

A Drasha on Romans 9:1–5

The Anguish of Covenant

There are passages in the New Testament that Jews instinctively approach with caution. History has taught us that some texts have been read in ways that wounded rather than healed, that divided rather than united. Romans 9 is one of those passages. It begins a section that has sometimes been interpreted as announcing that God has finished with Israel. Yet if we listen carefully to Paul's own words, we hear something very different.

The chapter does not begin with certainty. It begins with tears.

"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

This is not the voice of someone standing outside Israel passing judgment. It is the voice of a Jew whose heart is breaking over his own people. Before Paul makes a single theological argument, he tells us how he feels. The emotion comes first. Only then comes the reasoning.

As Amy-Jill Levine reminds her readers, we make a profound mistake when we imagine that Paul ceased to be Jewish after his encounter with the risen Jesus. He remained a Jew who argued as Jews argued, who read Scripture as Jews read Scripture, and who cared passionately about the destiny of Israel. The debates that fill his letters are family arguments, not attacks from outside.

In fact, Paul's extraordinary statement in verse three echoes one of the most moving moments in the Torah. After Israel worships the Golden Calf, Moses stands before God and prays: *"If You will forgive their sin... but if not, blot me out of the book You have written."* (Exodus 32:32)

Can there be a greater expression of solidarity? Moses is willing to lose everything if only Israel might be saved.

Paul says something astonishingly similar. *"I could wish that I myself were accursed... for the sake of my own people."*

Whether or not such a thing is even possible is beside the point. The language itself tells us something essential. Like Moses before him, Paul is prepared to imagine sacrificing himself for Israel. This is the language of covenantal love.

Jewish tradition has always admired leaders who carry the burdens of others. Abraham argues for Sodom. Moses pleads for Israel. Jeremiah weeps for Jerusalem. The true leader never rejoices in condemnation. The true leader suffers with the people.

Then Paul does something that is often overlooked. He begins listing Israel's privileges.

"Theirs is the adoption as children." "Theirs the divine glory." "The covenants." "The giving of the Torah." "The worship." "The promises." "The patriarchs."

Notice the grammar. He does not say, "These once belonged to Israel." He says, "Theirs **is**." Everything remains in the present tense.

Marc Brettler repeatedly points out that throughout the Hebrew Bible covenant is remarkably resilient. Israel fails repeatedly. Kings disappoint. Prophets lament. The people go into exile. Yet nowhere does God revoke the covenant with Abraham. Divine disappointment is real; divine abandonment is not.

Paul's own language reflects precisely that understanding. Israel still possesses the covenant. Israel still possesses Torah. Israel still possesses the promises.

This becomes even clearer when we remember where Romans is heading. Only two chapters later Paul will declare,

"The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Irrevocable.

That single word has transformed Jewish-Christian dialogue over the past half-century. It reminds Christians that the God who called Abraham does

not change His mind. The covenant is not cancelled. It is not replaced. It endures because God is faithful.

One phrase deserves particular attention. *"The giving of the Law."*

How often has Torah been misunderstood as a burden from which humanity needed rescuing? Yet Paul includes Torah among God's greatest gifts to Israel. That is profoundly Jewish.

Every year on Shavuot we celebrate the giving of Torah. We dance with it. We study it throughout the night. We bless God for giving it. One does not rejoice over chains. One rejoices over wisdom. Torah is not primarily legislation. Torah is relationship.

The Hebrew word *Torah* means instruction, guidance, teaching. It is the loving direction of a God who refuses to abandon humanity to chaos. Psalm 19 delights in Torah. Psalm 119 sings its praises for 176 verses. Paul himself knows that Torah belongs among Israel's treasures.

Nor does he dismiss Temple worship. That too remains one of Israel's gifts. Paul may believe that something new has begun in Christ, but he never speaks as though Israel's worship had become worthless. Like many Jews of his day, he still treasures the sacred rhythms of Israel's life before God.

Then Paul reaches the climax. *"From them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah."*

Here Judaism and Christianity naturally take different paths. Christians recognise Jesus as Messiah; Judaism still waits for the messianic age in which swords become ploughshares, justice embraces the earth, and the knowledge of God fills creation as the waters cover the sea.

Yet notice what Paul refuses to do. He never detaches Jesus from Judaism. Jesus remains a son of Israel. He belongs to Abraham's family, David's house, Israel's story.

Amy-Jill Levine often warns Christians against turning Jesus into a figure who somehow floats above Judaism. To understand Jesus, we must understand the Jewish world that shaped him. Remove his Jewishness and we lose much of what made him who he was.

Perhaps that observation carries a challenge for all of us. Too often religion has been tempted by triumphalism. We imagine that if our faith is true, someone else's must therefore be false. We think God's love is a limited resource that can only be given to one people at the expense of another.

The Hebrew Bible knows nothing of such arithmetic. God chooses Abraham without rejecting humanity. God enters into covenant with Israel without ceasing to care for the nations. Election is never privilege for its own sake. It is always responsibility. That is why Paul begins with grief rather than victory. His theology is shaped by love. His argument is carried by compassion. His heart remains bound to his people.

Whether we read Romans as Jews or Christians, perhaps that is the deepest lesson. Before we speak about doctrine, we should ask whether our hearts resemble Paul's. Do we grieve for one another? Do we carry one another? Do we refuse to caricature those with whom we disagree?

The rabbis tell us that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*—baseless hatred. If hatred destroys holy places, perhaps compassion rebuilds them.

Paul's tears remind us that genuine faith never delights in another's exclusion. Genuine faith longs for reconciliation.

And that may be the most Jewish insight of all. May we become people whose convictions are strong, whose scholarship is honest, and whose love is large enough to embrace those with whom we differ. For covenant is sustained not by certainty alone, but by faithfulness, humility, and hope.

Amen.