

Rabbi Judy Weiss
The Biblical Text

Psalm 126
Leader's Guide

Discussion Question: *Have you ever felt in exile? from the land of Israel? from yourself? from your family? from the world?*

Leader: *Psalm 126 is written from the vantage of a nation in exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the First Temple (between 586 and 539 BCE). The psalmist describes people longing to return to their previous circumstances; it will be a dream-come-true to them. They imagine the joyful thanks they will feel and the longing for restoration that other nations will feel on seeing Israel's restoration.*

The psalmist beseeches God (verse 4) to restore Israel quickly and fully, just as a dry wadi is refilled with a flood of water every spring. The last two verses poignantly depict Israel's longing to return home through the use of an agricultural metaphor which also continues the motif of water.

Psalm 126
A Song of ascents,

When the LORD restores the fortunes of Zion
we see it as in a dream

²our mouths shall be filled with laughter,
our tongues, with songs of joy.

Then shall they say among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them!”

³The LORD will do great things for us
and we shall rejoice.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.

⁶Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag,
he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves.

Question: *What is the water in this metaphor? How does it differ from the wadi's water? Why does the poet use two such different water images?*

Answers might include:

- A rush of water in a wadi expresses hope for their return in a powerful flood.
- The tears of individuals acknowledge the pain truly felt in their present state.
- The present pain is assuaged with hope based on their knowledge of how nature works: seeds planted and watered lead to the reaping of crops. Similarly hard work and crying (really wanting to be restored) will lead to their rebirth.

Leader: *Some suggest understanding this psalm on a personal level in terms of the colloquial expression: No pain, no gain. Do you agree?*

Let's consider a prayer of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav:

Text #2

Dear God, let my heart grasp the profound wisdom with which You created the world. Help me understand that life's difficulties are in fact her opportunities; life's endings are also her beginnings; life's disappointments are her finest teachers.

Source: *The Gentle Weapon: Prayers for Everyday and Not-So-Everyday Moments*, edited by Mykoff and Mizrahi

Leader: *Psalm 126 may be understood in terms of an individual's longing to end his/her personal exile. In what ways, or at what times in life, might a person feel cut off, isolated or in exile? What types of loss might create such a feeling?*

Consider this prayer concerning loss from Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav:

Text #3

Dear God, suddenly I'm alone; I'm in pain. As I search for some source of comfort, the world—the world so full, so bustling—seems so empty now. It's cold and it's frightening in this hollow that is me—in this hollow that once brimmed with confidence and joy. God, pull me back—back to the world of the living, back to a life of action and human relationships.

Source: *The Gentle Weapon: Prayers for Everyday and Not-So-Everyday Moments*, edited by Mykoff and Mizrahi