

“Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes” (Leviticus 10:6): On Mourning and Refraining from Mourning in the Bible

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Many agree today that objective research devoid of a personal dimension is a chimera. As noted by Fewell (1987:77), the very choice of a research topic is influenced by subjective factors. Until October 2008, mourning in the Bible and the ways in which people deal with bereavement had never been one of my particular fields of interest and my various plans for scholarly research did not include that topic. Then, on October 4, 2008, the Sabbath of Penitence (the Sabbath before the Day of Atonement), my beloved father succumbed to cancer. When we returned home after the funeral, close family friends brought us the first meal that we mourners ate in our new status, in accordance with Jewish custom, as my mother, my three brothers, my father’s sisters, and I began “sitting *shivah*”—observing the week of mourning and receiving the comforters who visited my parent’s house.

The *shivah* for my father’s death was abbreviated to only three full days, rather than the customary week, also in keeping with custom, because Yom Kippur, which fell only four days after my father’s death, truncated the initial period of mourning. Before my bereavement I had always imagined that sitting *shivah* and conversing with those who came to console me, when I was so deep in my grief, would be more than I could bear emotionally and thought that I would prefer for people to leave me alone, alone with my pain. But as an Orthodox woman and lecturer in Bible at Bar-Ilan University (the only religious university in Israel), I knew that I could not avoid observing the prescribed rites of mourning. To my astonishment, I discovered the therapeutic and consoling side of *shivah*, the mourner’s gratitude for the expressions

Biblical passages are rendered on the basis of the New JPS and/or the RSV, modified to suit the sense as appropriate. I would like to thank Prof. Rimon Kasher and Lenn Schramm for their helpful comments.

of social support and the relief of talking with people, especially when the focus is on the deceased.

I was always strongly attached to my father and had helped care for him during his last illness. After his death, I felt a strong need to consult the psychological literature on mourning, where I learned that my experience was normal (yes, it turns out that heartache, in the most literal sense, is a well-known symptom of bereavement) and gained an idea of what I could expect during the rest of the long journey of mourning. Thirteen days after my father's death, while planning a bicycle tour with my husband in the hope that the physical activity would soothe my turbulent feelings, I decided, on the spur of the moment, to suspend my other academic projects and begin studying mourning in the Bible, because that was what I needed then, as therapy, and that I would dedicate the fruits of my research to my father's memory. During the cycling tour I worked on a mental sketch of the introduction to the book.

Thus my father's death spawned my current interest in mourning in the Bible and limited it to the specific category of mourning for the dead rather than other sorts of mourning, such as national mourning or petitionary mourning.

In the wake of my own experience with mourning customs, and starting from the story of Aaron and his sons, who were not permitted to indulge in the normal rites of mourning (Leviticus 10), the present article analyzes four cases in which biblical characters did not mourn and considers the main differences among them. Three of them involve the death of children (Aaron for his sons [Leviticus 10]; David for his infant son [2 Sam. 12:15–25]; and the Shunammite matron for her son [2 Kings 4:8–37]); one involves the death of a spouse (Ezekiel for his wife [Ezek. 24:15–24]). In two cases mourning is suppressed in compliance with the injunction of God or his prophet (Aaron and his sons as instructed by Moses, who interprets God's will; and Ezekiel directly at God's behest); in the other two cases it is the decision of the bereaved parent (David and the Shunammite matron). I will wind up with a consideration of the link between mourning and gender and point out the importance of women in mourning rituals.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of my beloved father, Robert Shemesh, who raised me with such great love.

1. “Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes”: Aaron and his sons are forbidden to mourn for Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10)

A terrible tragedy has struck the family of the newly installed high priest Aaron at an unexpected moment. Leviticus 8 and 9 recounts the ceremony in which Aaron and his sons were anointed with the consecrated oil and entered into their new function, after precise and meticulous preparations. Chapter 9 concludes on a particularly celebratory note:

Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings. Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces. (Lev. 9:22–24)

But this pinnacle of spiritual exaltation is cut off tragically: the Lord’s manifestation in the fire that blazes forth and consumes the sacrifice (9:24) evidently propels Aaron’s two older sons, Nadab and Abihu, into a religious ecstasy in which they bring “strange fire before the Lord”—probably a flame not kindled from the perpetual fire on the sacrificial altar.¹ Their punishment was immediate and measure for measure, exacted by the very instrument of their transgression: “And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:2).² And thus, in an instant, the collective elation gave way to desolation. Fire, so recently the symbol of the bond between the people and its God (9:24), has now become a

1. See, for example, Milgrom 1991: 598, 631; Hartley 1992: 131,132. For a summary of the rabbinic opinions about Nadab and Abihu’s transgression, see Shinan 1978–79 and Kirschner 1983; for Philo’s interpretation, see Kirschner 1983.

2. On the motif of fire as a means of expressing the principle of “measure for measure” in the Bible, see Shemesh 1999: 275.

means of punishment: the people's shouts of joy (ibid.) are replaced (we may conjecture) by screams of horror and a sense of shock.

The first reaction we hear of is Moses', who, seeking to attach meaning to his nephews' horrible deaths, tells Aaron: "This is what the Lord meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people' " (Lev. 10:3). This may mean that God is more punctilious with those who are closest to him.³ It is true that Nadab and Abihu were punished, but in their death they sanctified the divine name. Did this idea provide some consolation to the bereaved father? According to the text, *va-yiddom Aharon* (v. 3)—which is generally rendered as "and Aaron was silent." But the verb and thus his reaction are subject to various and even contradictory interpretations:

The normal understanding, as noted, is that the root *d.m.m* connotes silence. But this, too, can be understood in two totally different ways. The dominant interpretation in Jewish tradition is that Aaron held his peace and did not mourn, because he accepted the divine judgment and found consolation in what Moses had said (*Avot de-rabbi Natan* A, 14 [ed. Schechter, p. 30]; b *Zevahim* 115b; et passim). That is, the sense of *d.m.m* here is like that in Jeremiah 47:6 "rest and be still (*domi*)!"⁴ Some, however, hold that Aaron was rendered mute by shock, accompanied by a deep depression. This reading is supported by Exodus 15:16: "Terror and dread descend upon them; through the might of Your arm they are still as stone (*yiddemu ka-aven*)."⁵ A mute reaction to bereavement is well known in the anthropological literature.⁵

3. Thus Abraham Ibn Ezra on Lev. 10:3 and, at greater length, on Amos 3:2; so too David Kimhi on Amos 3:2 and Abravanel on Lev. 10:1 (1964: 2:58–59). See also Noth 1977: 85; Milgrom 1991: 601–603; Hartley 1992: 134.

4. So too, Odell 2000: 201.

5. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965 [1915]: 437), who studied mourning customs among the Australian aborigines, reported that bereaved women were required to maintain strict silence for a period that might last as long as two years. According to him, it was not uncommon for this ban to reduce all the women in the camp to total silence. Even after the mourning period was over, the women would

Some even believe that silence was a widespread mourning custom of biblical times, citing Job's friends, who sat silently with him for an entire week, contemplating his tragedy.⁶ It seems to be more plausible, however, that silence was not a mourning custom of biblical Israel and that when their bereavement reduced the mourners to silence it was a natural reaction to the shock rather than adherence to custom.⁷

Unlike the dominant reading that Aaron was mute (whether in acceptance of the divine judgment or because of his trauma), Levine (1993) proposed understanding the verb *d.m.m* here in the sense *d.m.m* II, "to mourn, moan."⁸ He cites the similar Akkadian root *damāmu*, which has this meaning. He also proposes that we understand the Ugaritic *d.m.m* as cognate with the Akkadian *damāmu* and parallel to the Ugaritic root *b.k.y* 'cry',⁹ and cites texts from Ebla that also support a connection between the root *d.m.m* and mourning. Thus Levine (1993: 89) proposes that "Aaron reacted in the

sometimes do without speech and continue to employ only sign language, in which they had become quite adept. On women's silence during mourning in Australia see also Bendann (1930: 125, 138, 190–191, 229–230, 269). See, too, the many examples offered by Gaster (1969: 819–825) of various primitive cultures in which widows (and sometimes widowers) are required to remain silent (or speak only in a whisper) for a certain period of time. The anthropologists Huntington and Metcalf (1979: 49) say that both loud noise and extreme silence are familiar reactions to mourning. See *ibid.* (103–117, 118) about the various times during mourning rituals when absolute silence is required among the Bara of Madagascar.

6. Feldman 1977: 97–99; Pahlm 1999: 29–31.

7. Ward 1972: 17–20; Levine 1993: 95–96.

8. For a survey of literature on the root *d.m.m* in the sense of mourning, see Levine 1993: 90, esp. n. 2 there.

9. See, for example, Dahood (1960: 400), who cites a text from the Keret saga: *bn al tbkn al tdm ly* ("My son, do not weep for me, do not mourn for me" [CAT 1.16 I 25–26]).

customary manner; he moaned or wailed and was about to initiate formal mourning and lamentation for his two lost sons.” But his plan is interrupted when Moses summons their cousins to bury the dead (v. 4) and explicitly forbids Aaron and his sons to mourn, so as to not to profane the sacred precincts: “And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes’ ” (Lev. 10:6).

Although Moses mentions only two customs of mourning here, he certainly intends them to stand for the full gamut of associated practices, all of which are forbidden to Aaron and his sons. There is no single locus in the Bible that collects all of the various mourning customs, so we must assemble them from various passages. It is possible, too, that not all of them were followed in all periods or by all strata of biblical society.¹⁰ The rending of garments as a sign of mourning, forbidden to Aaron and his sons, is mentioned frequently.¹¹ The second practice forbidden them, loosing the hair or uncovering the head, is mentioned much less often.¹²

10. On mourning customs in biblical times, see, for example, Vaux 1961: 59–61; Ward 1972; Alster 1983; Anderson 1991: 49–50 et passim; Pahm 1999: 24–32; Olyan 2004: 31–34 et passim; Kruger 2005. For an analysis of several mourning gestures and postures, see Gruber 1980: 2:401–79.

11. On the rending of garments by mourners, see, for example, Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 1:2, 11; 3:31; 13:31; 2 Kings 2:12; Job 1:20. The rending of garments in the context of petitionary mourning is found, inter alia, in 1 Kings 21:27 and Esther 4:1. For the rending of garments in the wake of some calamity and as a way of expressing distress, see Gen. 44:13 and 2 Sam. 13:19.

12. For uncovering the head as a sign of mourning, see Lev. 21:10; Ezek. 24:17, 23. See also Lev. 13:45 (the customs to be followed by a leper) and Num. 5:18 (the ritual of the *sotah*).

Other mourning practices mentioned in the Bible include weeping,¹³ lamentation,¹⁴ keening,¹⁵ wearing sackcloth,¹⁶ removing the shoes,¹⁷ and sometimes fasting,¹⁸ refraining from bathing¹⁹ or anointing the body with oil,²⁰ sitting or lying on the ground²¹ or in ashes,²² sometimes rolling in dirt or ashes,²³ strewing dirt or ashes

13. For example, Gen. 23:2; 50:3; Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:8; 2 Sam. 1:12; 3:32, 34.

Anthropologists note that weeping is an almost universal reaction to death. See Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson 1976: 15.

14. “Lamentation” (*hesped*) evidently refers to short cries of grief, as in “Alas, my brother!” (1 Kings 13:30; Jer. 22:18); “Ah, brother!” Ah, sister!” “Ah, lord!” or “Ah, his majesty!” (Jer. 22:18), or “Alas! alas!” (Amos 5:16). It is frequently associated with weeping: see Gen. 23:2; 2 Sam. 1:12; Ezek. 24:16, 23; 27:31; Esth. 4:3.

Sometimes it is mentioned without weeping, as in Israel’s mourning for Samuel (1 Sam. 25:1; 28:3) and Bathsheba’s for Uriah (2 Sam. 11:26).

15. E.g., 2 Sam. 1:17; 3:33; Jer. 9:20; Ezek. 32:2; 2 Chron. 35:25.

16. On the wearing of sackcloth by mourners, see, for example, Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31; Isa. 22:12; Jer. 6:26; 48:37; Ezek. 7:18; 27:31; Esth. 4:1. On sackcloth in the context of petitionary mourning see, for example, 1 Kings 21:27; Jon. 3:6, 8; Esth. 4:1.

17. Ezek. 24:17, 23; Mic. 1:8. For the removal of the shoes to express grief and distress, evidently as an expression of petitionary mourning, see 2 Sam. 15:30.

18. Fasting to express grief for the loss of a dear one is mentioned in 1 Sam. 31:13; 2 Sam. 1:12; 3:35. For fasting as part of petitionary mourning, see, e.g., Judg. 20:26; 2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27; Jon. 3:7; Esth. 4:16.

19. 2 Sam. 12:20.

20. 2 Sam. 12:20; 14:2; Isa. 61:3.

21. 2 Sam. 12:16; 13:31; Isa. 47:1.

on the head,²⁴ covering the lower part of the face (hiding the mustache),²⁵ and beating the breast²⁶ or thigh.²⁷ Although there is no explicit mention of abstaining from sexual relations, we may conjecture that this too was a mourning practice.²⁸ Bereaved wives marked themselves off from their surroundings by means of clearly recognizable “widow’s weeds.”²⁹ During the mourning period, relatives and friends visited the

22. Isa. 47:1; Jon. 3:6; Job 2:8. It is true that the mourners in these three passages are gentiles, but it is plausible that the mourning customs ascribed to them reflect those practiced in ancient Israel.

23. Jer. 6:26; Ezek. 27:30; Job 16:15.

24. See, for example, 1 Sam. 4:12; Job 2:12. For sprinkling ashes on the head in petitionary mourning see, for example, Josh. 7:6.

25. Ezek. 24:17, 22. Covering the mustache is also one of the signs of mourning prescribed for the leper (Lev. 13:45); it is mentioned, too, as part of the garb of the disgraced seers and magicians who have received no answer (Mic. 3:7).

26. Isa. 32:12; Nah. 2:8.

27. Jer. 31:19; Ezek. 21:17.

28. This seems to be behind the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. Tamar, knowing that Judah has completed his period of mourning for his wife (v. 12), conjectures that he is in a state of sexual starvation. So she disguises herself as a prostitute and induces him to have sex with her. On sexual relations as a sign of the conclusion of mourning see 2 Sam. 12:24. See also Anderson 1991: 27–37, 49, 72, 75–76, 80, 84, 86. According to b *Ta’anit* 30a, mourners are not allowed to eat, drink, anoint the body, wear shoes, or have sexual relations.

29. Gen. 38:14, 19; 2 Sam. 14:2.

mourners to console them³⁰ and took on several mourning practices themselves, as a way to express their participation in the mourners' pain, nodding their head (or perhaps the whole body),³¹ evidently they also provided them with their first meal on the first day of mourning.³²

In addition to the legitimate mourning rites mentioned above, a number of customs are denounced as illegitimate by Leviticus and Deuteronomy and thus, it stands to reason, were widespread: self-mutilation³³ and shaving or plucking out the hair and beard.³⁴

These and other mourning rites play a major psychological function: they help mourners retain some degree of stability and structure in their lives at a time when their familiar world seems to have collapsed around them and the ground is disappearing from under their feet. Such practices help them internalize and adjust to their new status as orphans, widows or widowers, bereaved parents, etc., and redefine their relations with the deceased and those around them. In addition, of course, they make it possible for them to express their grief and unburden themselves of some of their pain. Beyond all of these psychological benefits, however, the Bible takes it as axiomatic that the living have certain obligations toward the dead (this seems to be almost universal in human societies throughout history). Some of the survivors' duties to the dead, as found in the Bible, are fixed and apply to every death, such as burying

30. See, for example, 2 Sam. 10:2; Job 2:11. Pahl (1999) focuses on the role of the comforters.

31. See, for example, Jer. 15:5; 16:5; 22:10; Job 2:11.

32. Jer. 16:7; Ezek. 24:17, 22.

33. For the ban on this custom, see Lev. 19:28; 21:5; Deut. 14:1. Evidence that it was practiced can be found, for example, in Jer. 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37.

34. This custom, too, is forbidden by Lev. 21:5 and Deut. 14:1. There are many examples of its being followed: e.g., Isa. 15:2; Jer. 7:29; 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37; Job 1:20.

the deceased³⁵ and mourning; other obligations obtain only in certain cases, such as blood redemption after a murder (Num. 35:19) and levirate marriage for the widow of a man who dies without offspring (Deut. 25:5–6). Thus Aaron and his sons are barred from fulfilling their duty toward their sons/brothers and from giving vent to their emotions in a way that might allow them to ease their pain.

Of all bereavements, the loss of children is the worst of all.³⁶ In patriarchal societies like that of the Bible, which attach major importance to sons who continue the family name, we might go further and say that the most unbearable loss is that of sons. Sons are an extension of their father. This is why the wish expressed by David's courtiers as he lay on his deathbed—"May God make the renown of Solomon even greater than yours, and may He exalt his throne even higher than yours!" (1 Kings 1:47)—is no insult but in fact a blessing, which David accepts gladly. What is more, in the biblical era male offspring served a practical function: they reinforced the power of the family and could support their parents in old age.³⁷

Nadab and Abihu were Aaron's two oldest sons (Exod. 6:23). Only they accompanied Moses and Aaron when they ascended Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:1). Aaron naturally saw them as his heirs, and his firstborn Nadab as his successor in the high priesthood. He was traumatized by their sudden death, but forbidden (along with his surviving sons, Ithamar and Eleazar) to mourn them, or even to accompany the dead to the grave. Aaron's cousins, Mishael and Elzaphan, were summoned by Moses to do this instead.

35. One who wishes to show further respect for the dead can erect a tombstone, as Jacob did for his beloved wife Rachel (Gen. 35:20).

36. The author of 4 Maccabees, astonished by the capacity of the mother of the seven sons to bear the loss of her children, makes clear the extent to which such behavior is unnatural, inasmuch as parents' love for their children is immense and the need to protect their children is natural. See also the examples he cites from the animal world—the birds and bees: 4 Macc. 14:11–20 [Charles 1913: 2:680].

37. See Isa. 51:18; Ruth 4:14–15. See also, in Ugaritic literature, the son's obligations to his father as detailed in the Akhat saga (*CAT* 1.17 I 23–33).

But even though Aaron and his sons are instructed to stifle their mourning and to continue the ritual in the Sanctuary—business as usual, as it were—they nevertheless find a way to express their grief by abstaining from the ritual consumption of the gift offering. Aaron allows it to burn to ashes, thereby turning it into a burnt offering. When Moses scolds him for this, Aaron associates his action with the calamity that has befallen him, without naming it explicitly: “Such things have befallen me!” (Lev. 10:19). This expresses his intense pain.³⁸ Diane Sharon calls attention to the fact that this is a ritual meal; consequently “in rejecting this meal, Aaron is also refusing to share a meal with the God whose fire has consumed his sons.”³⁹ According to her, a sin offering as described in Leviticus 10, part of which is eaten by the priests and part of which is reserved for the deity, can be viewed, in a certain sense, as a meal shared by the priests and the deity. By refusing to take part in this feast, Aaron is expressing, in the only way left to him, his grief and rage over what has just happened.⁴⁰ But such a personal expression of grief is not found in the case of a later priest, Ezekiel, when God forbids him to mourn for his dead wife.

2. “You shall not lament or weep or let your tears flow”: Ezekiel is forbidden to mourn for his wife (Ezek. 24:15–24)

The Lord tells Ezekiel that a person who is very dear to him, “the delight of your eyes”⁴¹ (Ezek. 24:16), is about to die. It is not obvious from this that the reference is to his wife, of whose existence readers learn for the first time in this pericope that

38. Sharon 1999:138. She cites examples, from ancient Near Eastern literature in general and from the Bible in particular, that a refusal to eat is a sign of a troubled spirit, whereas eating is an expression of tranquility.

39. Ibid. See also n. 5 there, about the notion that the sacrifice is a meal served to the divinity.

40. Ibid., p. 139.

41. That is, someone whom your eyes desire, whom you love to look at (cf. Isa. 53:2). The expression may refer to objects or to people (1 Kings 20:6, and cf. vv. 3 and 5). In Lamentations 2:4 it seems to mean “beloved children” (and cf. Hos. 9:16).

relates her death. The phrase could equally refer to his children, if he had any. In any case, the Lord instructs Ezekiel to stifle his grief: “Son of man, I am about to take away the delight of your eyes from you through pestilence; but you shall not lament or weep or let your tears flow. Moan softly; observe no mourning for the dead: Put on your turban and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover over your upper lip, and do not eat the bread of men” (vv. 16–17).⁴²

This pericope raises grave problems, both linguistic and thematic, that I cannot address here.⁴³ I will mention only that the Lord’s injunction to Ezekiel at its beginning, rendered by the NJPS as “moan softly; observe no mourning for the dead,” and by the RSV as “sigh, but not aloud,” can be understood in several ways.⁴⁴ The most common interpretation derives the word *dom* from the root *d.m.m* ‘be silent’ and takes it as modifying *he’aneq* ‘moan, sigh’: thus “moan quietly.” David Kimhi considers it to an imperative and understands an implicit privative *me-* before *he’aneq*: “[*me-*]he’aneq *dom!* ‘be silent [and refrain] from sighing’; that is, from crying out as other mourners do; but you be silent and do not cry out.”⁴⁵ Abravanel’s gloss is similar (1979: 537). More plausible, however, is the common view that the Lord is not forbidding him to moan (cf. v. 23, where groaning or moaning [*u-nehamtem*] is permitted to the people) and that the phrase indicates permission for the prophet to moan his loss quietly. Thus the meaning is something like “groan silently/moan silently [but] observe no mourning for the dead.” By contrast, Levine

42. Translators and exegetes over the centuries have differed as to whether “men” here refers to “mourners” or “comforters.” I tend to the second sense, along with Cooke 1936: 271; Greenberg 1997: 509; Friebel 1999: 331; Kasher 2004: 1:484; and Lapsley 2007: 97. See also Jer. 16:7. According to the Talmud (b *Mo’ed katan* 24b), mourners may not eat of their own food on the first day of mourning. The custom that friends or relatives prepare the first meal after the funeral persists among Jews today.

43. For a discussion see, for example, Stroete 1977.

44. For a survey of the various interpretations see Zimmerli 1979: 502; Friebel 1999: 330–336.

45. Cohen 2000: 166.

(1993: 99–100) and Greenberg (1997: 508–509) associated *dom* with *d.m.m* II, “to moan.” Although they differ in the details,⁴⁶ they agree that Ezekiel is permitted to moan and sigh over his bereavement—but no more than that.

Whether we understand the passage as Kimhi and Abravanel do—namely, that Ezekiel was forbidden any manifestation, even private, of his sorrow—or that he was permitted to grieve quietly, he was clearly not allowed to engage in the standard mourning rites: lamenting or crying, baring his head and removing his shoes, covering his lip and eating the funeral meal. In contrast to Abraham, who mourned and wept for Sarah (Gen. 23:2), Ezekiel, like Aaron and his sons, is told not to mourn his wife in the normal ways.⁴⁷

46. Levine (1993:100) offers two different readings. The first understands *dom* as a noun and links it to the next word, *metim*, in the sense of a moan or lament for the dead, and takes the noun phrase as the object of the following verb *ta’aseh*: “Groan! But the lament over the dead [and] mourning do not perform.” His second reading takes *dom* as a freestanding imperative: “Moan!” Thus “Groan! Moan! But do not perform a mourning over the dead.” Greenberg (1997: 508) connects *dom* (again as a noun) with the following *metim*, as in Levine’s first construal, but takes the noun phrase as the object of the preceding verb *he’aneq*: “Groan a moaning for the dead.”

47. On the other hand, Lipton (2006) suggests that Ezekiel 24 deals not with mourning for the dead but with petitionary mourning: Ezekiel is forbidden to adopt the customs of mourning for his sick wife, in an attempt to persuade God to heal her, just as the exiles are forbidden to adopt mourning customs because of the Temple and their relatives left behind in Zion, in an attempt to influence the Lord to show them mercy. But her reading does not persuade me. As I understand it we should explain that the ban on mourning by Ezekiel to be similar to that on Aaron and his sons’ mourning for Nadab and Abihu, who died an unnatural death (Lev. 10:6), discussed

But there is a major difference between the restrictions enjoined for Aaron and his sons and those laid on Ezekiel. In the former case the purpose is to preserve the social order: as priests who have just been consecrated, Aaron and his sons must suppress their private grief in order to avoid profaning the sacred and in order to maintain the unity of the congregation for which they are responsible (Lev. 10:6–7). In Ezekiel’s case, by contrast, the prophet’s private life is cast as an emblem of the destiny of his people, as in the cases of Isaiah (8:1–4, 18), Jeremiah (16:1–9), and Hosea (1:2–9; 3). Not only does Ezekiel’s bottling up of his grief make no contribution to the social order; it actually expresses its fragility: just as Ezekiel does not mourn his wife, neither will the people mourn the awful tragedy that is about to overtake them—the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the Temple, and the violent deaths of their sons and daughters (v. 21). As the prophet puts it:⁴⁸ “You shall do as I have done: you shall not cover over your upper lips or eat the bread of comforters; and your turbans shall remain on your heads, and your sandals upon your feet. You shall not lament or weep, but you shall be heartsick because of your iniquities and shall moan to one another” (vv. 22–23).

Ezekiel’s prophecy does not explain why the people will not follow mourning customs.⁴⁹ Some hold that there will be no mourning because the people have been

above, and the command to Jeremiah that he not mourn the dead (Jer. 16:1–9), addressed below.

48. Greenberg (1997: 515) finds an interesting parallel between the collapse of the social order in Ezekiel 24, in the wake of the great calamity, and an ancient Egyptian text, the “Prophecy of Neferti,” which describes the collapse of the social order at the end of the Old Kingdom (see *ANET* 1969: 445b). In the latter, however, the failure to lament is a result of the lack of social solidarity (the text goes on to proclaim that the son will slay his father and brothers will turn foes), which, I maintain, is not the case in Ezekiel 24. See further below.

49. See the survey of the various opinions in Stroete 1977: 164–166; Lapsley 2007: 95.

commanded by the Lord to take their example from Ezekiel; not mourning for the sinful city of Jerusalem will show that they accept the justice of the divine decree and serve as a sign of their emotional detachment from Jerusalem and the Temple.⁵⁰ It seems more likely, however, that we should understand the divine injunction here in light of Ezekiel's many other symbolic actions throughout the book and see his statement to the people as a prophecy rather than a command.⁵¹ Just as the other examples of his unusual conduct are meant as an omen of the people's destiny, and not as a divine injunction to the people, so too here. When Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled and the exiles do not mourn the national disaster and the many dead, it will serve them as a portent (v. 24), that is, as evidence of the truth of Ezekiel's prophecy⁵² and consequently of the existence of the Lord and His might, as the Lord tells the people through Ezekiel: "When this happens, then you will know that I am the Lord God" (ibid.). But if it is not a divine injunction to the people not to mourn, what will prevent them from observing the normal rites? The answer, I believe, is that the unprecedented scale of the catastrophe will bring the social order, including its mourning customs, crashing down, and leave the people paralyzed in their grief, too

50. See, for example, Odell 2000, especially 201–202, and, with some variants, Friebel (1999: 342–344), who argues that when the catastrophe actually strikes there is no longer any reason for mourning customs. He compares this to David's reaction to the death of his newborn son (2 Sam. 12:20), to which we will return below (ibid., 342–343).

51. For symbolic actions related to prophecies of disaster, see Ezek. 4; 12:1–16, 17–20; 21:23–32 [18–27], and, with regard to prophecies of deliverance, 37:15–28.

52. Compare the role of the portent in Exod. 7:9; Deut. 13:2; 1 Kings 13:3; Ezek. 12:6. The last example is especially important for us, because it is another action by Ezekiel that serves as a prophetic symbol of the dismal destiny facing the people exiled from their land.

disheartened and depressed to practice such rituals.⁵³ What is more, when tragedy befalls an entire community there is little point to institutionalized mourning, since there is no one to offer consolation.⁵⁴ The magnitude of the impending national calamity is such that the exiles will be able only to moan to each other, thereby expressing their collective grief for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and lamenting their private tragedy, the deaths of their sons and daughters, in a manner that is quite uncivilized, indeed animal-like.⁵⁵ This idea, that it is the intensity of the disaster that will deter the people from mourning, is confirmed by the parallel text in Jeremiah 16. Jeremiah is commanded not to marry and not to have children (v. 2), and never to console mourners (vv. 5, 8[?]), so that his personal life will express the truncated future of the people in Judah, both parents and children, whose destruction has been decreed (vv. 5–7, 9). What is most important for us is that Jeremiah, too, describes the absence of mourning customs in the wake of mass death: “They shall not be buried; men shall not lament them, nor gash and tonsure themselves for them. They shall not break bread for a mourner to comfort him for a bereavement, nor offer one a cup of consolation for the loss of his father or mother” (vv. 6–7). I maintain that just as the people’s failure to follow mourning customs in Jeremiah 16 is an effect of the scale of the disaster, so too in Ezekiel 24:22–23.

In addition to the exiles in Babylon, we encounter parents who do not mourn the death of a child in David’s reaction to the death of the boy born of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, although he had followed mourning customs while the

53. See, for example, Cooke 1936: 269–270, 272; Allen 1990: 60–61; Greenberg 1997: 515.

54. This is Rashi’s first explanation *ad loc.* (Cohen 2000: 166).

55. The more usual sense of the root *n.h.m* ‘groan, moan’, used in v. 23, is to roar or bellow like an animal. For other uses related to human grief, see Ps. 38:9; Prov. 5:11. The optimistic reading that the exiles will not mourn because they will recognize that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple heralds the dawn of a new age (see, for example, Stroete 1977: 174; Block 1997: 794, 796; Friebel 1999: 348; Odell 2000) ignores the shocking description of the exiles as bellowing like animals.

infant was fighting for its life (2 Sam. 12:19–25) and again in the case of the Shunammite matron (2 Kings 4:18–37). In both of these, however, the parent is not commanded to stifle grief but elects to do so of his/her own accord. We now turn to an analysis of David’s anticipatory mourning before the infant’s death and of David’s and the Shunammite’s eschewing of mourning practices after the death of their sons.

3. “But now that he is dead, why should I fast?”: David’s Reaction to the Death of his Infant Son (2 Sam. 12:19–25)

The death of David’s newborn son by Bathsheba, conceived in sin, is the first death in his immediate family known to us. It is also the only death in his family that is not sudden, but foreknown, given that Nathan prophesied the child’s death (v. 14) and that the child lingers for seven days. This difference between the death of the newborn and other deaths in David’s family sheds some light on why David reversed the normal procedure—mourning while the child yet lived, and stopping the moment he learns of the infant’s death. The mourning customs observed by David during his son’s illness, stated explicitly by the text, are fasting and lying on the ground: “David fasted, and he went in and spent the night lying (*ve-shakav*) on the ground” (2 Sam. 12:16). The outcome of David’s sin with Bathsheba—“he lay (*va-yishkav*) with her” (2 Sam. 11:4)—is that he lies on the ground, in a vain attempt to atone for his sin and to annul the fatal decree passed against the son born of that sin. At the end of the story, the same words that designated the sin describe David’s attempt to comfort Bathsheba: “he lay with her” (2 Sam. 12:24).

Although they are not mentioned in so many words, David observed other mourning customs as well. This may be inferred from the fact that, after the child’s death, “he bathed and anointed himself, and he changed his clothes. He went into the House of the Lord⁵⁶ and prostrated himself” (v. 20).

The “elders of his house”—his counselors or ministers (cf. Genesis 24:2)—urge David to suspend his mourning—to rise from the ground and eat—certainly out of concern for his health, but in vain (2 Sam. 12:17). David pays no heed to their entreaties, even though they are among his closest confidants. The use here of the root

56. The reference is evidently to the sanctuary that housed the Ark of the Covenant. See Avioz 2008.

b.r. /b.r.h, which refers to the first meal after a mourning fast (2 Sam. 3:35) or illness (2 Sam. 13:5, 6, 7, 10), indicates that David was growing weaker before their eyes as a result of his intense mourning, which included fasting. We are not told at what stage of the child's illness David began observing mourning customs, but the statement that "on the seventh day the child died" (2 Sam. 12:18) evidently indicates that David's reaction to the child's illness began as soon as it became apparent. If so, we are talking of a weeklong fast, like that of the townsfolk of Jabesh Gilead after they buried Saul and his sons (1 Sam. 31:13). In addition to fasting and lying on the ground, David prayed to the Lord.

David must have felt that he was to blame for the condition of the innocent child, who would soon die on account of his father's transgression, as the prophet Nathan had informed him even before the child was born (2 Sam. 12:13–14). The link between forgiveness of David's sin and the child's death is clear. David regains his own life but must bury his infant son.

David's observance of mourning customs during his son's grave illness is not mourning for the dead but petitionary mourning, which is also an expression of penitence.⁵⁷ Such rites are appropriate as long as the petition is pending. As soon as David knows that the child is dead and that his entreaties are in vain, he terminates them. The narrator describes this in a series of short clauses that express vigorous activity and a return to life: "Thereupon David rose from the ground; he bathed and anointed himself, and he changed his clothes. He went into the House of the Lord and prostrated himself. Then he went home and asked for food, which they set before him, and he ate" (v. 20). David's conduct after the infant dies is the antithesis of his behavior while the child was sick (rising from the ground rather than lying on it, eating rather than fasting, and so on). The narrator expresses this by the divergent use of the roots *b.w. '* and *s.k.b*: instead of "he went in (*u-va '*) and spent the night lying (*ve-shakav*) on the ground" (v. 16), as part of his mourning, after the child's death the root *b.w. '* denotes resumption of his routine: "He went into (*va-yavo '*) the House of the Lord. . . . Then he went (*va-yavo '*) home" (v. 20). Shortly thereafter the roots *b.w. '* and *s.k.b* designate the renewal of sexual relations between David and Bathsheba: "he

57. Cf. Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27; Jer. 36:9; Jon. 3:5–9; Esth. 4:1–4 15–17. On petitionary mourning, see Olyan 2004: 62–96.

went in (*va-yavo*) to her and lay (*va-yishkav*) with her” (v. 24). David understands that Nathan’s prophecy has been realized and that all his attempts to avert the evil decree were in vain. His behavior after he learns of the child’s death is acceptance of the divine verdict.⁵⁸ What is more, as shown by Anderson (1991: 49, 82–84), not only do David’s actions that are the contrary of mourning rites express a return to normal life; all of them are in fact associated with biblical expressions of joy. His conduct after the infant’s death astonishes his courtiers, who incorrectly parsed his mourning practices while the child was alive as evidence of a strong emotional bond to the child and as an expression of his devastation over its impending death. So when the child dies they are afraid to give David the bad news, lest he “do something terrible” to himself (v. 18). But their anxious whispering arouses his suspicion. “Is the child dead?” he demands. We can well imagine their trepidation as they replied with the single Hebrew word “[he is] dead” (v. 19) and their tense focus on his reaction. But seeing David’s vigorous activity to end his mourning, contrary to what they had feared in light of his behavior thus far, they are bold enough to express their astonishment at this strange behavior, which does not correspond with what is expected of a bereaved father: “Why have you acted in this manner? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but now that the child is dead, you rise and take food!” (v. 21). Their puzzlement allows David to explain himself: “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: ‘Who knows? The Lord may have pity on me, and the child may live.’ But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me” (vv. 22–23).

David’s stoic response to the child’s death does not resemble his reaction in other cases of bereavement. From the public and ceremonial perspective, his desire to eat after learning of the child’s death stands in stark contrast to his refusal to do so after the death of Abner (2 Sam. 3:35). From the personal and emotional perspective, his pragmatic and rational response to the infant’s death is not repeated following the slaying of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:31, 36–37) and especially not after the death of Absalom (2 Sam. 19:1–5). Fokkelman (1981: 90) conjectures that David’s anticipatory mourning for his son, an entire week before the infant died, facilitated the resumption of his routine after the child’s death. Although it is true that anticipatory

58. Cf. Abravanel 1955: 349; Anderson 1991: 83; Sharon 1999: 41.

mourning for a gravely ill person may reduce the intensity of the grief after the person breathes his last, it cannot explain David's sharp transition from intense mourning to perfectly normal behavior. As I read it, David's calm reaction is possible only because of his emotional distance from the dead child, with whom he never had a chance to bond. It corresponds to what we know from psychology and anthropology about parents' reactions to the death of infants, as opposed to the loss of grown children, especially in societies where infant mortality is high.⁵⁹ This is what David Kimhi writes about vv. 22–23: “Nor is it worth weeping over the child after its death, as one weeps for the dead, because he was an infant and not a rational being for whose loss a man should weep. Yet David did cry for Amnon and Absalom, although it was not in his power to bring them back, as an expression of his pain and mourning” (Cohen 1993: 203).⁶⁰

Perhaps, though, we can offer another explanation for David's indifference about the infant. Bathsheba's son is the fruit of their adultery, the result of an unplanned and distinctly unwanted pregnancy. His conception led David to murder Uriah, after he had failed in his valiant efforts to get Uriah to spend the night at home and sleep with his wife, so that he could plausibly be accounted the father of the child. Thus the innocent newborn is a reminder of David's terrible transgression, for which Nathan has already censured him: “Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites” (2 Sam. 12:9). So we may conjecture that the infant's death bears with it a species of spiritual relief for the sinner; the reminder of the sin is buried, removed from sight and mind, and David can delude himself that by this loss he has paid for his sin and rehabilitated his relationship with God. The child dies instead of David, who accepts the verdict, unlike his howls of grief after the death of Absalom: “If only I had died instead of you!” (2 Sam. 19:1 [18:33]).⁶¹

59. See Blauner 1966: 318 and n. 13 (bibliographical references). According to him, primitive societies do not identify infants and children as “people.”

60. So too Abravanel on 2 Sam. 13:37 (1955: 354).

61. This was noted by Sharon 1999: 145–146.

The sequence of actions by which David marks the end of his mourning—“he *went* into the House of the Lord. . . . Then he *went* home” (2 Sam. 12:20)—is followed shortly by “he *went* in to her [Bathsheba]” (v. 24): a resumption of sexual relations and thus of normal life.⁶² But here this has a special meaning—an attempt to console Bathsheba for the death of her infant: “David consoled his wife Bathsheba; he went in to her and lay with her” (ibid.). The language here is very close to that of their first and forbidden tryst: “she went to him and he lay with her” (2 Sam. 11:4), but with such a great difference—then she was compelled to go and please him; now he goes to console her.⁶³ We can say that the child’s illness and death opened David’s heart to awareness of the misery of another person: first the child itself, as long as it was struggling for life, and then its mother Bathsheba, after the death of her infant.

The events in chapters 11 and 12 have a chiastic structure:

<u>Chapter 11</u>	<u>Chapter 12</u>
Pregnancy	Death of the infant
Death of Uriah	Pregnancy

In chapter 11, Bathsheba’s unwanted pregnancy leads to the murder of Uriah. In chapter 12 the death of Bathsheba’s son leads David to console her and she again conceives, but willingly this time. The conclusion of the story is a rectification of the sin and its punishment. In contrast to Nathan’s earlier mission bearing a stern rebuke—“And the Lord sent Nathan to David” (2 Sam. 12:1)—the end of the story—“He sent a message through the prophet Nathan” (v. 25)—heralds hope and peace. In contrast to the death of the infant as a consequence of David’s sin with “Uriah’s wife” (v. 15), now we have the birth of the son who will continue his dynasty, a

62. According to David Kimhi on 2 Sam. 12:20, David slept with Bathsheba on the very day that the infant died (Cohen 1993: 203).

63. Shimon Bar-Efrat expresses this pithily: “Dort musste Batscheba um seinetwillen zu ihm kommen, hier kommt er zu ihr um ihretwillen” (Bar-Efrat 2009: 121).

consequence of David's desire to console "his wife Bathsheba" (v. 24).⁶⁴ In contrast to the concluding sentence of the account of the sin—"But the Lord was displeased with what David had done" (2 Sam. 11:27), the second infant is the object of God's love (2 Sam. 12:24), which is reconfirmed by the name Nathan gives him at God's behest: "He sent a message through the prophet Nathan; and he was named Jedidiah [i.e., beloved of the Lord] at the instance of the Lord" (v. 25).

The name given him by his parents, too (by his father, according to the *kethib*; by his mother, according to the *qere*)—Solomon, which expresses wholeness and peace (v. 24)⁶⁵—articulates their hope for a new beginning after the calamity they have endured. As Abravanel notes it in his commentary on v. 24: "He named him Solomon, to indicate that David and his father in heaven made peace through him" (1955: 349).

4. "All is well": The Shunammite Matron's Restrained Reaction to her Son's Death (2 Kings 4:18–37)

Unlike David, who expresses no grief after the death of his infant son because he has accepted the heavenly verdict, the Shunammite matron suppresses all manifestations of mourning precisely because she has not done so and is resolved to fight for her son's life. This requires that she conceal the fact of his death, for reasons I will explain below. First, however, let us consider the background of the story. In 2 Kings 4:8–17 we read that Elisha seeks to reward the Shunammite matron for her liberality in hosting him whenever he visits Shunem and adding an upper chamber to her house for him to stay in. First he proposes to exercise his connections in high-up places on her behalf; but the matron rejects this offer and makes it clear that she is content with what she has. Elisha is not satisfied and still wants to reward her for her generosity.

64. On the different epithets attached to Bathsheba, see *ibid.*

65. For the derivation of Solomon from "peace," see 1 Chron 22:9: "Solomon (*shelomoh*) will be his name and I shall confer peace (*shalom*) and quiet on Israel in his time." For the paronomasia of the name Solomon and the various occurrences of the word *shalom* with reference to him, see, e.g., Garsiel 1991: 191–192, 204–205; Frisch 1999: 93–95. For the play between Solomon and *shelemut* 'wholeness, perfection', see Garsiel 1991: 206; Frisch 1988: 90–91.

Here his serving-man Gehazi enters the picture, reminding his master that the woman has no son and that her husband is elderly. Gehazi is hinting that Elisha should exploit not his earthly but his heavenly entrée and work a miracle for the woman. Elisha accepts the advice and informs the Shunammite matron that within a year she will be embracing a son. The woman's anxious reaction—"Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (2 Kings 4:16)—does not indicate that she does not want a child, but rather that, wanting one very much indeed, she is afraid of disappointment.⁶⁶ On the surface, however, her fears are pointless and the prophet's promise is realized in full (v. 17). If the story ended here, we could read it as a freestanding account of a miraculous birth effected by Elisha. But the story has a second part, in which the young boy, who has gone out to the fields to watch his father and the harvesters at work, succumbs to heatstroke or sunstroke. When the child cries out in pain—"my head, my head!" (v. 19)—his father sends him back home to his mother. We read the heartrending details of how she cuddles him on her lap, powerless to help him, until he dies (v. 20). But the moment the child stops breathing the Shunammite matron turns into a tigress fighting for his life.

Instead of weeping inconsolably and starting to mourn, she lays the body on the bed in the room of Elisha, the "holy man of God" (as she refers to him in v. 9), shuts the door, and makes preparations for the long journey to Elisha on the Carmel, where she will beg him to restore her son.

There seem to be three reasons for carrying the child's lifeless body to the room and bed of the man of God. First of all, on the symbolic level, the man of God, who was responsible for the child's birth, is deemed by the Shunammite to be equally responsible for his "rebirth," and his bed symbolizes this responsibility. Second, on the magical level, her action expresses the common belief that the appurtenances of saints absorb some of their owner's holiness and thus have the power to effect miracles on their own.⁶⁷ The Shunammite, who recognizes Elisha's holiness, identifies his bed as a protected space in which the process of death will be suspended

66. Pace Shields 1993: 62, 63, 67; Dijk-Hemmes 1994: 225, 228; and Amit 2003: 287–88. For a review of the argument that she really does not want a son, see Shemesh 2008:15; for the refutation of that idea, see *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

67. See Ganuz 1989.

until the man of God arrives and can restore the boy to life. Third, on the practical level, the Shunammite must conceal the child's death from everyone, and Elisha's shuttered chamber is the ideal hiding place. Her need to hide the fact of death seems to combine a practical consideration with a mystical attitude. As a practical matter, had the child's corpse been left in a public space the relatives might have buried him, putting an end to the Shunammite's hopes of regaining her son. On the mystical level, there is the idea that recognizing and accepting death gives it power and standing as an established fact. Note that she never utters the word "dead" in connection with the boy, not even to Elisha.

Before she reaches the prophet, though, she must overcome the obstacle of his servant Gehazi, whom Elisha, spying her in the distance and concerned by her unannounced arrival, sends out to make sure that she, her husband, and her son are well. The Shunammite dismisses Gehazi with the same answer she had given her husband, "All is well" (v. 26), because she understands that the situation is so serious that only direct intervention by the man of God will avail (the accuracy of her perception is seen later, when Gehazi's mission with Elisha's staff fails, but the prophet is able to revive the child: vv. 29–37). In contrast to her calm response to Gehazi, when the Shunammite reaches Elisha she is reduced to an act of desperation, which breaches the bounds of propriety, and seizes hold of the prophet's feet (v. 27). This utterly violates the distance that has always marked her behavior toward him, as manifested in the construction of his own room (v. 10) and in her standing in the doorway, rather than entering, when he summons her (v. 15). Falling on Elisha's feet is the woman's first expression of her anguish. Gehazi, shocked by her inappropriate behavior, tries to pull her away, but Elisha has understood that her shocking action stems from a shocking situation—"she is in bitter distress" (v. 27)—and instructs Gehazi to leave her alone. Only now does the Shunammite tell Elisha that her distress involves her son, when she complains to him: "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I say: 'Don't mislead me'?" (v. 28). But she still is careful not to say that the child is dead. Elisha may believe, then, that the child is critically ill or unconscious, so that it would suffice to send his staff with Gehazi to rectify matters; the miracle of healing has little in common with the miracle of resurrection. Ultimately Elisha gives in to the Shunammite's insistence that he act directly to restore the child; at the end of the story the Shunammite does again embrace a living son.

But in order to succeed in her mission she has had to suppress her grief at her son's death and stifle every expression of mourning, to the point of falsely reassuring both her husband and Gehazi that "all is well." Her avoidance of manifestations of grief continues until the moment she grabs Elisha's feet in supplication. In this case the strategy of not mourning is intended to bring the boy back to life.

5. "Summon the dirge-singers, let them come" (Jer. 9:16 [17]): Mourning and Gender

In Leviticus 10:6, Aaron and his two surviving sons are forbidden to mourn for Nadab and Abihu (see above, §1). However, Moses tells Aaron that the entire nation will mourn the dead, a detail that may have offered some small consolation to the father and brothers who could not mourn themselves. Although the text does not say so explicitly, there seem to have been other first-degree relatives who did mourn for Nadab and Abihu: their mother Elisheva (see Exod. 6:23) and their sisters (see Lev. 10:14).⁶⁸ It is true that there is no textual evidence of this mourning, but there is no reason why women who had not been anointed with the sacred oil should not express

68. Ugaritic literature offers several instances of mourning by sisters: the goddess Anat mourns for her brother Baal (*CAT* 1.6 I 1–29); Paghit mourns for her murdered brother Aqhat (*CAT* 1.19 I 34–37). Both of them take vengeance against the murderer (Anat's vengeance, *CAT* 1.6 II 4–37; Paghit's, *CAT* 1.19 IV 23–61). In the short Sumerian "Dream of Dumuzi," Dumuzi has a vision of his mother and sister mourning for him (Wolkstein and Kraemer 1983: 74). The sister, Geshtinanna, did not reveal Dumuzi's hiding place to the *galla*, even though they tortured her, unlike his friend, who revealed his secret for money (*ibid.*, 79–81). After Dumuzi's death, his wife Inaanna, mother Sirtur, and sister Geshtinanna sang a dirge for him (*ibid.*, 85–88). But it was Geshtinanna who sacrificed herself for him and shared his fate by agreeing to replace him in the underworld for six months out of every year (*ibid.*, 88–89).

their grief. As such their situation was better than that of the men in the family, who had to smother their pain and seclude themselves in the sacred precinct.

Anthropological research points to the important function of women in mourning rites.⁶⁹ Ethnomusicologists note that the singing of dirges, especially at funerals, is a classically female role.⁷⁰ In Sumerian literature this is reflected by the dirges sung by Dumuzi's mother, sister, and wife after he dies and is transported to the underworld,⁷¹ as well as by the "weeping goddess" who bewails the destruction of her city and sanctuary and the bitter fate of its citizens. The most impressive of these city dirges is that by the goddess Ningal for Ur.⁷² There seems to be a parallel between the goddess who weeps for the destruction of her city and the personification of Zion in the book of Lamentations as a widow (Lam. 1:1) and as a mother traumatized by the suffering of her dying sons (2:19) and by the sight of their corpses (2:20). The motif of the weeping goddess is also evident in Jeremiah's image of the matriarch Rachel as the mother of the entire nation, weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted (Jer. 31:15).⁷³

69. See, for example, Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson 1976: 21–28, 145; Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 30, 36, 65, 77, 83, 102, 115–116. Durkheim (1965 [1915]: 436–441) notes that Australian aborigine women are required to engage in especially cruel mourning rites (self-mutilation, cautery of their breasts and abdomen), which he ascribes to their inferior social status.

70. Feld and Fox (1994: 39), followed by Cooper in his article on Sumerian dirges (2006: 43–44), note that the importance of women as keeners may explain why the dirges are written in the Emesal dialect, conventionally viewed as a female dialect.

71. On the weeping goddess motif see Kramer 1982, 1983. On the dirges sung for Dumuzi by the three female deities (his mother, wife, and sister), see above, n. 68.

72. *ANET* 1969: 455–463.

73. See Kramer (1982: 141*), who proposes that the Sumerian text BM 98396, which describes the mourning by Ninhursag (also called Ningal) for the destruction of

Although there is scant evidence in the Bible of mourning by specific women,⁷⁴ dirge-singing is represented as a women's profession. The role of the keeners is to arouse the mourners and comforters to tears, as we learn from Jeremiah: "Thus said the Lord of Hosts: 'Listen! Summon the dirge-singers, let them come; send for the skilled women,⁷⁵ let them come. Let them quickly start a wailing for us, that our eyes may run with tears, our pupils flow with water' " (Jer. 9:16–17 [17–18]). In the mishnaic era, too, this was a women's profession, as indicated by Rabbi Judah's dictum that "even the poorest in Israel should not hire less than two flutes and one wailing woman" (m *Ketubot* 4:4 [trans. Danby]). The Ugaritic myth tells of the women (referred to as weepers, mourners, and breakers of their skin) who lament Aqhat in the home of his father Danel for seven years before Danel expels them from his house (*CAT* 1.19 IV 9–22).⁷⁶

It would seem, however, that aside from the professional keeners for whom it was a livelihood, all women were expected to lament the dead or the catastrophe at times of private or collective mourning. "Daughters of Israel, weep over Saul," enjoins David (2 Sam. 1:24). Ezekiel instructs the daughters of the nations to sing a dirge for Egypt (Ezek. 32:16). Jeremiah calls on the Ammonite women, the "daughters of Rabbah," to cry out and observe mourning customs for the national calamity that will strike their country (Jer. 49:3). The daughters of Israel lamented Jephthah's daughter four days every year (Judg. 11:40). The singing of dirges by women is one of the

Ur, be taken as the prototype for Rachel's weeping for her children, "who are gone" (Jer. 31:15).

74. We read that Bathsheba mourned for her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11:26) and that the wise woman of Tekoa disguised herself as a woman in mourning for her son (2 Sam. 14:2). We do read about the extraordinary attention paid by Rizpah daughter of Aiah to her dead sons (2 Sam. 21:10), but not that she actually mourned them.

75. "Skilled women" (*hakamot*) means professional keeners. See, for example, David Kimhi ad loc.; Thompson 1980: 315, n. 2; Carroll 1986: 245.

76. In Israel today, at funerals of members of the Yemenite community, there are women who specialize in keening and singing dirges.

forbidden practices of idolatry, as indicated by Ezekiel’s vision of the women sitting at the gate of the Temple and weeping for the dead Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14), a ritual linked to the Sumerian myth of the death of Dumuzi, which spread throughout the Fertile Crescent and as far as Greece.

Isaiah has a vision of women who are “beat[ing themselves] on the breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine” (Isa. 32:12). Here there is a play on words—*shadayim* ‘breasts’ and *sedei hemed* ‘pleasant fields’—plus the obvious allusion to women in “pleasant fields” and “fruitful vine.”⁷⁷ On the explicit level, the women are to mourn for the fields and vines that no longer provide grain and wine; implicit, however, is that they are to mourn for themselves, for their sorry state in which they can no longer be seen as fruitful fields and prolific vines. As I understand it, the interplay of levels in Isaiah here provides an explanation of women’s central role in mourning rites, as exemplified by the Sumerian weeping goddess/mother and by the matriarch Rachel weeping for her sons: women, who produce life from their bodies, like a field, and who nourish their infants with their own milk, are the first to mourn when the life that they brought into the world and nurtured lovingly suddenly withers and dies.

6. Conclusion

I have examined four biblical stories of mourners who do not observe mourning customs for dead relatives: Aaron and his sons are forbidden to mourn for their sons/brothers, Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10); Ezekiel is forbidden to mourn for his wife (Ezek. 24:15–24); David astonishes his courtiers by abruptly terminating his mourning when his infant son dies (2 Sam. 12:19–25); and the Shunammite matron does not display any grief for her dead son (2 Kings 4:8–37). In three of these cases the non-mourner is a parent (Aaron,⁷⁸ David, and the Shunammite matron); in the

77. The metaphor of woman as a field is very common in Israelite culture and in both the ancient and modern world. See Shemesh (in press). Woman as a fruitful vine can be found in Ezek. 19:10 and Ps. 128:3.

78. In this case the surviving male siblings were included in the ban, but the narrative focuses on the reaction of the father.

fourth, a husband (Ezekiel) who does not mourn his wife. In two of them it is the Lord's prophet (Moses) or the Lord Himself who prohibits the observance of mourning, but there is a significant difference between the situations: Aaron and his sons must eschew mourning in order to maintain the social order, whereas Ezekiel must suppress his grief for his wife as a sign of the collapse of the social order, soon to be manifested by the people's avoidance of mourning for the destruction of the Temple and their loved ones. In the other two cases it is the bereaved parent who decides not to mourn: David, by returning to his normal routine after the infant's death, expresses his acceptance of the divine judgment; whereas the Shunammite matron does not mourn precisely because she does not accept the verdict and is determined to do whatever she can to restore her son to life. In view of the immense psychological importance of mourning customs, we readily comprehend how difficult it must have been for Aaron and his sons, Ezekiel, and the Shunammite to stifle their anguish and behave as if nothing was wrong: Aaron and his sons did so in response to Moses' injunction; Ezekiel, in compliance with an explicit divine command; and the Shunammite, following her own intuition, which told her what would be the most effective manner to rectify the situation.

As I have argued here, it seems likely that Nadab and Abihu's mother and sisters were permitted to mourn for them, since they had not been anointed with the sacred oil and did not perform priestly functions. We know that women played a major role in mourning rites in the ancient world (see above, §5). I believe the key to their centrality in this domain is the notion that women, as the generators of life, are the most appropriate persons to lead the mourning for its loss.

Abbreviations:

ANET 1969 – *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 1969. ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd edition, Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

CAT – *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (KTU: second, enlarged edition), eds. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz and Joaquín 1995. Sanmartín, Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

CBQ – *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.

EI – *Eretz Israel*.

JHS – *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*.

JJS – *Journal of Jewish Studies*

JQR – *The Jewish Quarterly Review*.

JSOT – *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*.

VT – *Vetus Testamentum*.

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