of the above, the changing descriptions of God weeping may testify to cultural shifts unrelated to either the national situation or religious polemics. Despite the time gap between the periods we are addressing here and the ancient times addressed in the first chapter of the dissertation; we may nevertheless discern parallels between the cultural processes in these two periods. In both instances the earlier sources describe God weeping out of His own personal sorrow, representing the richness and depth of His character, without any negative or critical connotations, of The later sources in both periods attempt to distance themselves from a literal understanding of God weeping, due to a sense that it is not befitting for God to weep.

The final chapter, **chapter 14**, addresses the question of anthropomorphism, which arises forcefully from this assortment of texts. Scholars debate how the Sages understood anthropomorphic expressions in their literature. Divine weeping would appear to be the most complex and controversial of all anthropomorphisms, since it not only attributes to God human qualities, but also describes Him in a state of helplessness, weakness, and failure. Some of the sources attempt to mitigate these implications, especially in sources that portray God Himself as suffering a personal blow, some of which (employ qualifying expressions such as “as it were”, or “if the idea did not appear in writing, it would be impossible to utter it” .Nevertheless, the portrayals have a power of their own that defies such mitigation. The moment these teachings appeared and were assimilated within rabbinic literature, the idea of vulnerability and deficiency became part of the perception of God: the destruction had left even Him broken and in need of compassion and consolation.

The **conclusion** presents an overview of our findings regarding the characteristics of the weeping God in rabbinic literature, and the literary, ideological, and diachronic ramifications of these sources. An overall view of the descriptions of God weeping reveal show God’s character is presented as sensitive, vulnerable, lonely, and hungry for compassion and consolation. The deployment by the Sages of this trope, despite its inherent theological difficulty, promotes a new perception of God, attempting to transform His image as angry, punishing, and even violent into one that is softer, more vulnerable and sensitive. At this point in history, the nation might have felt anger

towards God in the wake of the Destruction and its attendant physical and spiritual suffering, and might have interpreted this experience as abandonment and severance. The sages acted to transform God's image. By describing Him as weeping, they portray Him in light of human experience, thereby also transforming the feelings of the readers and listeners and causing them to feel empathy and even compassion towards God. In this sense, we propose that these teachings provided a response for questions arising within the Jewish faith itself, more than a response to external controversies and claims of God's abandonment of His people. The teachings represent fascinating testimony to the religious world of the Sages, the anguish of their crisis and the forces of rebuilding and rehabilitation following the destruction of the Temple and the attendant national and religious catastrophe.

The description of God weeping, seeking empathy and solace, provides a vantage point for comprehending the lives, travails, and world-view of the Sages during critical years in the molding of the nation's culture, when and they sought to cope with the national and religious crisis of the destruction of the Temple.