“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter” (Lamentations 1:1-4).¹

War and Peace. These are infinite, complicated, and simultaneously painful and hopeful subjects indeed. Father Ryan has admirably provided a broad overview of the complex roles of war and peace in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, so I would like to focus,
instead, on a single moment of war and violence—the destruction of
the Temple in Jerusalem—its aftermath, and the rippling reverberations
(historiographical, exegetical, poetic, and personal) it has had in the
course of Jewish history. As we will see, this story and its textual traditions
center on Jerusalem, the holy city, but also on Babylon; this story, as I will
tell it, is at least 2500 years old, and yet its central settings, Jerusalem, on
the one hand, and Babylon, modern day Iraq, on the other, are still the
sites of contemporary wars and ongoing peacemaking efforts. That is, the
story I will tell begins in antiquity, and winds its way through medieval
and modern times, but it has not been resolved nor come to an end.

I have also chosen to tell this particular story because it is not only about
war but about exile, migration, and dislocation and how bound up home
and homelessness are with war, violence, and the destruction of cities.
These are themes with which we are, unfortunately, all too familiar these
days. Through three historical moments, I hope to explore how war and
migration are coupled in Jewish tradition, and the surprising ways in
which this coupling sometimes worked.

WAR, LAMENT, AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

I opened this reflection with the opening verses from the Book of
Lamentations, written after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in
Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian forces in 586 BCE.
The Book of Lamentations is post-war literature. The narrator of the text
describes Jerusalem, emptied of her people, lonely, widowed, and weeping;
the roads themselves mourn, remembering the pilgrims who no longer
travel to the city for the three annual festivals. When I teach this text in
my undergraduate courses, my students and I reflect together on what
was lost when the Temple fell: a cultic center, perhaps a priestly library, the
ability to bring sacrifices (and thus the power to ask God for atonement
or assistance, or to offer thanksgiving), human lives, material possessions,
homes, morale, and faith. After the first few passages of Lamentations,
the text abruptly shifts and the narrator addresses God directly: “Look
and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger... the LORD has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter Judah. For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears...” (Lam 1:13-16).

After the Temple was destroyed, the Jews were forced into exile. They found themselves captives, slaves, and refugees in Babylon. Psalm 137, also written in this period, begins as follows: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” (1). Exhausted and disheartened after war, according to this Psalm, these exiles were taunted by their captors to “sing one of the songs of Zion” (3). The Psalm describes how these Jews, overcome with sorrow, hung up their harps on the willow trees, unable to sing. Instead, they sat in lament: “How can we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (4). Their memory of Jerusalem was so entwined with the city’s destruction that they could no longer sing as they once did in their Temple. The Psalm continues: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you...” (5-6). This text is about the inability to sing after war, the feeling of dislocation in a foreign land, and the promise not to forget the place from which one has fled and to which one longs to return. Though we do not know the exact date of this Psalm, its deeply emotional tone and its setting, on the banks of the river, captures (or evokes) an early moment of exile, when sorrow is overwhelming and silencing.

Despite these laments, the Jews eventually did settle comfortably in Babylon. We know that they did because, in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we read that during the reign of the Persian king Cyrus the Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. There were many Jews who returned and rebuilt the second Temple. The text mentions that among those who journeyed back to Jerusalem were 200 singers, which alludes to the silenced songs in Psalm 137 in the aftermath of war and signals the return of song during this period of rebuilding. But others were reluctant to leave their new homes and
communities in Babylon, and so they stayed behind. According to my Iraqi family’s traditions, our ancestors were among those who arrived in Babylon as exiles after the first Temple’s destruction and did not leave. I sometimes imagine my ancient ancestors in Babylon—what was it that made them stay? Their friendships with neighbors? The good schools their children attended? The landscape? Their finances?

I want briefly to fast-forward from the sixth century BCE to the sixth century CE. The Jews, again, found themselves in Babylonia. Centuries earlier, in 70 CE, they had again been exiled from Jerusalem after a series of revolts against the Roman Empire that left their second Temple destroyed in a war that the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius described as “the greatest not only of the wars of our own time, but, so far as accounts have reached us, well nigh of all that ever broke out between cities or nations” (He was no doubt being dramatic, in the genre of ancient Greek historiography, but the passage nonetheless signals how devastating this series of wars must have been for Jerusalem’s population.) Over time, the majority of Jews settled in communities in the Galilee in the Roman province of Palestine and in various cities (Sura, Pumpedita, Mahoza, Nahardeah) in Sasanian Babylonia. Rabbis began emigrating from the Galilee to Babylonia by the third century CE, probably because some Jews had remained in their communities between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and so it was a safe place to go, already settled by earlier Jews. By the end of late antiquity, the rabbinic community in Babylonia had established itself as the authoritative Jewish center of learning, and it flourished. It was there that the Babylonian Talmud was compiled, edited, and studied in study houses and eventually used as the basis for Jewish rituals and law. (It is this literature that lies at the center of my own research, and that is still studied in yeshivot, and more recently universities, around the world.)

For the rabbis in Babylonia, the Temple’s destructions (at this point a conflation of the first and second Temples’ destructions) remained one of—or perhaps even the—defining moments in their recollection of
the past along with the Exodus from Egypt, commemorated in daily prayers and on the holiday of Passover. Even as they settled comfortably in Babylonia, befriending the aristocracy and picking up some Persian, they imagined their God mourning in heaven. In the first tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, we read that God marks the passage of time with lament: “Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel says, citing Rav: The night has three watches and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says, ‘Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world.’”\(^5\) In this passage, God has insomnia and for good reason; God spends regular intervals of time each night mourning for the loss of the Temple (a Temple God destroyed, according to this passage and others, including Lamentations, because of Israelite sin). In another passage, Rabbi Aha tells Rabbi Nahman bar Yizhaq that “Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, there is no laughter for the Holy One, blessed be He.”\(^6\) While God is described as spending three hours of each day laughing with the Leviathan, after the Temple’s destruction God is no longer able to laugh at all. While in the book of Lamentations the city of Jerusalem weeps out of loneliness and the pain inflicted by war, and in Psalm 137 the people of Israel lament their distance from the city from which they were exiled, here, so many centuries later and back in Babylonia, it is God who the rabbis imagine mourning the Temple’s destruction. God still cannot bear to laugh, the rabbis insist, because of the memory of war.\(^7\)

**JUDAH HALEVI, BETWEEN PEACE AND WAR**

I would now like to turn to a second moment, in the medieval period, in which exile from and return to Jerusalem were reconceived by a prolific Spanish Jewish physician, polemicist, and poet, Judah Halevi, in a new context of war and peace. Halevi begins one of his poems by addressing Jerusalem directly—“Zion!”—and asking her: “Do you wonder how and where your captives / Are now, and if they think of you, the far-flocked remnants?”\(^8\) In Lamentations, the city sits desolate, with no inhabitants
to comfort her—they have gone into exile (even “her infants have gone into captivity,” 1:5). In this poem, Halevi turns back to the city and asks Jerusalem if she (the city imagined is in the feminine) ever wonders what happened to those exiles, her children, who fled in war. He assures Jerusalem that they do, indeed, still think of her, even as they are spread throughout the four corners of the world so many centuries later: “From north and south, east, west, and all directions / Near and far, they send their greetings / As I send mine.”

Halevi’s poems become love poems to the city, ones in which he not only professes his love and his homesickness, but also in which he promises to return. In one of his most well-known poems, Halevi insists that “My heart in the East / But the rest of me far in the West.”

Not only does Halevi think of Jerusalem with love and longing; he also wishes to reciprocate the city’s tears with his own, enough to cover Zion’s mountainous landscape with symbolic morning dew (“captured by my longings / To weep like Hermon’s dew upon your mountains”). In Halevi’s poems, lament transforms into love; love replaces, or at least displaces, grief.

Halevi uses the opening word of the Book of Lamentations—“How?”—to link back to the city’s destruction but also to prompt his vow to travel to Jerusalem. What will he do once he arrives in Jerusalem? Halevi provides an answer in a third poem: “Would that on eagle’s wings I flew/ To mix the water of my tears with your parched clay!” Halevi’s poems about Jerusalem emphasize the tears and the dust; Halevi imagines that his tears will moisten the “parched clay,” “the ruined Shrine’s dust,” and the “stones and earth” and remold and rebuild, if not physically then poetically, the city and its temple.

Halevi wrote these poems in a context of simultaneous peace and war. He was living in Muslim al-Andalus during the so-called “Golden Age,” a peaceful and prosperous time for Jews in the Iberian Peninsula; he was free to practice medicine and business, write theological and polemical treatises, and compose religious and secular poetry. He was also able
to travel—to Alexandria, to Cairo, and eventually to Jerusalem. But he was writing in the early decades of the Crusades, during a time when Jerusalem was, again, caught up in a series of brutal and bloody battles, and their aftermath. Halevi references the Crusades and the Christian-Muslim conflicts over Jerusalem when he writes of Jerusalem “in the bonds of the Moor” and “Zion chained to the Cross.”

According to legend (but probably not historical fact, as we know little about the circumstances of Halevi’s passing), Halevi was killed as he kneeled to recite one of his Odes to Jerusalem upon entering the city for the first time in the summer of 1141. Halevi, living in peaceful al-Andalus, nonetheless longed to travel to Jerusalem, which, at the time, was a city that had recently suffered a series of wars and remained at the brink of yet more violence. That he survived dangerous sea voyages, hunger, and other perils of travel only to die at the gates of a turbulent Jerusalem fits well with the themes of his poems and his promises to return at all costs, even for just a single glimpse of the destroyed city.

EXILE FROM EXILE, AND ALSO BACK HOME

Not all Jews, however, so eagerly embraced return to Zion. Remember those Jews who stayed put in Babylon when Zerubavel, Ezra, and Nehemiah made the journey to rebuild the second Temple, and who welcomed the Galilean rabbis back during the Sasanian period. The modern Jews of Iraq believed that they were their direct descendants, never tempted to leave their homes. The Iraqi-Canadian novelist and critic Naim Kattan begins the preface of his book, *Farewell, Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*, by reminding his readers that only in the twentieth century have “the prisoners of Nebuchadnezzar...had to abandon the land where they’d lived for twenty-five centuries.” Mir Basri, a Jewish Iraqi essayist and poet also writes of his heritage by emphasizing the ancient presence of Jews in Babylon and the integral role they played in Iraqi culture even in his day: “In Babylon, after a while, the Jewish rabbis wrote the Talmud, the lighthouse of Moses’ law [ash-shari’a
....And we, those who lived in Iraq, in ancient and modern times, in the times of the Chaldeans and the Babylonians, the Persians and the Abbasids, and then in the eras of the Turks, the British, and the Arabs, carried in our minds and on our tongues, their lofty mission.”

This tradition that the Jews of Baghdad were Nebuchadnezzar’s captives, and that their ancestors were those who compiled the Babylonian Talmud is not historically verifiable (many of Iraq’s Jews were probably exiles fleeing the Iberian Peninsula after the Spanish Expulsion in the 1490s, and in any case only a handful of rabbinic elites were involved in the Talmud’s composition and redaction); these genealogies reveal much more about how Iraqi Jews thought about their place in contemporary Iraqi society than about ancient history, about which we have little evidence.

What motivated, or forced, these Iraqi Jews—150,000 of them in Baghdad (about 25% of the city’s total population) in 1940, and significant numbers in Basra and elsewhere—to leave a land they considered home for two and a half millennia, and where did they go? It will not come as a surprise, by now, that after a series of wars, many of them returned to Zion.

Father Ryan ended his talk with his father’s story of war and peace, which inspired me to end my response with a story about mine. My father was born in Baghdad in 1942, when the Second World War was raging in Europe. Iraq was a relatively safe place to be a Jew then. Even so, not long before he was born, in June 1941, the Farhoud, a series of urban pogroms, killed close to 180 Iraqi Jews in Baghdad and Basra and left the Jewish communities there feeling unsafe and vulnerable. After the war in Palestine in the late ’40s, for various reasons life in Baghdad became increasingly challenging for its Jewish population. Jews no longer felt safe in their city and in the following years they fled, en masse, to the new State of Israel.

One night in 1950, my grandparents woke my 8-year-old father up from a deep sleep. Without prior warning, they sent him with his school bus driver, Aharon, and Aharon’s nine children, to Israel. Disguised as Aharon’s
tenth child, my father boarded a flight to the Holy Land. He did not know at the time that he would not see his mother for six years, and his father for 12. My father still remembers this night as though it happened yesterday. When I ask him about it, he tells me that he sat in the third-to-last row of the plane, by the window. Before takeoff, Aharon came to sit next to him, sensing that the journey ahead would not be easy. Aharon turned to my father and asked him, simply, “ashlonek—how are you doing?” “Soda umusbura,” my father responded in Judaeo-Arabic, “[the world] is tainted black.”

My father was heading to the land of Israel, as Halevi had done many centuries earlier. But while Halevi boasted that, in his eagerness and haste to get to Jerusalem he “never stopped to kiss my wife, my children, friends, or kin,” for my father the abruptness and loneliness of the move was difficult. The trip for my father was not a return home, but a move away from home, though my father did eventually make a new home. I find it ironic that it was war that exiled the Jews from Jerusalem in the first place, that brought them to Babylon, and that it was another series of wars (in Europe, in Palestine, in Iraq) that brought my father and so many Iraqi Jews in the late ’40s and early ’50s, and also into the ’90s and 2000s, back again as refugees. I am not suggesting that such Jews rejected the idea of return to Zion—my great grandfather’s name, after all, was Tsiyon (Zion)—but rather that the relations between Jerusalem and Babylon were complicated, and that, in the course of Jewish history, wars (the making of them, the enduring of them) have so often been associated with exiles and migrations, leaving homes and making new ones.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Where does all this leave us? I might have chosen to reflect on other texts and moments on the topic of war and peace—the biblical command not to forget the Amalekites and to wage relentless war against them, rabbinic hesitation about any military endeavors even those that might have heralded the messianic era, the military poetry of Samuel ibn Naghrela
Ha-Nagid, the medieval philosopher Maimonides’ discussion in *Laws of Kings and their Wars* about the differences between waging voluntary and obligatory wars, and the application of these ideas to more modern circumstances. But I did not want to lose sight of the individuals implicated and affected by war and peace, and the traces of their stories. War and dislocation—of individuals, and of communities—have been a running theme through our sources, yet in unexpected ways. In the book of Lamentations and Psalm 137, war caused exile, Jewish captives taken to Babylon. But another war, in which the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians, left a king in power who encouraged the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed. The Roman war again left the Temple in ruins, and the guerilla wars of the Bar Kokhba revolt shortly thereafter resulted in the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem and their eventual resettlement to the north and east. The battles of the Crusades set the backdrop of Judah Halevi’s poetry of longing, and eventually his storm-tossed voyage across the sea and back to Jerusalem. War II, the Holocaust, the Farhoud, and the war of 1948—all unsettled life for the Jews of Baghdad such that they were forced to leave their homes and live in a sort of exile from one homeland in another. There is not a single direction of migration in these moments and texts, nor a predetermined trajectory of war. There is a pattern, though: each war caused upheavals—military, social, economic, religious—that, in turn, left people, individuals and communities, fleeing and seeking new places to live in peace, as, alas, they still do today.
NOTES

1 All biblical passages follow the New Revised Standard Version translation.
2 Ezra 2:64.
3 Consider, for example, Ezra 1:4, which directs those who do not make the journey to Jerusalem to send resources instead. A total of 42,360 Israelites, 70,337 servants, and 200 singers are said to have returned in Ezra 2:64.
6 A series of biblical passages (Isaiah 22:12, Psalm 137:5, Isaiah 42:14) are then proposed as possible proof texts for this interpretation.
7 There are many additional examples from the Talmud and rabbinic midrashim of the impact that these wars had on Jewish consciousness, and on their sense of place in the diaspora. See, e.g., *Lamentations Rabbah* and *Pesiqta Rabbati*, as well as Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000). In *Lamentations Rabbah* 1.1, God performs the rituals of mourning for the Temple, and in *Lamentations Rabbah* Proem 24, God insists on weeping for the Temple’s destruction.
9 Ibid.
11 Halevi, “Zion, Do You Wonder?”, ibid., 23.
13 Halevi, “To Jerusalem,” ibid., 22.
17 Naim Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad* tr. Sheila Fischman; (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), v. The book was first published in French as *Adieu, Babylone* in 1975, and translated three decades later, after the Iraq War, into English,
with a new preface from which this passage is a quote. He refers here not only to the mass migrations of the mid-twentieth century but also subsequent ones, including during the Iraq War in the early twenty-first. Nissim Rejwan's memoir, *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), also offers an important perspective on Iraqi Jews' reflections on their past in the region and their rapid emigration.


22 I recall God's command to Abraham, “*lekh lekha – go!*” (Genesis 12:1), to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house when Abraham made a similar journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan.


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