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BY THE WATERS OF A DEATH CAMP: AN INTERTEXTUAL READING OF PSALM 137

Karl A. Plank

By the waters, by the waters of Chelmno, There he shuffled with ankles in chains. By the waters, by the ashen waters of the Narew, There his captors demanded songs and his tormentors mirth. There he sang the songs in a foreign land. But his heart wept.

Karl Plank, 'Srebnik'

I. THE RETURN OF SIMON SREBNIK

Claude Lanzmann begins his magisterial Shoah with the story of Simon Srebnik. The film’s opening frames show the forty-seven year-old Srebnik in a small boat on the Narew River. As he passes along the water, we hear him softly sing a folk song from his past. Lanzmann’s introduction, however, preempts any pastoral quality that the scene may suggest. His words identify Srebnik as one of only two survivors of the death-camp Chelmno. The trip along the Narew returns him to the site of his internment. The return reenacts his ordeal: the SS, fond of the teen’s musical voice, forced him several times a week to row a flat-bottomed boat along the river and sing for their entertainment as well as for the nearby Polish villagers and German civilians. His song echoes what he sang three decades earlier.

The comments that accompany Srebnik’s return interpret two features of the scene: the nature of the place to which he has returned and the intention of his singing. First, as Srebnik walks the empty space where once the death-camp stood, he remarks:

It’s hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here. A lot of people were burned here. Yes, this is the place. No one ever left here again . . . No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one
can understand it. Even I, here, now... I can't believe I'm here. No, I just can't believe it.3

As the repetitions indicate, Srebnik intends to mark the point of return as a 'here', but the site's oddity begins to unravel that assertion. Left without traces of its history, this place is a non-place—an empty field. Though no one ever left this place, no one is here.4 Furthermore, the impossibility of recreating what happened at that site mystifies the sense of place so that Srebnik himself expresses dismay at his being 'here'. The place 'here', empty and mystified, forfeits the determinate qualities that would allow one to know it as 'here'. Srebnik's 'here' turns on itself to bear the load of 'there', an alien and unknowable place.

Second, when Lanzmann interrogates some villagers who remember Srebnik's singing, they reply: 'the Germans made him sing on the river. He was a toy to amuse them. He had to do it. He sang, but his heart wept'.5 Like the strangeness of Srebnik's 'here', his singing has a paradoxical quality. Compelled as amusement, it yet expresses weeping. Though compliant, it resists the captors' intent to carnivalise the scene and rob Srebnik of the humanity preserved in his weeping heart. The villagers' comment answers the underlying question, 'can a person sing by the waters of a death-camp and remain human?' As they remember Srebnik, they affirm the possibility.

The Srebnik episode echoes Psalm 137. The conjunction of weeping and singing (Ps 137:1–3), the captors' demand for songs that one can sing only with difficulty, if at all, in the foreign land (137:3–4), and the boundary of flowing water (137:1) all reflect the intertextuality between the exilic psalm and the holocaust scene. While intertextual relations may confirm a shared meaning in two texts, they also can sound a dissonance. Such intertextual tension tends to subvert continuities or introduce a complexity that riddles any text's simple clarity.6 The Srebnik episode, especially in its erosion of the language of 'here' and in its interpretation of Srebnik's singing as a weeping of the heart, complicates our reading of the biblical psalm. It asks us to raise questions of the psalm's own spatial map (e.g. its use of 'there' and the implied 'here') and to explore the psalmist's conviction of the impossibility of singing God's song in a foreign land (137:4). In so doing, the intertextuality alerts us to issues otherwise not explored or sufficiently considered.

II. WHEN ‘‘THERE’’ IS ‘‘HERE’’: THE SPATIAL MAP OF PSALM 137

Psalm 137 falls into three distinct parts: a lament of the predicament of the exiles that focuses upon the seeming impossibility of singing YHWH's song in the foreign land (vv.1–4); a mandate to remember Jerusalem that puts the speaker under self-curse should he fail to remember (vv.5–6); and, a plea
that YHWH, in turn, remember the people by taking vengeance on the captors and their conspirators (vv.7–9). Each of these parts presupposes a certain spatial orientation or, in structuralist terms, deixis.\(^7\) First, the lament begins with a geographical boundary—‘by the waters of Babylon’ (v.1). The boundary maps the lament in terms of a ‘there’ that the psalmist identifies with the banks of the rivers and an implied ‘not-there’\(^8\). ‘There’ marks the alien land (v.4) where the exiles sat down (v.1), where their memories of Zion caused them to weep (v.1) and where captors asked them for songs (v.3). ‘Not-there’ marks a site somewhere else that, in light of the rest of the psalm, looms as a place accessible only in memory: Zion (v.1) or Jerusalem (vv.5–6). Taking straightforwardly the psalm’s repeated ‘there’ as a place at distance (i.e. somewhere the psalmist is not) and emphasising the perfect tenses of the verbs in vv.1–3, this section seems to look at the exile in retrospect and to speak of it from some place other than ‘by the waters of Babylon’ (v.1).

The second section of the psalm, however, complicates this spatial map. Critics have commonly asserted that, if the psalmist is not there in Babylon, he is here in Jerusalem as part of a group of returned exiles.\(^9\) Still, the second section’s emphasis on not forgetting Jerusalem implies distance no less than does the deictic ‘there’ of vv.1–4. The act of memory presupposes an absence of the thing remembered and would make present what is not immediate. The psalm’s demand to remember Jerusalem acknowledges a condition wherein one must specifically act to make present in mind what is not present in any other way—a condition that, with regard to Jerusalem, makes most sense if the psalmist is yet in Babylon. Thus, if the first section identifies Babylon as ‘there’, the second resists marking Jerusalem as the implied ‘here’ and encourages us to perceive the exile’s ‘there’ as the psalmist’s ‘here’.

The third section of the psalm shares the spatial orientation of the second. In its desire for YHWH to devastate Babylon, it assumes a vantage from which Babylon presently stands unpunished.\(^10\) For the psalmist to be back in Jerusalem, however, would itself reflect the humiliation of Babylon before Cyrus’s Persian Empire (539 B.C.E.). Return follows the downfall of Babylon which here the psalm calls for rather than observes. As such, the third section, like the second, resists seeing Jerusalem as the psalmist’s ‘here’ and makes most sense within an exilic context.\(^11\)

The difficulty in the psalm’s spatial map lies not in a lack of simple deictic clarity, but in the tension between two spatial orientations, each clear in its own right, but undermined in combination with the other. Either the psalmist is in Babylon, writing in the midst of the exile; or the psalmist is in Jerusalem, writing in the aftermath of exile and return. The former makes sense of the emphasis on not forgetting Jerusalem (vv.4–6) and the call for the devastation of Babylon (v.8), but requires an interpretation of ‘there’ (vv.1 and 3) that differs from its straightforward sense of spatial distance. The latter takes
seriously the straightforward connotation of 'there' as a place at distance—somewhere the psalmist is not—and draws support from the perfect tense verbs of vv.1–3 that situate Babylon as temporally past as well as spatially distant. This reading, however, must then interpret the Jerusalem to be remembered as a different place from the Jerusalem of the psalmist’s return. In combination, the sections of the psalm suggest that either 'there' is not there or 'Jerusalem' is not Jerusalem; that, or the unresolved tension of competing deictic clarities that would negate any spatial stability in the psalm.

Those who have argued for the post-exilic situation of the psalmist in Jerusalem have typically claimed that 'Jerusalem' is not Jerusalem. They contend that the ruined Jerusalem to which the exiles return differs from the Zion of their memory in such a way that they must be obliged not to forget their allegiance to the vision of that holy city set above their highest joy (v.6). This reading provides one way of resolving the spatial tension. The intertextuality with the Srebnik story, however, encourages us to consider two other paths of interpretation that either reckon 'there' in a peculiar way or understand the spatial tension as meaningful in its own right.

The Srebnik episode attests an obscuring of the deictic 'here'. Though Srebnik is at Chelmno, the mystification and emptiness of the space shakes his confidence to assert it as 'here', to know it as a determinate place that orients and situates him. Intertextuality with the psalm invites us to ask if the psalmist writes in a comparable situation, only one in which his sense of 'here' has eroded to the point where he actually speaks of it as 'there'. In this sense, 'there' is not there: it does not signify distant space as much as it marks the alienated space of 'foreign land' (v.4). The psalmist knows his place to be Eretz Sham, the land of 'there'; he has been exiled to the country whose name is 'Away-from-here'. He defines his 'here' in terms of living on the other side where strangeness eclipses the familiar markers that would enable him to say 'here am I'. Where the markers have vanished, as in Srebnik’s case, or are fundamentally strange, as this reading of the psalm suggests, no solid orientation is possible and, as such, neither is any confident assertion of 'here'.

To understand 'there' as a marker of alienated space renders the category in an existential way. Its contrary may not be the spatial poh ('here') as much as the personally charged hinneni ('here am I'). As is evident throughout Hebrew scripture, hinneni expresses readiness to respond, in particular to a divine summons (e.g. Gen 22:1, 31:12, 46:2; Exod 3:4; Isa 6:8). Its literal meaning—'See me' or 'Behold me'—involves the speaker’s willingness to appear at a given place and thus communicates an openness that contrasts with the hidden defensiveness of alienation. Not devoid of spatial connotation, hinneni conveys the convergence of self-assertion and a particular place or 'here'. Because he is not committed to respond to his captors’ demands (vv.3–4),
because he is not open to appear by these waters of Babylon so as to be claimed for an act that would unravel his fidelity, because captivity denies him the freedom to assert his identity and thus to appear in his own right—because of all these things he cannot utter ‘hinnei’. Because he cannot say ‘here am I’ he expresses his alienation through the language of ‘there’ as if to say ‘Here where I am is foreign land. I live in Eretz Sham, the country where strangeness and oppression put me at deep distance from the roots of my identity. For me, this place can be no “here.” It is always “there.”’

We have noted possible readings of the psalm that render ‘Jerusalem’ as not Jerusalem or ‘there’ as not there. We must consider as well the possibility that the spatial tension is unresolvable and, perhaps, intentionally so. Another way to describe Srebnik’s return emphasises not the shifting valence of the deictic ‘here’, but the dissonance between the ‘here’ of present Chelmno—a non-place empty of markers—and the ‘here’ of Chelmno’s past, marked vividly in Srebnik’s consciousness as the site of mass murder: ‘they burned people here’. When Srebnik speaks ‘here’, he sounds simultaneously the register of two clashing tones that create a spatial polyphony. ‘Here’ at this site along the Narew River, he stands in two places at once: the peaceful, empty field and the landscape of empyred flesh.

Such spatial polyphony renders the deictic center of the text unstable. The deictic center provides a coherent representational system that identifies the participants of the text and the time and place of their activity. It furnishes a stable axis so that readers may read with a sense of orientation. Its collapse deprives those readers of a fixed frame of reference and thus disorients them through the coincidence or perpetual alternation of competing frames. Though the category of the deictic center focuses attention upon textual structures and reader dynamics, it potentially reveals as well the situations of Srebnik and the psalmist. The textual instability of the deictic centre approximates certain features of the human experience of exile, displacement and trauma. The spatial dynamics of the text furnish an icon of the psalmist’s ordeal of exile and the holocaust survivor’s return to the site of his affliction.

The textual features of dissonance and disorientation mirror facets of the experience of exile and return. Two commentators on exilic life emphasise precisely these qualities. Michael Seidel notes:

An exile is someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another… The task for the exile, especially the exiled artist, is to transform the figure of rupture back into a “figure of connection”… For the exile, native territory is the product of heightened and sharpened memory, and imagination is, indeed a special homecoming.
Edward Said continues in a similar vein:

Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. Exile, in the words of Wallace Stevens is "a mind of winter" in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable. Perhaps this is another way of saying that a life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.¹⁹

Both Srebnik and the psalmist show the signs of wintry mind, using language that reflects a 'decentered and contrapuntal' existence; or, in Seidel's terms, they live in one place while remembering and projecting 'the reality of another'. As such, they can know no center, because they live in two spaces at once. Srebnik walks across the empty field, but all the while calling to mind the landscape of the death camp. The remembered reality of the place where people burned becomes a present feature in the pastoral scene. Heightened memory connects the landscapes of past and present into a dissonantal whole, forbidding him to dwell simply in one or the other.

Similarly, the psalmist lives in two spheres, both exerting a hold on him. This reading also understands the psalmist to be in Babylon. While there, however, he remembers Zion and projects its reality onto the site that stifles the singing of God's song (v.4). The intensity of the memory of the lost Jerusalem becomes present to the psalmist, leading to weeping (v.1) and offering a vantage from which his 'here' becomes 'there'. For the psalmist, the remembered reality determines. It does not eclipse awareness of his ongoing exile along foreign waters, but leads him to speak of it with a certain distance and explains the psalm's emphasis on the remembrance of Jerusalem. As Seidel suggests, in memory and imagination the exile may recover a bit of 'native territory' that transforms rupture into connection. Said, however, should have the last word: memory connects only to unsettle; it can recall but never finally reestablish the fixed center of home. Perceived with the 'mind of winter', Jerusalem is present to the exilic poet, but in no way that affords the singing of God's song. He remains in foreign land and must yet lament the absence of Zion.

This third path of interpretation does not resolve the spatial tension, but understands it to express the exilic context itself. If the dissonance of the text's deixis disorients the reader, it does so as an effective poetic icon. Form and content converge to replicate for the reader the spatial dynamic that the psalmist knows on foreign shores: the loss of a center, the forceful coincidence of competing frames, and the unsettling of any 'habitual order' of home. Unable to live simply in one place, the psalmist’s memories of Zion involve...
heightened senses of both absence and recovery. For its reader, the psalm allows neither cynicism nor unqualified confidence concerning any homecoming.

We have observed three paths of interpretation to deal with the peculiar spatial map of Psalm 137 and its resulting location of the psalmist. First, traditional commentators have argued that the psalmist writes in Jerusalem after the exile, finding the ruins of Jerusalem to require remembrance of a different Zion to be set above all joy (v.6). The second and third views situate the psalmist in an exilic Babylon as he pledges to remember the Jerusalem to which he has not yet returned. The second explains the psalmist’s rhetoric of ‘there’ (vv.1–3) as a sign of alienated space. The third sees the spatial tension to be meaningful in its own right. The psalmist, in this view, experiences his exilic situation as the unresolved dissonance of living simultaneously in two places: the remembered reality of Jerusalem and the foreign land of Babylon that the strong memory of home transforms into ‘there’.

One can make reasonable arguments to support each of these views, though finally each has limitation. At this point, we ask not to judge those arguments per se, but to reckon the role that intertextuality might play in the interpretation of the psalm. With regard to the psalm’s spatial map, what do we see when we read the psalm ‘by the waters of a death camp’ that goes unnoticed when read otherwise? First, the intertextuality draws attention to the complexity of the psalm’s spatial grid, making it necessary to consider the possibility of a deixis that is multidimensional and tensive. Second, the intertextuality asks the interpreter to reflect on the way that traumatic displacement may reconfigure one’s sense of place and render odd the language used to situate oneself. Third, the intertextuality suggests the possibility of seeing the psalm’s ordeal as present, thereby underscoring the urgency of the psalm as a lament and protesting plea. Fourth and finally, the intertextuality invites the interpreter to take seriously the psalm as a poem whose language is an icon of the experience it would convey; to see in the contrapuntal deixis the reality of exile. The point is not that one must read the psalm in this intertextual way, but that it is worthwhile to do so; that it opens the text to new horizons of interpretation that take seriously the connection between displacement and deixis, exile and language.

III. SINGING THE SONGS OF ZION: THE IMPOSSIBLE NECESSITY

The intertextuality between Psalm 137 and the story of Simon Srebnik brings further questions to the psalm’s central predicament: how can the weeping exiles sing a song of the Lord on alien ground (v.4). Where, at least on first reading, the psalm poses the impossibility of such singing, the Srebnik episode
points to a more paradoxical act. In his captivity, he is coerced to sing for his captors' amusement, but, as the villagers remember, 'he sang, but his heart wept.' He sang the song that entertained his guards, but what he sang also expressed a different reality heard by other ears, the reality that his heart was weeping. His song amused, but also revealed the torment of his condition in human voice.

A rabbinic midrash on Lamentations 4:11 probes the inappropriateness, if not the impossibility, of singing a song of joy in a context of weeping. The midrash begins by noting the oddity of another psalm: 'It is written, “A song of Asaph. O God, heathens have entered Your domain” (Ps.79:1). A song! It should have said, “A weeping”!' The midrash resolves its issue through a mashal that shows a merciful dimension of the catastrophe, thereby suggesting the fittingness of song instead of weeping. Yet, the initial apprehension of the midrash remains: are weeping and the song of joy incommensurable in such a way that the circumstances that warrant the former prohibit the latter? It is this question that any reading of Psalm 137 must pursue and, in light of the Srebnik story, do so with openness to paradox and complexity.

The opening section of Psalm 137 (vv.1–4) shows the psalmist and his group enacting a refusal. In counterpoint to the captors' request for songs, they have hung up their lyres in the poplars of their foreign territory (v.2). As John Hollander notes, 'Hanging the harps, kinnorotenu, on the trees, abandoning familiar and consoling music, is actually a violent gesture of refusal—it is a slamming down of the piano lid, or a closing of the instrument case.' Accordingly, the rhetorical force of v.4 — 'How can we sing a song of the Lord' — points to the seemingly self-evident impossibility of performing a song of Zion or the adamant unwillingness to comply. The psalm relates the refusal to the captors' demand for amusement (v.3), but the logic of the assumed impossibility calls for further examination.

To interpret the psalmist's sense of the impossibility of singing, we should consider the following three possibilities of understanding the refusal, each amplified by Srebnik's story and holocaust reflection. First, one cannot, or must not, sing at the captors' request because to do so capitulates to mockery. To sing here would do only the will of the tormentors, making one the unwitting agent of one's own humiliation and, moreover, trivialising the song of the Lord. When set to nefarious purpose, the song of Zion is no longer the song of the Lord, but the song of the captors; no longer a sacred expression that anticipates joy in God's presence, but a sign of humiliation in God's absence. Srebnik's story gives concrete image to the humiliation of such singing. The Polish villagers who had witnessed his performance recollect the German coercion and, in the words of one, how the thirteen and a half-year-old had been made 'a toy to amuse them [the German soldiers].' To hear him sing
again made the heart of another witness 'beat faster, because what happened here... was a murder'.26 Revealingly, the memory of the singing, in this villager's mind, renders Srebnik's humiliation as a metaphor for the broader catastrophe wrought by the Chelmno death camps, a sign of the murderous acts that 'happened here'. No isolated event, the coerced singing for the captors' amusement participates in the Nazi genocide; humiliation is a step on the way to murder.

Other holocaust testimony documents further how Nazi oppressors deployed sacred song in acts of humiliation. As recorded in the Memorial Book of Sochaczew, German guards readily appropriated the medieval practice of forcing Jews to perform the Sabbath song, 'Mah Yafit', as a parodic entertainment for mocking Gentiles:

One day, the German guards gathered several hundred Hassidim in the market place and forced them to dance the 'Mah Yafit' dance as they were attired in their Sabbath clothing, with their kapotes and small prayer shawls, in order to entertain the Christians who gathered there after they came out of church... After the dances they beat them and cut their beards.27

Here, the singing of one's sacred songs is pressed into the service of a beating and defilement. The association of the song with the experience of servility and ridicule, as Werb notes, 'eventually caused the song to be expunged from the working repertoire of Sabbath hymns. In Askenazic communities worldwide, it is no longer heard in its religious context'.28 The same threat lurks over the psalmist and his repertoire. To sing the songs of Zion for humiliating purposes jeopardises their sacred use. Once deployed in the act of shame can they be rehabilitated for acts of praise and expressions of joy?29 Is the refusal to sing ultimately an act to rescue the legacy of the songs of Zion?

Second, one cannot or must not sing the songs of Zion in alien land because they are the wrong songs to sing. Their expressions of joy clash with the torment of exile. Echoing the contrast of Eikah Rabbah 4.14, one of the village witnesses to Srebnik's singing speaks of the act as part of the 'true German irony: people were being killed and he had to sing'.30 A similar dissonance surfaces in the psalm. If to sing the Lord's song at the captors' call demeans the song's sacredness, so would its joy potentially trivialise the exiles' weeping (v.1) and become itself a form of self-abnegation.31 The clash between song and experience may run deep, involving not only personal anguish but a collective sense of a collapsed world of meaning, the loss of the culture's symbolic coherence.32 From this vantage, we hear in v.4 a voice of despair that goes beyond resistance to ask: has the song of Zion been rendered obsolete in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, the displacement from promised land, and seemingly, the defeat of God? Regardless of the captors' purpose,
can such songs make sense any longer for those who must sing them, or do they violate the integrity of experience that has here issued in weeping?

Third, one may find it necessary to refuse to sing Zion’s songs in exile because to do so can only deeply wound the singer with vivid reminders of what he or she has lost. Srebnik mourns in song: ‘A little white house / lingers in my memory. /Of that little white house / I dream each night.’ As he sings the song of his childhood, a song about the loss of childhood, he knows anew the loss of the world in which that song had its natural place. Were the captives in Babylon to sing the songs of Zion, they, too, could experience again, in memory, the traumatic loss of home whose joy those songs would otherwise celebrate. It is no idle matter to sing the songs that betoken home when home has been put at irretrievable distance; it is an act that opens oneself again to the trauma of loss. Memory is risky: it may turn into an affliction of its own.

While we should not doubt the therapeutic power of memory, neither should we underestimate its threat. For example, the work of Dori Laub with holocaust survivors shows that the retrieval and narration of certain memories ‘might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking [remembering] is re-living; not relief, but further retraumatization’. Laub notes further, and with particular pertinence to the circumstance of Psalm 137, that ‘if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a re-experiencing of the event itself’. The lack of an ‘empathic listener’ or an ‘addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories’ provides ripe condition for memory to become traumatic reenactment and add further affliction to the original experience. There is no ‘empathic listener’ or ‘addressable other’ in the psalmist’s scene. Were he to offer a song of Zion that testifies to the significance of his home, he would sing to an insensate audience. What is precious to him, like the memory invoked by Srebnik’s ‘little white house’, can only be a momentary amusement to his hearers who ask for the song in the first place simply to torment. Thus, the question of v.4 sounds an ominous dread, weighted with the near-impossibility of the task.

The three possibilities for understanding the exiles’ resistance to singing have focused on the damaging consequences that such singing might incur: the trivialisation and loss of the Lord’s song, the betrayal of the integrity of weeping, and the potential traumatising of the singer. While the first two make sense of the psalm’s emphasis on the captors’ tormenting strategies for amusement (v.3) and the exiles’ experience of weeping (v.1), the third forges a strong link with the exiles’ oath that follows their despairing question (vv.5–6) and illumines their plight as a dilemma. That is, the psalm’s progression joins the impossibility of singing the songs of Zion with the existential necessity of singing precisely those songs as an act of faith.
and memory. Where the dread of reenactment fosters the desire to forget, the severe oath (vv.5–6) reflects the will that no such forgetting occur. It is because the impossibility of singing weighs so heavily, because the desire to forget is so strong, that the accompanying oaths must be made to insure that the exiles remember, as they must, the Zion of their song.

The dilemma of the exiles surfaces in the psalm’s use of the language of memory (zkhr, vv.1, 6, 7). In its first usage, we find that the memory of Zion induces the weeping that makes untenable the demanded songs (v.1). In the second usage, however, the language of memory (v.6) fills the protasis of the psalmist’s oath, making it impossible for him not to remember Zion. The act of remembering Zion and singing the songs of Zion cannot be separated in the psalm. Indeed, as the medieval commentator David Kimhi (Radak) noted, the terms of the oath make the act of forgetting Zion tantamount to the impossibility of performing the songs of Zion: if he forgets Jerusalem, the psalmist vows, his right hand will wither, making it impossible to strum the lyre; if he does not remember Jerusalem, his tongue will stick to his palate, making it impossible to sing. The fate of the songs of Zion rests with the will to remember, the prior condition for their singing and the ground of their necessity.37

If the song of Zion is so impossible to sing, why is its remembrance so necessary that a severe oath vouchsafes its obligation? Earlier, we noted the humiliation and trauma that singing might incur, especially when it renders the exile compliant with his or her captor. Not-singing the song runs similar risks in that it gives the captor another kind of victory, one which upholds the captor’s intent to separate the exiles from their home. If the dread of memory threatens the exile with a re-living of the loss of home, the act of forgetting simply insures that the loss will be thorough—not only a geographic displacement, but an existential loss of the vestiges of home that might yet identify and dignify the self in exile.

The oath expresses the dire consequences that would result from not-remembering Zion. In Levine’s words,

The fulfillment of the curse... would destroy the possibility of speech and action; playing and singing, the very activities being performed at the moment of the song, would become impossible. All meaningful action and communication are thus made dependent on one quintessential attitude: keeping the memory of Jerusalem alive.38

The point is not just to avoid the perils of forgetting, but to claim that which memory affords: preserving the condition for ‘meaningful action and communication’. Furthermore, the act of memory, vitalised in the songs of Zion, creates a resistance to the captors that surpasses the refusal to comply
with their demand. If the essence of exile is to move one from the ‘here’ of home to a ‘there’ that is someplace else, to render one captive behind a boundary that forbids the return to home, then memory simply refuses to honor that boundary. Instead of yielding to an imposed alienation, the act of memory connects ‘here’ and ‘there’, making existentially present what is absent or has been put at distance.

The exiles’ remembrance thus corresponds to the reading of the deictic situation of the psalm wherein the psalmist experiences a sense of living simultaneously in two places. As in Babylon he is both ‘here’ and ‘not-here’, so must his singing reflect both the lament of the loss of Zion and the vitality of its claim. In a way that challenges the midrash’s simple opposition between song and weeping, he must do in his own manner what Srebnik did in his: sing while at the same time conveying the weeping of his heart to those who have ears to hear. If the intertextuality between psalm and Shoah lead us to see a ‘German irony’ in the captors’ strategy, so does Srebnik’s act encourage us to understand the singing as an impossible necessity, an act of paradoxical dimension that meets the psalmist’s dilemma with faith and integrity.

The song that remembers Zion does more than avoid betrayal of its promise or surrender to the captors’ boundaries. It preserves the identity of the singers as ones who can call on God to remember (v.7). Though the psalm envisions God’s remembrance in joltingly violent ways, underlying its petition is the demand for God to be their God, a God of justice and agent of change in the people’s circumstance.

As in our discussion of the spatial map of Psalm 137, we can observe the intertextuality between psalm and Shoah to expand the horizon of our interpretation of the biblical text, as well as clarifying certain of its features. Reading the psalm ‘by the waters of a death camp’, makes the interpreter imagine new ways of understanding the psalmist’s predicament (v.4). The impossibility of the exiles’ singing the Lord’s song, in the shadow of the holocaust, contends with the risks of self-betrayal, humiliation, and the reenactment of trauma, as well as jeopardising the sacredness of the songs of Zion. The impossibility of singing the Lord’s song itself comes under challenge through the example of Simon Srebnik’s singing at his captors’ demand while conveying to others the reality of a weeping heart. In the same way that the spatial features of the psalm resist a one-dimensional portrayal, so does the exilic predicament emerge in a paradoxical demand: to sing the song of Zion’s joy without trivialising the tears of profound loss; to weep as an exile without forgetting the claim of Jerusalem that yet calls for remembrance and future action. The holocaust intertextuality leads us to emphasise precisely the way in which the exile’s experience requires paradox for its expression and understanding. Indeed, paradox renders the psalm an icon of the experience whose ordeal breaks apart any monody of thought and language. It bids us
BY THE WATERS OF A DEATH CAMP

yield to the difficult polyphonies of exilic space and song: to recognise in the exile, as in the holocaust survivor, one who must be there by the waters of Babylon and death camp, and yet not-there; one who must weep the lament of catastrophe while voicing the hope of Zion, while remembering its highest joy.

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REFERENCES

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5. Shoah, 6.


8. By definition, deictic markers imply contrasting pairs. To mark a place as 'there' implies a contrasting 'not-there' that includes in its domain 'here'. See Wolfgang Klein, 'Local Deixis in Route Directions', in Speech, Place, and Action. Studies in Deixis and Related Topics, 166. Furthermore, the common symbolic use of river imagery to convey a boundary yields precisely this contrasting sense of a 'this side' and an 'other side' (e.g. Joshua 24:2–3).


10. As seen by Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 60–150. A Commentary, tr. H. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 501. Curiously, though, Kraus continues to talk about the psalmist's vantage of "looking back" as if the event of exile were a past matter (501–502).

11. The mention of the Edomites (v.7) may tempt one to see another spatial referent in the psalm, but rather than functioning to indicate a third location between 'here'
and 'there', it belongs more clearly to the Jerusalem scene of destruction. 'Edomites' here does not invoke the imagination of its space (Edom) as much as the role of this people as encouraging allies of the Babylonians and idle eyewitnesses to the devastation of Jerusalem. Note, e.g. the prophet's excoriation of the Edomites in Obadiah 1:8–15.

12 Thus, e.g. Mays, Psalms, 421.


14 Note Franz Rosenzweig's definition of 'hinneni' as a way of answering 'all unlocked, all spread apart, all ready, all-soul: "Here I am"'. The Star of Redemption, tr. W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 176. For further and related philosophical discussion of the term, see Susan A. Handelman's treatment of Levinas's 'me voici'. Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991), 265–271.

15 Note that the hnh radical includes the adverb of place and time, 'here' (henah), that contrasts precisely with 'there' (shamah). See F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), s.v., 'henah' (244,1). Compare the combination of the notion of seeing and deictic markers of place in the French use of 'voici' and 'voilà'.

16 Shoah, 5.

17 On the notion of a deictic center, see Deixis in Narrative, ed. J. Duchan et al. (New York: SUNY, 1993). See also, Klein, 'Local Deixis in Route Directions', 163–4.


20 For example, the first must contend with the present presentation of the quandary of v. 4 (the problem of singing God's song in a foreign land) and the seeming futurity of Babylon's downfall in v. 8. The second and third are vulnerable to charges of psychologising the text and must read vv.1–3 unstraightforwardly in order to sustain their interpretations.

21 Shoah, 6.


24 Consistent with this perspective, one finds the midrashic tradition understanding the refusal to comply with the tormentors as an expression of contempt for them as well as a refusal to add to their own burden of humiliation and guilt. Imagining the conversation of Levites following Nebuchadnezzar's demand for song, Midrash Tehillim has them say: 'Is it not grievous enough for us that we brought about the destruction of His Temple? Must we now stand to strike up a song for the pleasure of this dwarf?' See William G. Braude, The Midrash on Psalms, Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale, 1959), p. 334. Note also the discussion of Robert Kirschner, 'Two Responses to Epochal Change: Augustine and the Rabbis on Ps. 137 (136)', Vigiliae Christianae 44 (1990) 248.

25 Shoah, 6.

26 Shoah, 5.

One caveat: while this first reflection on the impossibility of singing the song of Zion, as informed by the history of Mah Yafit, suggests the significance of resistance to the tormentors' request, one must remain wary of ascribing too much choice to the one compelled to sing. Under coercion, that person faces, at best, what Lawrence Langer refers to as a 'choiceless choice'. See his Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit (Albany: SUNY, 1982), 67–129.

Note the perceptive insight of Ibn Ezra whose reading of the difficult 'tolalenu' (v. 3) as being derived from 'yelala' suggests that one cannot rejoice and howl at the same time. As William Holladay puts it: 'our tormentors want joy, but they cause us to howl'. The Psalms through Three Thousand Years (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 152.

In this regard, note the exile's theological challenges following the loss of the Temple, land, and Kingship as symbolic realities (as well as in plain fact). See Ralph Klein, Israel in Exile (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 3–5.

This is the third and culminating instance of zikhru in the Psalm.

On the problematic character of vengeance in the Psalms, but also on its significance, see Walter Brueggemann's reading of Psalm 109 in The Psalms and the Life of Faith (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Note, too, that in Psalm 137: 8 one finds a mirrored perception of what the exiles understand themselves to have experienced. In the language of retaliation in kind, one finds not only vengeance, but poignant self-perception.