

Yom Kippur D'var 5777  
Congregation Betenu  
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On this day when we are thinking about some of the hardest things for us to consider; people we have hurt, ways we have not lived up to being our best selves, and ways we want to be better moving forward I want to spend some time thinking about the power of tears.

If you are like me at one point in your life and even today, you were or might still be embarrassed to cry in public in any space even when in a situation where it would be totally appropriate to cry. This is especially true for those of us who grew up or socialized male. After my grandfather passed away, while we were still at the hospital I did not see my uncle, brother, or male cousin cry once. Throughout all of shiva I never saw them cry. My brother at one point told me, “Papa would want us to be strong for our Bubby and our Aunt.”

It is possible that they found private moments to express their emotions. It is possible crying is not what they needed at the time since we all grieve differently, but a part of me felt they were suppressing their emotions thinking this was the best thing to do at the time or this is what society told them to do even in this moment.

How many of us even in moments of despair, grief, sadness suppressed our tears in a public place, in front of our family members, or even to ourselves for fear of looking weak, out of a desire to be the strong stoic caretaker for others more deeply hurt, and/or out of some sense that it would be “inappropriate” to cry?

Our ancient rabbis would find this notion that tears a linked to, “a moment of weakness” or only appropriate in private shocking. In a discussion about *לְאָמַר*, causing wrong to one’s neighbor or wife; one of our ancient rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer says it is important not to do this because, “Ever since the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer are closed, but the gates of tears are always open.” (Baba Metzia 59a). He uses a verse from Psalms to support his claim, “Hear my Prayer O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; you will not be silent at my tears” (Psalms 39:13).

This is not the only our ancient rabbis value tears or the people who cry them. In I Samuel 1:10 – 16 we are told of an interaction between Hannah, one of the many barren women in the bible and Eli, a priest. Hannah was weeping as she prayed to G!d for a child. She prayed in her heard, with her lips moving, but not making any sounds which caused the priest to think she was drunk. This heartfelt prayer must have been rare in Eli’s day; as rare as it seems to be today. How many of us would be willing to weep openly in a synagogue while we prayed to G!d?

Even though this must have been rare potentially Rabbi Hamnuna cites her as the paradigm of prayer. He cites the things that Hannah does as laws for how we are to pray. I Samuel says she spoke in her heart so one who prays must direct their heart. Her lips moved and therefore one must pronounce the words of the prayer with their lips. Her voice was not heard therefore we should not pray too loudly. He nor the other ancient rabbis say anything about her weeping, but it is clear they felt we have a lot to learn from Hannah. Perhaps, we still do. It is clear when asking for her deepest desires she did so from a place of weeping. Perhaps, prayer is meant to connect us to our deepest desires. Our deepest emotions and needs to be an expression of those emotions.

It is not just Hannah who cries biblically. Many of our biblical matriarchs and patriarchs weep. Sometimes like Hannah our matriarchs are weeping and praying for children. Sometimes our patriarchs and other biblical heroes are crying after being united with family members like Jacob when he reunites with Esau in Genesis 33. Sometimes it is not only when reuniting with

family after witnessing those family members make proper teshuva; becoming better people as in the case with Joseph throughout the latter parts of Genesis.

Outside of these stories one of our earliest stories is in Genesis where Abraham kicks Hagar and Ishmael out of the house at Sarah's insistence. Lost, alone, in the desert Hagar sets Ishmael under a bush so as not to watch him die. Ishmael begins to cry and Genesis 21:17 tells us that G!d heard Ishmael crying and called out to Hagar. It is through Ishmael's tears that G!d is reached in this story. Yet again we get a direct link of tears to divine connection/revelation.

Perhaps the biblical character that exudes this so called ideal stoic "masculine man," David is seen to cry all of the time. David is reported to be good looking, a warrior, and one who seems to be able to get any woman (and perhaps man, but that is a different drash) he wants. This is everything someone socialized male in America is told is the ideal from media and society and yet David does not shy from his emotions. In I Samuel 20 when David is told via secret code by Jonathan that he [David] must flee for his life from Saul they weep together for this loss of friendship.

In the midst of one of his many battles David and his men come to a town that was raided. It was burned to the ground and all of their wives, sons, and daughters were taken captive they weep until they had no more strength for weeping left (I Samuel 30:3 – 4). These battle hardened men according to the bible wept sometimes in private over personal relationships, sometimes in public over the loss of their loved ones. While there is no explicit revelation from G!d nor connection to the divine that results from this weeping it seems appropriate to ask why, in our time, are emotions seen as weak if soldiers and kings were openly weeping according to our biblical tradition?

It is not just mortals who weep according to our Jewish tradition. Genesis Rabbah, a collection of Rabbinic Midrash or stories based on biblical verses say that one of the possible reasons Isaac went blind is that during the akeda; when he was bound on a sacrificial alter by his father the angels were weeping. Tears from those angels fell into his eyes and later in his life caused his blindness. This particular story makes it clear that the divine weeps too. In this case they were weeping for what they viewed as injustice. The Midrash is clear the ministering angels did not agree with G!d's test and were weeping for everything this father and son were being put through.

The ministering angels are not the divine beings who weep according to our tradition. Anyone who has been to a Shabbat service I have led have heard me talk about the Shekhina. For those who have not, our Jewish mystics note that this is a feminine aspect of the divine. This aspect of the divine is most accessible to human beings. The Talmud in Masechet Megillah tells us that when the Israelites went into exile the Shekhina; the most accessible aspect of the divine went into exile with them and will rejoice with us at the time of our redemption.

The New Zohar goes further than just telling us that this aspect of divinity was with us in exile. It tells us that the Shekhinah wept with us. The Shekhinah; this feminine presence of the divine for the Jewish mystics, but just another name for the divine for our ancient rabbis cries. Feels the same feelings as human beings; is with us no matter what we are feeling at any given time. In other words G!d, or at the very least one aspect of G!d weeps openly.

We started by talking how our ancient rabbis say that although the gates of prayer may be closed the gates of tears are always open. Tears according to our ancient rabbis are an immediate way to connect with divinity. Biblically we see G!d responding to the tears of barren women like Hannah and Leah weeping for their deepest desires; namely children. We have seen how weeping could be a paradigm of how we today are supposed to pray. We have explored how

some of our male biblical ancestors wept openly despite Western notions of masculinity telling men and in some ways everyone tears are signs of weakness.

So on this Yom Kippur may we all be open to crying. May we all recognize the one way to truly repair ourselves, the relationships we have hurt, and being the path to teshuva; repentance is to feel deeply in our hearts the pain we have caused. That tears can be recognition of this pain. Tear can help us process this pain. Tears are appropriate in any setting where we feel connected to sadness, grief, and/or pain. May we relearn that despite what society may tell us crying is necessary. Crying is a way to connect not only with ourselves, but with the divine. Through our tears may we truly find ways to repair ourselves, our relationships and become our best selves in this new year. G'mar Hatima Tovah. May we all be written in the Book of Life for a blessed year.