

# Psalm 137 - The Lament of Jerusalem

by Mr. Ronald Benun

Of the 150 psalms, Psalm 137 best fits the category of a lament. The psalmist describes the profound grieving of the Babylonian exiles over Jerusalem and their intense longing for it. In this paper we will demonstrate how the psalmist uses various literary devices to embed these themes in virtually every syllable of the psalm's 84 words. The net result reflects the all-encompassing despair and sorrow of the sensitive segment of the nation in exile.

## Location of Psalm 137 in Tehillim

At first glance, Psalm 137 appears out of place with the psalms that precede it. Psalm 137 is placed towards the end of the fifth book of Psalms. Prior to Psalm 137 the general tone of book five is celebratory. The following is a brief outline of the celebratory psalms that precede Psalm 137 in book 5:

1. Book 5 opens with Psalm 107 in which the psalmist praises G-d for his kindness to Man. It opens with the statement - **הָדָו לַיהוָה כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**, followed by the repeated refrain of - **יִדְוֶה לַיהוָה חַסְדּוֹ** וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם. The psalm concludes with the phrase - **וַיִּתְּבוּנְנוּ חַסְדֵי יְהוָה** - once more referring to the opening "**כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**".
2. Psalms 113 -118, more commonly known as the **הַלֵּל**, is a running praise of G-d which also opens and closes its last psalm with the "**כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ**" statement. This **כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ** statement envelopes Psalms 107 - 118.
3. Psalm 119 is a celebratory acrostic that contains 8 verses for each letter of the alphabet.

4. Psalms 120 – 134, sometimes referred to as the Psalms of the return, consist of the 15 celebratory שירי המעלות.
5. Psalms 135-136 praise G-d for the great miracles he did for the nation during the exodus, culminating in 26 repetitions of “כִּי לְעוֹלָם חִסְדּוֹ”. These final כִּי לְעוֹלָם חִסְדּוֹ repetitions create an envelope around the Psalm 107-136 block, as 107 opened with “כִּי לְעוֹלָם חִסְדּוֹ”.

Directly following this intense burst of praise, the psalmist turns to the concluding eight Psalms of Tehillim proper.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137 is the first of these eight psalms, and instead of continuing the praise, he is forced to confront his current reality. He is in exile, the nation is in exile, and the days of rejoicing in Jerusalem have become a mere memory. Instead of celebrating, he grieves - lamenting the loss of Jerusalem and the victory of Israel's enemies.

## Structure

Psalm 137 consists of 3 clearly delineated sections:

### Section 1

- (א) על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם בכינו בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן :  
 (ב) על עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ כְּנְרוֹתֵינוּ :  
 (ג) כִּי שָׁם שָׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דַּבְּרֵי שִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן :  
 (ד) אֵיךְ נָשִׁיר אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר :

In this section, the psalmist describes the nation that has been exiled to Babylon; they sit by the river, weeping and remembering Zion. They discard their musical instruments

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<sup>1</sup> Pss. 137-145 serve as the conclusion to the Book of Psalms, while the final five psalms (Pss. 146-150) function as the coda or grand finale to Tehillim.

as they can no longer play them; they can no longer be joyous without Jerusalem. Verse 3 continues with an account of the captors asking the exiled nation (possibly with intention to torment), to “sing to us one of the songs of Zion.” In verse 4 the nation responds with a rhetorical question, “How can we sing the song of YHVH on alien soil?” Throughout this section, the author is recalling events experienced by the nation and, accordingly, speaks in the plural form.

## Section 2

(ה) אִם אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי :  
 (ו) תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אִם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶכֶּי אִם לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל  
 רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי :

After recalling the exile in section one, the author shifts his mode of speech from first person plural (we) to first person singular (I), and personally addresses the city. In this section (vv. 5-6) he turns to Jerusalem itself and says “If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget.” The use of the word “forget” in conjunction with his right hand poetically captures the imagery of someone who has become incapacitated and is unable to act, as the right hand represents Man carrying out action. He has such an intense connection to Jerusalem that if he were ever to forget the city he would be incapacitated; his hand would “forget”. Similarly, the use of the phrase *תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אִם* (v.5) poetically captures the imagery of someone who cannot speak without mentioning Jerusalem. If he does not use his mouth to recall Jerusalem (*אֶזְכְּרֶכֶּי*), he will not be able to speak. The author is so profoundly attached to Jerusalem that he cannot talk or move without remembering the city.

### Section 3

(ז) זָכַר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד  
הִיְסוּד בָּהּ :  
(ח) בַּת בְּבֶל הַשְׂדֻדָּה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁישַׁלְמָם לְךָ אֵת גְּמוּלָךְ שֶׁגַּמְלָתָ לָנוּ :  
(ט) אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁיאֲחִזוּ וְנִפְצָ אֵת עַלְלִיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע :

In the third and final section of the psalm, the psalmist turns to G-d and prays for Him to remember the day of Jerusalem's destruction, how the nation of Edom cheered and encouraged the atrocities committed during that time; they cried "strip her, strip her to her very foundation!". The psalmist then turns to the nation's captor, Babylon, and pronounces a blessing upon he who makes them suffer the same carnage that they brought upon Israel.

One significant aspect of the structure of Psalm 137 is the placement of repeated key phrases and words. One such word in this psalm is the string of ע followed by ל forming the syllable על, which occurs at the end of each of the three sections delineated above. The first section ends with על אֲדַמַת נֶכָר (v. 4), the second section ends with על רֵאשׁ שְׂמִחָתִי (v. 6), and the third section ends with על עַלְלִיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע (v. 9). In each of the section endings, the על string is placed at the beginning of a 3-word clause that closes the verse and the section. These two letters do not only differentiate sections, they also serve as literary markers at the beginning and end of the Psalm; the Psalm begins with the words על נְהָרוֹת בְּבֶל (v. 1) and ends in v. 9 with the word סָלַע, i.e. על in reverse, enveloping the Psalm in the ע and ל sequence. (We will elaborate on this point later in the paper.)

Another word that occurs at key locations is the repeated זָכַר root. In the opening verse of section 1 the psalmist uses the זָכַר root when mournfully remembering Jerusalem in the words בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֵת צִיּוֹן (v. 1). In section 2 the זָכַר root occurs at the center of the section in v. 6 as אִם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֵכִי, also referring to the psalmist's resolve to remember the

city. In addition, the root שכח (forget), the antonym of זכר (remember), is used twice in the first verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, referring to the individual psalmist's resolve to never forget Jerusalem. Section 3 opens on the words זכר זָכַר אֶדוֹם הִנֵּה לִבִּי אֶדוֹם (v. 7) as part of the psalmist's prayer for G-d to remember the nation of Edom in connection with Jerusalem. The repetition of the root זכר found at key locations throughout the three sections not only corresponds to the thematic division, but also further accentuates the theme of this psalm, i.e. the intense emotional longing for Jerusalem.

### Psalm 137's Theme

As we have observed in our other studies on Psalms<sup>2</sup>, the center word or verse of a psalm is particularly significant, often its focal point. Center points can be determined based on the word counts or the verse counts of the text. In this psalm, both do indeed, have thematic connotations. The center verse of Psalm 137 is v. 5 - אִם אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי. The psalmist is so emotionally attached to Jerusalem, the city that is referred to in Psalms as full of G-d's compassion, justice and righteousness (cf. Ps. 48, 122), that he can never forget it.<sup>3</sup>

The center words of the entire Psalm are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחֻפִּי, "my tongue to my palate," which describe the psalmist's intense longing for the city. A closer look at these two metaphors reveals that they express the psalmist's message in a much

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ronald Benun, "Psalm 22: From the Depths of Divine Abandonment to the Pinnacle of Hopeful Vision." *Purim Reader*. (New York: Tebah, March 2008), p. 31

<sup>3</sup> This center verse is arranged in a chiasm where the center word יְרוּשָׁלַם is flanked with the שכח root immediately before and after it and with assonance at the opening and closing of the verse with אִם and יְמִינִי.

deeper manner than appears on the surface.<sup>4</sup> When he states “תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי” it appears that he means to say, “Jerusalem is so intrinsically ingrained in my writing of this composition that if I forget Jerusalem my right hand would forget its instructions and would not be able to write anything, since virtually every word contains a literary reference to Jerusalem,” as we will soon demonstrate.

Similarly, with the second metaphor, the psalmist seems to be saying, “If I am not conscious of Jerusalem when I speak, my tongue would be stuck to my palate and I wouldn’t be able to say anything, since every word I say contains a literal reference to Jerusalem. In addition, if Jerusalem is not foremost in my happy occasions my tongue would not be able to participate in the celebration because it’s impossible for me to sing of any joyous event without referring to Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup>

The word Jerusalem occurs three times in the psalm (vv. 5, 6, and 7) and its synonym Zion occurs twice (vv. 1 and 3). Combined, Psalm 137 has a higher occurrence of Jerusalem/Zion than any other psalm. The word Jerusalem is found at key junctures throughout the Psalm. As noted above, it is the central word in the center verse. In addition, in v. 6 it directly precedes the closing words of the second section - יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֵאשׁ שְׂמֵחָתַי. The word Jerusalem occurs at the exact center of the 7<sup>th</sup> verse; notably, the seventh word of the 13-word verse.<sup>6</sup> The word Zion is the closing

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<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of this metaphor, based on the preponderance of the ל, will be elaborated shortly.

<sup>5</sup> It should be recalled that in verse 3 the captors asked the Israelites to sing of the songs of Zion in joyous occasions.

<sup>6</sup> For the significance of this number see Rabbi Shamah’s article: *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. For the use of word counts see: Ronald Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 Article 5 (2006).

word of the verse both times it is used. The repeated reference of Jerusalem and Zion at specific locations throughout, appears to be another literary device used to underscore the Psalm's focus on Jerusalem.

Upon close examination, the reader notices that the text is filled with alliteration that focuses around the letter *ש*. The Psalm contains the phrases *שָׁם יִשְׁבְּנוּ* (v.1), *שָׁם שְׁאֵלוּנוּ שׁוֹבְיָנוּ* (v.3), *שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר יְרוּשָׁלַם* (v.3), *אֶשְׁכַּחךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח* (v.5), *עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתֵי אֲשֶׁרִי* (v.6), *הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שְׁיִשְׁלַם* (v.8), and *שְׁיֵאחֲזוּ* (v.9). The abundance of alliterative *ש*'s brings attention to the unusually high frequency of *ש* in this text. Of the 317 letters in Psalm 137, 26 of them are *ש*, comprising 8.2% of the letters. On average the letter *ש* makes up about 4% of the letters of Psalms. Thus, this Psalm contains double the amount of *ש*'s that the average psalm contains. Many scholars have commented on the abundance of alliterative *ש*'s in this Psalm, but most do not offer sufficient explanation as to why the letter *ש*, in particular, is alliterated so frequently. Another letter, *ל*, is also significantly alliterated in this Psalm in the phrases *עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם*, *יְרוּשָׁלַם*, *לֹא אֶעֱלֶה*, *לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִפִּי* (v.6), *שְׁגַמְלֶתְ לָנוּ*, *שְׁיִשְׁלַם לָךְ*, *שְׁגַמְלֶתְ לָךְ*, *עַל לְלִיךְ אֶל הַסֵּלַע* (v.9), which all bring attention to the letter *ל*. The letters *ש* and *ל* may be significant in this Psalm because together with the letter *מ*, they make up the word *שלם*. Though the pronunciation of Jerusalem is “*yerushalayim*,” it is never written in its full form (*מלא*) and always appears without the *י* (*yod*) as *יְרוּשָׁלַם*. The city of Jerusalem is clearly referred to as *שלם* in Psalm 76:3 where it states *וַיְהִי בְּשָׁלַם סוֹכּוֹ וַיִּמְעוֹנְתּוּ בְּצִיּוֹן*.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have pointed out that it is very likely that *שלם* was the original name of the city of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Note that in Psalm 76:3 there is ABBA parallelism where the words *סוֹכּוֹ* and *יִמְעוֹנְתּוּ* are synonymous as are *שָׁלַם* and *צִיּוֹן*.

<sup>8</sup> See *Olam HaTanakh*

Being that שלם is synonymous with Jerusalem, the placement of ש, ל, and מ in the text carries quite a bit of significance. As seen in table 1, one observes that these three letters occur in close proximity to one another several times in this text, and in some cases form the acronyms of word sequences. In verse 1, the word שלם can be found in the words שָׁמַל בְּבָבֶל; the ש, ל, and מ can be reorganized to spell שלם. In verse 3 שלם can be found in שָׁמַל שְׂאוֹנוֹ, וְתוֹלְדֵינוּ שְׂמִיחָה שִׁירֵינוּ מְשִׁיר. In fact the phrase שִׁירֵינוּ מְשִׁיר makes a glaring reference to Jerusalem in that it contains the letters י, ר, ו, and ש (ירוּשׁ), and is followed by a ל, and מ in the next two words, לְנוּ מְשִׁיר. The phrase שִׁיר מְשִׁיר in verse 4, and לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אֵם in verse 5 similarly each contain these three letters in sequence. Verse 5 contains an explicit mention of Jerusalem, and it is also followed by the words עַל רֹאשׁ, resulting in the ending letters (ספּי תבוּת) of “עַל רֹאשׁ” to be read backwards as שלם. Strikingly we find the actual word שלם in the word שְׁיִשְׁלֵם of verse 8<sup>9</sup>, shortly followed by the word שְׂגַמְלָתָהּ that contains another שלם reference! See Table 1:

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<sup>9</sup> Scholars have noted that the word שְׁיִשְׁלֵם in Ps. 137 may be alluding to Jerusalem (see e.g. Olam HaTanakh on Ps. 137).

Table 1

(1) על נהרות בבל שם שִׁבְנוּ גַם בְּכִינוּ  
בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן :

(2) על עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כְּנָרוֹתֵינוּ :

(3) כִּי שָׁם שָׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְבָרֵי שִׁיר  
וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן :

(4) אֵיךְ נָשִׁיר אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נְכָר :

(5) אִם אֲשַׁכַּחַךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי :

(6) תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לֶחֶפֶי אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶכִי אִם  
לֹא אַעֲלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי :

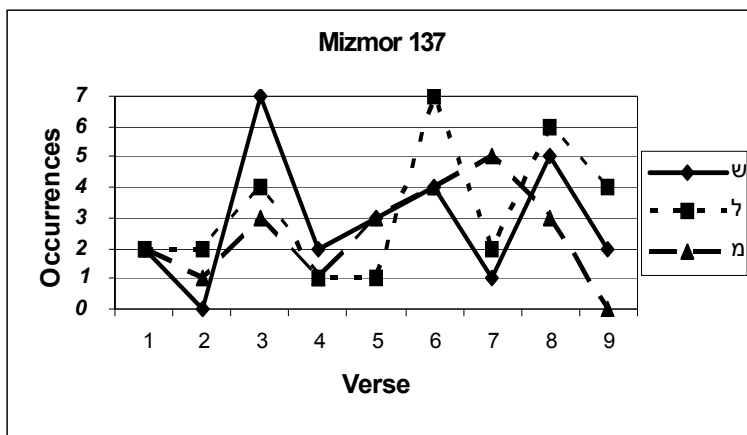
(7) זָכֹר יְהוָה לִבְנֵי אֲדוֹם אֶת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם  
הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הִסּוֹד בָּהּ :

(8) בֵּית בְּבֶל הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁשְׁלַם לָךְ אֶת  
גְּמוּלָךְ שְׂגַמְלַת לָנוּ :

(9) אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁיֵּאֲחִז וְנִפֹץ אֶת עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל  
הַסַּלַע :

The spelling out of Jerusalem throughout the psalm through meticulous placement of the letters  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  is amazing in and of itself. However, this feature is even more astonishing when analyzing another aspect of the letter clustering throughout the Psalm. Not only has the psalmist incorporated the name of Jerusalem into the individual words, overall the letters  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  are clustered in such a way that in the beginning of the Psalm there is a higher frequency of the letter  $\psi$  followed by a higher frequency of  $\text{ל}$ , followed finally by  $\text{מ}$ 's, with the effect that in a way the entire Psalm spells out the name of Jerusalem –  $\text{שלם}$ . In verse 3 the letter count of  $\psi$ 's in the Psalm reaches a high point with seven occurrences of the letter. In verse 6, the frequency of  $\text{ל}$ 's in the Psalm supersedes the  $\psi$ 's with seven occurrences. In verse 7 the letter  $\text{מ}$  occurs five times, the highest occurrence of the letter  $\text{מ}$  in a verse in Psalm 137, also superseding the  $\psi$ 's and  $\text{ל}$ 's in this verse. It is also noteworthy that in verse 7 the grand total occurrence of each individual letter  $\psi$ ,  $\text{ל}$ , and  $\text{מ}$  in the Psalm is exactly 19 times up to this point. Verse 7 evens out each letter usage, returning back to verse one where each letter was used exactly twice (See Table 2).

Table 2



Furthermore, the psalmist appears to have integrated the name of Jerusalem into the letter counts of the verses. As noted above, the name יְרוּשָׁלַם is the central word in verse 7. This verse has a total of 47 letters. The letter ש, the only ש in the verse, occupies the 24<sup>th</sup> position – the exact center of the verse. The central placement of the ש in the word יְרוּשָׁלַם, i.e. the center word of the verse, perhaps was intentionally placed to allow the reader to distribute this solitary ש among the surrounding ל’s and מ’s to form the word שלם multiple times. Similarly, in verse 8, the phrase לְךָ שְׁיִשְׁלָם is at the center of the ten words. As noted, the word שְׁיִשְׁלָם contains the word שלם in its pure form. Verse 8 is comprised of 37 letters, and the letter ל of שְׁיִשְׁלָם occupies the 19<sup>th</sup> letter position, the center letter of the verse. Once more, the psalmist appears to have employed this same technique of placing the center letter ל in the word שלם (Jerusalem) allowing the surrounding ש ‘s and מ’s around the ל to form the word שלם many times. In the center verse of Psalm 137, we find an exceptionally incredible usage of this technique. As stated, at the center of this five-word verse we find the word Jerusalem. There is only one ל in this verse- the one found at the near-center of the verse within the word Jerusalem. There are three ש’s and three מ’s surrounding the ל, placed in a chiastic manner around the singular ל, once more spelling the name of Jerusalem numerous times. We find each of the letters used to make up the word שלם, the ש’s and the מ’s, are prominently found as the second letter in each word of the verse; or at the position to “the right” of the lead letter in each word. The striking aspect of this placement is that within the verse, the psalmist informs us that “if he forgets Jerusalem he will forget his right”; the psalmist never forgets Jerusalem and in a stunning play on these words he places the letters that make up Jerusalem’s name at the location to “the right” of each word in the verse.

אִם אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי

Taken together, the letter placement throughout the entire Psalm appears to have the intent of spelling out Jerusalem's name, שלם, over the entire course of the Psalm. This astounding technique has the overall effect of having the word ירושלם emanate from every syllable of the Psalm!

It is quite remarkable that in a psalm that is focused on the message of never forgetting Jerusalem, the letters of the city's name recur so many times in the text in such a structured fashion. The letters ש, ל, and מ recur so often in this psalm that they make up about 24% of all of the letters in this psalm (77/317)<sup>10</sup>. Within the text itself, Jerusalem is never forgotten; it is referenced in many different ways. Zion is mentioned twice, יְרוּשָׁלַם is mentioned three times, and there are 9 references to שלם, adding up to at least 14 references to Jerusalem in this psalm. The memory of Jerusalem is so ingrained in the psalmist, that every fiber of his Psalm contains the name of the city. He so yearns for Jerusalem that he cannot even write the Psalm without making constant, yet subtle references to the city throughout the text. He cannot mention Babel, the place of his exile, without making subtle reference to his home, Jerusalem (בְּבָלָ שָׁם). Just as he cannot speak without remembering Jerusalem (לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ), he cannot write without remembering Jerusalem in his writing either. Jerusalem is part of his essence; it is like his יְמִינִי. Additionally, when in v. 5 the psalmist states - אִם אֶשְׁכַּח אֶם אֶשְׁכַּח תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי, he is simultaneously poetically alluding to the fact that he cannot forget Jerusalem, for if he did his right hand would stop functioning, i.e. he would stop writing. The psalmist, however, not only continues to write his lament on Jerusalem, as we have explained, Jerusalem

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<sup>10</sup> For the significance of the number 77 see: Ronald Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 Article 5 (2006).

is integrated into every syllable of Psalm 137 in every possible manner.

The way this message is sophisticatedly embedded into the fiber of the psalm, may also explain why the psalmist uses the letters ץ and ל in beginning and ending the Psalm and in marking off its 3 sections. As stated above, the central words of the entire psalm are לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכֵּי, “my tongue to my palate.” The sound that is made by the letter ל is created by placing the tongue on the palate (or putting one’s “lashon” on his “hik”). Because the letter ץ is a vowel, the word על mimics the transition of an opened mouth (ע - a vowel) to a closed one (ל). Following the phrase - תִּדְבַּק לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכֵּי in verse 6, there is a large concentration of ל (palatal letter), א (open mouth), and ע (open mouth). The consecutive alternating ל with א/ע in this verse makes the syllables here sound particularly disjointed, poetically relaying the focal message that the psalmist cannot open his mouth without remembering Jerusalem. Moreover, by beginning the Psalm and ending each of the 3 sections with the word על, the psalmist is creating the literary effect of fulfilling what he said in v.4 - his tongue is stuck to his palate. He is so deeply affected by his separation from Jerusalem that he cannot talk properly; he is inarticulate, and is what is commonly termed “tongue-tied.” There is not a single verse in this Psalm that does not contain the letter ל. Notice that the other letters that spell the name of Jerusalem, ש, ן, and ם, are each conspicuously omitted from a single verse. In v. 2 there are no ש’s, and in v.9 there are no ם’s. The blatant omission of these otherwise ubiquitous letters in Psalm 137, only further makes the ever-present ל eye-catching. The deliberate repetition of the letter ל seems to have the effect of the reader experiencing the psalmist’s difficulty in speech, with his tongue stuck to his palate, while reading and pronouncing the numerous ל’s found throughout the Psalm. As stated above, the last word in the

Psalm, **הַסִּלַע**, also has the two letters **ע** and **ל** but in opposite order, ending the Psalm with the tongue off the palate (opened mouth). To appreciate the significance of this dramatic change in the Psalm, we need to look no further than the words directly preceding **הַסִּלַע**. In the last verse the psalmist expresses his wish for his enemy to be destroyed - **אֲשָׁרֵי שְׂיֹאֲחֻוּ וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֵיךְ**. Throughout the Psalm the repeated **ל** signified the deep emotional longing for Jerusalem, and the intense affliction caused by the actions of the nation's enemies. Only at the end of the Psalm, where the psalmist expresses vindication for the evils committed by the nation's enemies, is he able to take his tongue off his palate.

## Ekha and Mizmor 137

The following are some of the many comparisons between Ekha and Mizmor 137. Although we will slightly digress from the main theme, it is noteworthy to mention them at this point<sup>11</sup>:

The phrase **תִּדְבַק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי** echoes Ekha 4:4:

תהילים 6: 137 **תִּדְבַק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי** אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶיךָ אִם לֹא אֲעֲלֶה אֶת  
 ?רוּשְׁלָם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחֲתִי :  
 איכה 4: 4 **דְּבַק לְשׁוֹן יוֹנֵק אֶל חֶפֶן** בְּצָמָא עוֹלָלִים שְׂאֵלוּ לָחֵם פֶּרֶשׁ  
 אֵין לָהֶם :

The word **לשון**, the **דבק** root, and the Hebrew word for palate (**חֶפֶן**) are used together only twice more in Tanakh-Ezekiel 3:26 and Job 29:10. As we have explained, in Psalm 137 the psalmist expresses his inability to speak (his tongue being stuck to his palate) by alliterating the letter **ל**. Usage of this phrase has a multi-faceted effect when understanding its backdrop. Ekha 4:4 describes the devastating famine that took place during the destruction of Jerusalem with the heartbreaking scene of babies dying of

<sup>11</sup> These comparisons are from a soon to be published article on Ekha.

thirst, causing their tongues to stick to their palates. There are many other similarities between Psalm 137 and Ekha. Although we will not discuss these similarities and their implications here at length, we will briefly mention some of these to give the reader a sense of the interplay between these two texts, both written as reactions to the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile.

1. The recollection of Edom's jeering of עָרוּ עָרוּ in Psalm 137:7 recalls the end of chapter 4 in Ekha where the word תַּתְעָרִי is used in conjunction with Edom:

איכה 4: 21 שִׁישִׁי וְשִׁמְחִי בֵּת אֲדוֹם יוֹשְׁבֵי תַי {יֹושְׁבֵת} בְּאֶרֶץ  
עוֹץ גַּם עָלֶיךָ תַעֲבֹר כּוֹס תִּשְׁכָּרִי וְתִתְעָרִי :

2. In Ekha 2:10, the elders lament Zion's destruction by placing dust on their head. Likewise, in Psalm 137, the psalmist states that even at the happiest hours, Jerusalem will remain in his memory, using the same word ראש as in Ekha.

תהילים 137: 6 תִּדְבֹק לְשׁוֹנֵי לֶחְמִי אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶכִי אִם לֹא  
אֲעֲלֶה אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׁמֹחֲתִי :

איכה 2: 10 יֵשְׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ יְדֻמוֹ זִקְנֵי בֵּת צִיּוֹן הֵעֲלוּ עֶפְרַע עַל  
רֹאשָׁם חֲגָרוּ שִׁקִּים הוֹרִידוּ לְאֶרֶץ רֹאשָׁן בְּתוֹלַת  
יְרוּשָׁלַם :

3. As stated, Psalm 137 opens and closes with the letter ע, the text ending on the word סע. Notice that Ekha chapter 5 has an unusually high occurrence of the letter ע as well. Five verses begin with ע. This is a statistically high number of times for a verse to begin with ע. Less than 2% of verses in Tanakh begin with ע compared with 25% of verses in chapter 5.
4. Ekha 5 opens on the words - זְכַר יְהוָה מָה הָיָה לָנוּ - הַבֵּיט {הַבִּיטָה} וַיִּרְאֶה אֶת חֲרָפְתָנוּ זְכַר. Recall that the root was repeatedly used in Psalm 137 at key locations, as in the opening verse where the

psalmist mournfully remembers Jerusalem in the words בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן.

5. Note the verses that close chapters 1, 3 and 4 in Ekha and their similarity to the last 2 verse of Ps. 137.

תהילים 8:137 בַּת בְּבֵל הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שָׁיִשְׁלָם לָךְ אֶת  
גְּמוּלְךָ שְׂגַמְלֶתָ לָנוּ :

תהילים 9:137 אֲשֶׁרִי שְׁיֵאֲחֹז וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל הַסָּלַע :

איכה 22:1 תָּבֵא כָּל רַעְתֶּם לְפָנֶיךָ וְעוֹלֵל לְמוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר עוֹלָתָה  
לִי עַל כָּל פְּשָׁעֵי כִי רַבּוֹת אֲנַחְתִּי וְלִבִּי דָוִי :

## A New Song

Psalm 137 laments one of the most painful moments in the nation's history, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the nation. Throughout the Psalm the psalmist relays his message using poetic techniques that underscore his yearning for Jerusalem and his overwhelming grief. From the lament, however, the psalmist is still able to end on the prospects that justice will be served to his enemies. Although the general tone in Psalm 137 provides little more than a glimmer of hope for the nation, analysis of the eight-psalm conclusion of Tehillim illuminates the seeds of hope and inspiration the psalmist planted within Psalm 137.

One of the more painful images in Psalm 137 is the opening scene, in which the nation sits on the riverbanks of Babylon, no longer able to sing, hanging up their instruments, unable to sing the songs of Zion. As we stated, the nation asks in v. 4 “How can we sing the song of YHVH on alien soil?” There is no answer provided in Psalm 137 to this question, and so it is understood to be a rhetorical question; apparently the memory of Jerusalem is overwhelming. In fact, though, the psalmist does not leave this question unanswered, but provides the answer at the near-end of the conclusion in Psalm 144. At the precise

center of the 130-words in Psalm 144 are the words “שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲשִׁירָה,” “I will sing you a new song” (v.9). Furthermore, the psalmist states here that he will sing the new song with a “ten-stringed harp.” The image of the exiles putting away their lyres in despair, unable to sing at Psalm 137 (v.2), is transformed in Psalm 144; a new, magnificent song is sung on a ten-stringed instrument as the nation will renew their covenant with G-d, and G-d will therefore continue to protect them.

תהילים 4:137 אֵיךְ נִשְׁרָא אֶת שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר :  
 תהילים 2:137 עַל עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תִּלְיֵנוּ בְּנֵרֹתֵינוּ :  
 תהילים 9:144 אֱלֹהִים שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲשִׁירָה לְךָ בְּנִבֵּל עֲשׂוֹר אֲזַמְרָה  
 לְךָ :

In Psalm 144 the psalmist expresses his utmost faith that G-d will save him from the oppressors calling them בְּנֵי נֶכֶר in verses 7 and 11, the same appellation of the exile land, אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר, in Psalm 137:4. Moreover, throughout Psalm 144 the psalmist uses the root פצה numerous times (vv. 7, 10, 11) asking G-d to save him from the oppressors, praying that G-d scatter them וַתִּפְצֵם (v.6). These words all are similar to the prayer at the conclusion of Psalm 137:9 - אֲשֶׁרִי שְׂיֵאֲחֻזוּ וְנִפְצָ אֶת עַלְלֵיךְ. In Psalm 144:8, the psalmist describes the enemy as people whose mouths speak lies, and whose “right” is false - שׂוֹא וַיִּמְיֵנָם יָמִין - אֲשֶׁר פִּיהֶם דִּבֶּר שׂוֹא וַיִּמְיֵנָם יָמִין - אֲשֶׁרִי. <sup>12</sup> This certainly is reminiscent of Psalm 137 where the psalmist states that if he forgets Jerusalem, his tongue will be stuck to his palate, i.e. he becomes inarticulate - תִּדְבֵּק - אִם לְשׁוֹנִי לֶחְפִּי (v.6), and his right hand loses function - אִם אֲשֶׁרִי יָמִין (v. 5). At the conclusion of Psalm 144, the psalmist praises the nation as G-d protects them, using the word אֲשֶׁרִי twice. Recall that Psalm 137 also used the word אֲשֶׁרִי twice, once in v. 8 praying that Babylon will be punished, and then in the concluding statement which opens on the word אֲשֶׁרִי.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, see Psalm 144:11.

The inspirational message of hope is seen to an even greater degree at the end of the coda in Tehillim. No longer is the nation unable to sing the songs of Zion. The penultimate psalm of Tehillim opens on the heightened command to “sing to the Lord a new song.”

תהילים 1:149 הַלְלוּהָ שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהַלְתּוּ בְּקוֹל  
חֲסִידִים :

Psalm 150 is the grand finale of the Tehillim. It is composed entirely of song and praise of G-d. The psalmist repeats the root הלל thirteen times, alluding to the covenant. This praise is accompanied with the magnificent call for the wind instruments to play - בְּתִקְעַ שׁוֹפָר - followed by the string instruments - בְּנִבְל וְכִנּוֹר (v. 3), and the percussions - בְּתוֹף וּמַחֲוֹל (v. 4). The Psalter has reached its climax. G-d's songs and praises are not only sung with a “ten-stringed harp” (Ps. 144:9), the entire orchestra is playing in unison. Not only has the nation renewed its song, all mankind is now singing and praising G-d - כָּל הַנְּשָׂמָה תְּהַלֵּל יְהוָה הַלְלוּהָ - (v.6).

## Conclusion

Psalm 137 is read on Tisha B'Ab in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the nation. The memory of Jerusalem is imprinted throughout the Psalm, making it clear that the events of Tisha B'Ab and the ensuing exile devastated the nation. However, along with expressing the grief of exile in a most moving manner, the psalmist is able to instill the powerful message of hope that the nation will put their faith in G-d, renew the covenant, and become even greater than before. Perhaps, one present day example of such hope is seen in a recent change in the interpretation of one phrase in Psalm 137. When the psalmist prays for the nation of Edom to be held accountable, he refers to the destruction of Jerusalem as יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם (v.7), calling it the “day of Jerusalem,” instead of

the “day of destruction” as even uttering those words are overwhelmingly unbearable. After over 2000 years the name יום הַרוּשָׁלַם has lost its negative connotation, and instead has become associated with the modern-day Israeli holiday celebrating the day that Jerusalem was reunified in 1967, the 28<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, יום הַרוּשָׁלַם.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed the present generation almost in its entirety never associates the name יום הַרוּשָׁלַם with the destruction of the temple, but rather the day Jerusalem was reunified. I realized this recently when teaching Psalm 137 to a group of young men and one student remarked “I know יום הַרוּשָׁלַם, it is כ״ח אייר!”