

I have always been a crier. My earliest memory of tears comes from my nursery school graduation. I think it had something to do with fear of getting up on stage and performing. Look at me now. Later, famous moments of tears came at various lifecycle stages of life, running away from a bar mitzvah lesson after my father, my tutor reprimanded me for not studying enough. It was legitimate. Sorry, dad. End of summer trips to Israel. Breakups. The end of rabbinical school. Getting engaged. Married and probably many more in between. Cause the truth is, I am a cryer. Have always been and will always be.

While the last almost two years seems worthy of a good cry, in a more isolated time frame, this has been an intense couple week period of tears. We had another school shooting. We had an awful tragedy in our larger community, losing a too young member of the Leffell school touching many of us here. Just two days, I had to stop reading a NYT article that discussed an online forum where young people battling mental illness and suicidal ideation gather to help and encourage one another. While the article was tagged with a warning and was written under the consultation of mental health professionals, I had to stop reading half way through. Then yesterday, a law was upheld for now that allows for certain folks to not have agency over their own bodies.

It's brutal and I feel like sometimes we all need a good cry together, just to simply signal to others that we are in pain before we act. Because crying isn't just crying.

Of course we want to do something and hopefully we can do something but I also think there's value in the cry before the action. Namely, the cry itself serves an important purpose. Although Darwin thought them purposeless and scientists are still uncovering the hidden meaning behind tears, crying does have real scientific grounding with a few theories abounding: Broadly speaking tears trigger social bonding and human connection. While most other animals are born fully formed, humans come into the world vulnerable and physically unequipped to deal with anything on their own.

Even though we get physically and emotionally more capable as we mature, grownups never quite age out of the occasional bout of helplessness. “Crying signals to yourself and other people that there’s some important problem. The same neuronal areas of the brain are activated by seeing someone emotionally aroused as being emotionally aroused oneself,” according to Michael Trimble, a behavioral neurologist at the University College London.

Crying has a long history in our culture. In my own life, I came to be in a time like many of you did: mostly implicit but sometimes explicit messages of the gendered breakdown of crying. Farther back into our history though, that was not always the case. In the Iliad, Zeus cries. There are reports from the middle ages of male ambassadors weeping before Kings. But way before that, as we’ve been reminded of with Joseph, crying has even more ancient roots.

You see, I follow in Joseph's footsteps. He's the original crier. 6 times in his narrative do we hear of Joseph crying and sometimes trying to restrain himself. I found this concept echoing in my head as I read through the Parshah this week as Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers after Judah's successful final plea. His first cry comes in private at his reunion with his brothers and he's in pain at their lack of reflection and change. Then, he cries in private at seeing his dear brother Benjamin. At that moment, it seems he wants to cry in person for as the Midrash tells us "crying extinguishes the burning coals of the heart."

Anyone who's ever felt the torrent of tears open up after a period of restraint knows that feeling of a fire within being extinguished. But he doesn't. And now, here, after his brother's Judah's pleas. This one stands apart for it is the first time the tears happen among others, and in this case his brothers. While there are three more to follow: I want to focus on this moment-

“Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace..

Before this moment he had always been able to restrain himself. Vayitapek. Now, lo yachol lehitapek, he cannot restrain himself. This cry stands in contrast. What is it about this specific moment that brings the tears and what do the tears signal to us here?

One opinion offered by the Shem Mishmuel, Rabbi Shmuel Boresntein, the 2nd Rebbe of the Sochatchov Dynasty, details the following “*Up until this moment, all of Joseph’s intentions were directed at punishing his brothers and subverting them, in order that he could break their hearts so that they would be forced to repent for their actions. Now, Joseph sees that Judah has lowered himself to the depths...and he recognizes in his heart true repentance, “he could no longer control himself.”*”

He needed to see some authentic transformation on behalf of his brothers. The process of repentance had never seemed to happen but now it did. There's something to this with tears too. Sometimes our intentions block our tears for we're so caught up in some other agenda that we're not noticing our selves. It takes an authentic moment for many of us to cry. The cause of the cry has to feel real and honest. It's our way to signal to that person that I see you on a deep level.

Beyond that, when we look at Judah's speech that makes up the first chunk of the text of the portion, we note that there's no mention of Joseph. Judah is approaching an Egyptian ruler. As Rabbi Avital Hochstein writes "As long as Yehudah continues to approach the ruler of Egypt rather than Yosef his brother, Yosef will remain disappointed and unsatisfied.

That is why Yosef can no longer va-yitapak, no longer restrain himself. Yosef teaches us that relationships require exposure. As long as we maintain our covers and masks, our relationships remain unsatisfying. An act of exposure requires courage, a courage which is necessary in order for relationships to become fulfilling and to bring us peace of mind.”

So sometimes tears, like science has continued to show us, reflect to someone that we want to be fully seen. And maybe in their seeing of us, we can see them and find partnership. Taken together, these texts speak to the power of being real. Sometimes we can gloss over this step and jump right into action.

Like Professor Trimble noted though, There must have been some point in time, evolutionarily, when the tear became something that automatically set off empathy and compassion in another. Tears bring us together. To act on something big: be it mental health among our young, gun violence in schools, or bodily autonomy being stripped away, it's important to know who we're with.

One final piece to note about the power of tears in the eyes of the great Chasidic master, the B'nei Yissaschar, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira from Dinov. He points us to look at the verse and realizes it says וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־קוֹלוֹ בַּבֶּכֶּה. It's not written he raised his voice in tears or he cried but that he gave his voice in tears. Giving, Natan, is from the language of a gift. The B'nei Yissaschar highlights this and then asks the question of what could possibly be the gift of tears?

First he argues that just as Joseph only appeased his brothers with tears so too will we only merit to be redeemed by God with tears, for the prophet Jeremiah tells us “They shall come with weeping, And with compassion will I guide them.” Then he goes on to show that Bechi, the hebrew word for tears, has the same numerological value as Lev, the word for heart. And we know that God is the rofe lishburei lev, the healer of the broken hearted. So if we are to express our brokenheartedness with tears, it serves not only as a signal to those around us but also a divine reminder that we need help. This is the gift in Joseph’s tears. When we cry, we bare our hearts to someone else and tell them we need them.

As we turn our attention back to our worldly events, the ones that make us break down with weeping, I want to remind all of us, myself included, that maybe we sit a little bit in the tears. For they are a great communicator. Of course we can act. We need to restrict access to guns. We need to put better systems in place to remind our youngest and most vulnerable that they matter and they can talk to us. We want to hear their cries, not stigmatize. We want to help those whose decisions to make choices about their own body, with no bearing on another person are being restricted. But first, maybe we need to have a good cry together. So here is me telling you that I have been having some Joseph like moments. If you are too, please talk to me. Let's be together in this. For we know from the Psalmist, Hazorim B'dimah, B'rinah yikztoru, from the planting of our tears comes the potential for reaping joy and triumph.

Shabbat Shalom,

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