



Chaos

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How do we understand the role of chaos in our lives, which feels so omnipresent right now? How can we defend against the mayhem? On this episode of Texting, Elana Stein Hain and Leora Batnitzky examine two passages from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and explore the surprising ways that chaos can be contained.

*This source sheet is part of the April 19, 2024 episode of the podcast **TEXTING with Elana Stein Hain** which delves deeply into Jewish texts to guide and inspire us as we grapple with the concerns and meaning of this moment. Join Elana as she addresses the issues of our day through the lens of classical Jewish texts in conversation with Hartman scholars.*

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I. The Shard that Keeps Chaos at Bay

1. Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 10:2 (29a)

וכן את מוצא בשעה שבא דוד לחפור תימליוסים של בית המקדש חפר חמש עשר מאוין דאמין ולא אשכח תהומא ובסופא אשכח חד עציץ ובעא מירמיתיה. א"ל לית את יכיל א"ל למה א"ל דנא הכא כביש על תהומא. א"ל ומן אימת את הכא א"ל מן שעתא דאשמע רחמנא קליה בסיני [שמות כ ב] אנכי ה' א-להיך רעדת ארעא ושקיעת ואנא יהיב הכא כביש על תהומא אף על גב כן לא שמע ליה כיון דרימיה סליק תהומא ובעא מטפא עלמא.

Likewise, you find when David came to dig the foundations of the Temple. He dug 1500 cubits and could not find the abyss (*tehom*). In the end, he found one ceramic pot and wanted to remove it. It said to him: You cannot. He asked: Why? It responded: I am here to subdue the abyss. He asked: Since when have you been here? It responded: From the time that God sounded God's voice at Sinai: "I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:2), the land trembled and sank. And I was placed here to subdue the abyss. Even so, he did not listen. When he removed it, the abyss arose and threatened to flood the world.

והוה אחיתופל קאים תמן אמר כדין דוד מתחנק ואנא מליך. אמר דוד מאן דחכם דידיע מקימתיה ולא מקים ליה ייא סופיה מתחנק. אמר מה דאמר ואוקמיה. התחיל דוד אומר שירה [תהילים קכ א] שיר המעלות שיר למאה עולות על כל מאה אמה היה אומר שירה. אף על גב כן הוה סופה מתחנקה.

And Ahitofel was standing there. He said, Now David will be asphyxiated and I will rule. David said: A wise person who knows its place but does not place it there should die by choking. He said something and placed [the ceramic pot back in its place]. David began to sing, "A Song of Ascents (Ps. 120:1) (Psalms 120-134 are fifteen song of ascents in a row! שיר למעלות or שיר המעלות – that is, a song for 100 ascents. He recited separate songs for each 100 cubits [that the water has arisen and fallen]. Even so, Ahitofel choked to death.

II. The Song that Keeps Chaos at Bay

2. Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 53a-b

חמש עשרה מעלות. אמר ליה רב חסדא ליהוה קמסדר אגדתא קמיה, אמר ליה: שמיע לד, הני חמש עשרה מעלות, כנגד מי אמרם דוד?

The mishna continues: The musicians would stand on the fifteen stairs that descend from the Israelites' courtyard to the Women's Courtyard, corresponding to the fifteen Songs of the Ascents in Psalms. Rav Hisda said to one of the Sages who was organizing *aggada* before him: Did you hear with regard to these fifteen Songs of Ascents in Psalms, corresponding to what did David say them?

אמר ליה: הכי אמר רבי יוחנן: בשעה שפך דוד שיתין, קפא תהומא ובגי למשטפיה לעלמא. אמר דוד חמש עשרה מעלות והורידו. אי הכי, חמש עשרה "מעלות" — "יורדות" מיבגי ליה!

He said to him that this is what Rabbi Yohanan said: At the time that David dug the drainpipes in the foundation of the Temple, the waters of the depths rose and sought to inundate the world. Immediately, David recited the fifteen Songs of the Ascents and caused them to subside. Rav Hisda asked: If so, should they be called fifteen Songs of the Ascents? They should have been called Songs of the Descents.

אמר ליה: הואיל ואדפרתן (מלתא), הכי אתמר: בשעה שכרה דוד שיתין קפא תהומא ובעא למשטפא עלמא. אמר דוד מי איכא דידע אי שרי למכתב שם אחספא ונשדיה בתהומא ומנח? ליכא דקאמר ליה מידי:

He said to him: Since you reminded me of this matter, this is what was originally stated: When David dug the foundations, the abyss floated to the top and threatened to flood the world. David said: Is there anyone who knows whether it is permissible to write God's Name on a pottery shard, and we can throw it into the abyss to calm it? No one responded.

אמר דוד: כל דידע למימר ואינו אומר, יחנק בגרונו. נשא אחיתופל קל וחומר בעצמו: ומה לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו, אמרה תורה: שמי שנקתב בקדושה ומחה על המים, לעשות שלום לכל העולם כולו — על אחת כמה וכמה. אמר ליה: שרי.

David said: Anyone who knows and does not say should choke. Ahitofel thought of an a fortiori (*kal va-homer*) argument: If the Torah allows God's Name which is written in holiness to be erased in water for the sake of making peace between spouses, certainly, it may be erased to make peace for the entire world! He said to David: It is permissible.

כָּתַב שֵׁם אַחַסְפָּא וְשָׂדֵי לְתַהוֹמָא, וּנְחִית תְּהוֹמָא שִׁיתַסָּר אֲלֵפֵי גְרַמִּידֵי. כִּי חָזִי דְנַחִית טוּבָא,
אָמַר: כַּמָּה דְמִידְלֵי — טְפֵי מִיֶּרְטַב עֲלָמָא. אָמַר חֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מַעְלוֹת, וְאַסְקִיה חֲמִיסָר אֲלֵפֵי
גְרַמִּידֵי, וְאוֹקְמִיה בְּאַלְפָּא גְרַמִּידֵי.

He wrote the Name on the pottery shard and threw it into the abyss, and the abyss descended 16,000 cubits. When he saw that it descended too far, he said, the higher the water is, the moister (and thus more fertile) the world will be. So, he recited 15 “Ascents,” and brought up the water 15,000 cubits, and established it there at 1,000 cubits [deep].