

## Tears

### Rosh Hashanah - Day 1 - September 14, 2015

Just before the Major League Baseball trade deadline in July, a report circulated that the New York Mets had traded their shortstop to the Milwaukee Brewers. The player, Wilmer Flores, heard the rumor for the first time in the middle of a game, yet he continued to play, tears streaming down his face, as he played out what he thought was his last game.

News reports called it a “surreal scene,” and most mainstream media made light of the tears; one headline read “For *Crying* Out Loud, What the Hell Happened at the Mets Game Last Night?”<sup>1</sup> Apparently, most sportswriters are cut from the same cloth as fictional manager Jimmy Dugan in the movie “A League of Their Own”; that is, they believe that “there’s no crying in baseball”!

And while most Hall of Fame induction days prove there’s at least a *little* crying in baseball, the truth is that tears of joy are easier to share. We cry at happy occasions because tears are one of the ways that our bodies release emotion - and happiness is one feeling that we’re willing to share with strangers.

Dividing our sentiments into “happy” and “sad” ignores just how nuanced our feelings truly are - and just how much power there can be in the outward show of these emotions. In all four of the Torah and Haftarah readings on Rosh Hashanah, we see this display of powerful emotions, from different causes and toward different ends. Every story we hear today and tomorrow involves parents crying over their children. And in each, tears are presented as a natural outlet for emotion.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.slantnews.com/story/2015-07-30-its-crying-time-for-wilmer-flores-and-for-mets-fans>

---

In today's Torah reading, Hagar's agony is almost palpable. We listen as the water she shares with Ishmael runs dry after they are exiled into the wilderness. We are as powerless as she, knowing that a lack of water means certain death for both her and her son, as she moves away from him, unable to watch him suffer. We bear witness to her grief. This is the reaction to feeling deeply helpless - utterly without hope - having exhausted every option. Emotionally and physically exhausted, she crumbles to the ground. **Hagar's are tears of despair.**

Today's Haftarah presents Chana's tale, which lacks the mortal peril of Hagar's, but is no less desperate. In most areas of life, she is happy and content: she has a loving husband, a large extended family, and the financial means to travel to Shiloh to offer sacrifices. But something is missing: she yearns for children, and yet she cannot conceive. **Chana's are tears of longing.**

Tomorrow's Torah reading tells of the binding of Isaac. Although Sarah is mostly - and quite notably - absent from the Torah text of the Akeidah, midrash elevates her role. After all, she is the mother who waited 90 years for a son, just to have God demand him as a sacrifice. One midrash says that Abraham worried, "How shall I separate my son Isaac from Sarah his mother?" He spoke with his wife about the task at hand, and together they prayed that God would do right by them. After a long night of praying and weeping, Sarah selected the finest garments for Isaac to wear, then accompanied them along the road until Isaac finally told her to turn back and return home. Upon hearing these words from her

son, Sarah wept bitterly, and both Abraham and Isaac cried with her.<sup>2</sup> **Sarah's are tears of fear - a deep and intense fear of the unknown.**

Finally, in tomorrow's Haftarah, we find Rachel weeping bitterly for the loss of her children - and for future generations. Jeremiah tells of the loss of the northern kingdom, descendants from the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim - from Rachel's line - who were exiled from the Land of Israel. Even as she mourns her losses - lost generations, lost opportunities, lost time - Rachel still puts her faith in God, reaching out through prayer. **For this, hers are tears of hope and possibility.**

---

As beautiful as these stories are, we might wonder: why, on the joyous holiday of Rosh Hashanah - the birthday of the world, the celebration of a new year and new possibilities - why did the rabbis choose texts that bring us to times and places of pain and suffering?

Each of these four stories features tears of a different kind: despair; longing; fear; hope. For many of us, these are emotions we experience frequently. Even on a significantly smaller scale, our feelings are just as valid as those of the women in the stories. Allowing ourselves to cry means allowing others to see us at our most vulnerable; in doing so, we acknowledge that crying helps us come to terms with changes, and normalizes the expression of our emotions.

---

---

<sup>2</sup> The Legends of the Jews, volume 1, page 274-276

5775 has been full of tears for our People and for our country. Walking into the Butcherie on a Friday afternoon became a little unsettling, as we looked around cautiously and tried to convince ourselves that what happened in a Paris kosher supermarket could not happen in Brookline, MA. Innocent black men and women - our fellow citizens - died at the hands of white police officers - and some innocent police officers paid the price for others' crimes. And Israeli officials *as high as the President* degraded our branch of Judaism, humiliating families with special needs children and denying them access to a bar or bat mitzvah.

We've cried tears of rage, fear, humiliation, and anger. We've cried for lost lives, lost innocence, and the signs of lost equality - an equality that has never truly been there, but the absence of which is now more apparent than it has been in decades.

---

Today and tomorrow, we watch helplessly as our ancestors - some of the people who, in the history of the world, were closest to God - cry out in pain. Bearing witness as they shed tears gives us permission - perhaps even reminds us - to experience our own complete range of emotions. If someone who can elicit a miracle from God can openly express despair, longing, fear, or hope - then surely it's alright for us.

The real work begins where the tears end. After Hagar had cried her heart out, she opened her eyes and was able to see the life-saving well in front of her. Likewise, once Chana was untethered from her emotions, she was able to focus less on the present and more on the future. Often, reaching the depths of our pain is what frees us to see the path forward.

How will we let our tears spur us to action this Rosh Hashanah? Perhaps the introspective time that the *Yamim Noraim* provides us, will bring the clarity that we've been seeking in

order to resolve a personal dilemma or family issue. Maybe an emotional release will free you to see what's right in front of you. Or perhaps, like me, you're looking to make an impact on one of the social injustices that has moved you to tears this past year.

I'd like to highlight two examples of this last possibility - one local and one international - and offer some ways that we can help.

---

The sound of a child crying is one of the hardest noises to bear. Millennia of evolution have shaped babies' cries, ensuring that the ones with the most volume and urgency get answered first. Those children are the ones whose needs are most likely to be met, giving them the best opportunity to grow and eventually produce loud babies of their own. Most of us, upon hearing a crying child, have the urge to comfort them - regardless of whether the baby is our own, a friend's or neighbor's, or belongs to a stranger. Our immediate instinct is solve the child's problem as quickly as possible.

In 2013, the journal *Pediatrics* published a study that surveyed 877 pregnant and parenting women. The team of researchers found that needing diapers and not being able to buy them was the leading cause of mental health problems among new mothers.<sup>3</sup>

The women were asked, "If you have children in diapers, do you ever feel that you do not have enough diapers to change them as often as you would like?". Almost 30 percent of women answered "Yes." The respondents then explained their methods for making diapers last longer, including emptying them into the toilet or air drying them before reusing them, and letting their kids sit in wet diapers longer than they should. Their

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/diaper-need/399041/>

answers provide a small glimpse into the challenges felt by mothers who struggle to make ends meet.

The women told researchers things like, “My self-esteem plummets when I can’t soothe my baby because I can’t put a clean diaper on her.” But this diaper deficit hurts more than moms’ self-worth; many day care centers require a week’s supply of diapers before parents can enroll their children. Without the required diaper stash, parents are not allowed to drop off their kids - which can have larger-scale ramifications, such as preventing them from attending job interviews.

*Neither* of the two largest assistance programs for low-income mothers covers diapers. It’s not a problem that you and I can fix alone, but this is a problem that we can help solve.

Audrey Cohen, a KI member (and a mother) is initiating a diaper drive. We’ll collect diapers and baby supplies in the beginning of November and donate them to the Allston-Brighton Diaper Bank (although if you have them now, I’ll be happy to hold them in my office). The mission of the diaper bank is to ease the burden for low-income families who need diapers. They aim to provide 30 diapers per month, per child. Diapers of any size - even open packages of clean diapers - are accepted.

To put it into context - a package of 144 diapers costs about \$50 on Amazon. That’s 2 Starbucks drinks a week for a month. Or one dinner out for two. This month, Target will even make it easy for you: if you buy three boxes of diapers, they’ll give you a free \$20 gift certificate to their store.

If you've ever changed a diaper, you know what a difference that clean feeling makes to the child; what you may not have realized is just how meaningful it can be to the parent, as well.

Please join me in donating and making an impact for families who need our support.

---

The tears of one child's parent make us yearn to help; and while I strongly encourage you to participate, we are also witnessing parents' cries on a much larger scale as we watch refugees fleeing toward the mirage of safety.

In the past 4 years, 20% of Syria's population - representing *four million* people - have fled the war-torn country.<sup>4</sup> Half of those leaving are children. It's not hard to understand why Syrian families are fleeing - taking flight is preferable to living under a regime of terror that ruthlessly targets civilians.

More than 70 years ago, Jewish parents in Germany made the choice to send their children on the Kindertransport - saving thousands of lives, but breaking up many families in the process. The logic was simple: keeping the children home was more dangerous than sending them on a train into the unknown. This horrible calculus is what Syrian parents face today; no mother or father would put their family in a rickety boat on rocky waters, if staying on land was safer than going out to sea.

Recently, a picture of a Syrian child blazed its way across the internet. In it, the three year old boy, named Aylan Kurdi, wears a red shirt, blue pants and a pair of sneakers as he lies

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/5/9265501/refugee-crisis-europe-syria>

on his stomach with his head resting on his left hand. Normally, a child lying like this might make us smile, as they sleep soundly in their bed.

But Aylan is not asleep; Aylan is dead.

His body rests in the sand, washed ashore on a Turkish beach. Instead of learning to count, going to school, and growing up, Aylan serves as a cautionary tale of the potential costs that refugees from Syria face. But the alternative is to stay - to remain in a country whose own government uses chemical weapons on their people. When people are so desperate to leave at any cost that they will risk their children's lives, the situation has gone beyond "crisis" and is well into "catastrophe."

Of course, Syria is not the only country contributing to what is being called "Europe's Refugee Crisis", but it is a large part of it. Until a week ago, most of us would have associated Syria mainly with supporting Hezbollah and a frequently-voicing a desire to destroy Israel. Just as much of the world turned a blind eye to the mass destruction of millions of lives in the 1930's, wealthy countries have worked hard to brush aside Syria's enormous and still growing humanitarian crisis.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote:

I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Then I realised that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite *like* yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour,

culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, “Love the stranger because you were once strangers,” resonates so often throughout the Bible<sup>5</sup>.

We are on the cusp of the greatest humanitarian challenge faced by Europe since the Holocaust. Rabbi Sacks declares that a strong humanitarian response to the more than 6 million displaced Syrians is an absolute must. It would demonstrate, he says, that the European experience of two World Wars and the Holocaust have taught that free societies, where people of all faiths and ethnicities make space for one another, are the only way to honour our shared humanity... Fail this and we will have failed one of the fundamental tests of our lives.

---

If the tears that we read about today and tomorrow teach us anything, it is how precious children are. Hagar nearly died for hers; Chana cried for want of one, while Sarah wept for fear of losing hers. These women may *feel* real to us after years of reading their stories - but there are real people, real parents and children and grandparents and cousins, who have uprooted their lives to escape persecution and need as much help as they can get. *Their* tears are all too real.

---

Rosh Hashanah is a joyous holiday. So why all the focus on pain? Why do all of our Torah and Haftarah texts recall tears?

Judaism teaches that we can hold multiple complex emotions at the same time. The wedding ceremony is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Not only because we break

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://us7.campaign-archive1.com/?u=2a91b54e856e0e4ee78b585d2&id=6551369571&e=74b9ccb155>

the glass at the end to remind us that, even amidst all of our joy, there is still pain and suffering in the world. But also because the one loving relationship mentioned in the traditional ceremony is that of Moshe and the People of Israel - not Jacob and Rachel, not Ruth and Naomi, not Jonathan and David. The relationship between Moshe and Israel is fraught with tension, anger, and frustration, at the same time as it is filled with love, dedication, and attachment. In highlighting this one pairing above all others, we recognize the dichotomous emotions of a marriage - and accept that we are capable of experiencing these contradictory feelings simultaneously.

So too is it with Rosh Hashanah.

---

This morning, we came face-to-face with Hagar and Chana. We heard their cries and learned from them: Chana taught us how tears can prompt action; Hagar showed us that crying can spur awareness.

There is one more Biblical character whose tears we encounter this morning. This person impacts how we spend the day, although in a more subtle fashion that is hidden within our tradition.

By the end of this morning, we will have blown 100 shofar blasts. Why 100?

In the Book of Judges, the Israelites are led into battle by Barak and Devorah. They defeat the Canaanite army, led by a man named Sisera. Upon defeat, Sisera flees to a settlement in the hope of hiding and surviving; there, he meets a young married woman named Yael. Yael slyly convinces him to join her in her tent, offering him respite and a drink of milk.

Drowsy from the milk and certainly overwhelmed by the day's events, Sisera drifts to sleep - at which point Yael kills him with a tent peg.

It is easy to focus on Yael's heroism. But the Talmud shares the perspective of another woman: Sisera's mother, who waited impatiently for her son to return home from the battle. She peered through her window and "*yevava*", wailed, "Why does his chariot delay? Why do the sounds of his chariot tarry?". Onkolas translates the sound of the Teruah as "*yevava*", wailing, the same word used to describe Sisera's mother's actions.

We are taught that there are 101 letters in these two verses describing Sisera's mother's pain, and that is why we blow 100 sounds. We cannot blow 101 sounds because our sorrow of repentance cannot match the sorrow of a grieving mother.

The suffering of a mother who has lost her son is our way of calling God to be near to us - God listens to the broken-hearted, and we pray that God listens to us too. We blow the shofar to remind us that even the pain of our enemy is our pain too.

And if something as iconic - as central to Jewish practice - as the blast of the shofar pushes us to understand that our enemies' pain is our own - surely it must also evoke our need to ease the suffering of innocent parents and children, be they across the world or in our own backyard.

This Rosh Hashanah, may we be able to see how fortunate we are - and may we help ease the burdens of those who are less so. May we put our words into actions and work to make a difference throughout the year.

Shana tova.