Parashat Vayigash

The Secret of Tears

There are several types of weeping, the most profound form results from revealing a mystery.

The story of Joseph and his brothers reaches its climax in the Torah portion of Vayigash. Judah approached Joseph and surrendered himself as a servant in place of Benjamin so that Benjamin could return to their father Jacob unharmed. Seeing Judah’s dedication to protecting Benjamin and his remorse for wishing to harm Joseph so many years ago, Joseph was overcome with emotion and, unable to contain his tears, he wept before his brothers saying, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?”¹ Joseph’s revelation to his brothers was accompanied by weeping. This is not the first time that we read of Joseph weeping, nor the last. A few verses later we read how Joseph “…fell upon Benjamin’s neck and wept and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.”² All in all, the verb “and he wept” (וַיֵּבְךְ) appears seven times in the Torah with reference to Joseph—more than any other Biblical figure.

In Egypt, Joseph was famed for his great wisdom.³ He governed a land and its people with the same restraint with which he controlled his own inclinations. One might imagine that such a wise and influential man would be stern and unsympathetic, yet here it becomes clear that Joseph could be deeply emotional. In general, he controlled his emotions, directing them with restraint, but he was by no means cold or removed. Is weeping merely a release of pent up emotion or does it signify something more?

The First Weepers

As with any concept that we meditate upon in depth, to discover the real meaning of tears, we need to analyze every phenomenon of weeping in the Torah, beginning with the first instance.

Hagar, Sarah’s handmaiden, was the first to weep in the Torah. Banished from Abraham’s household, she wandered through the wilderness with her son Ishmael. After their water supply was drained, she left the child under a bush and walked away.

¹ Genesis 45:3.
² Ibid, v. 15.
³ Ibid 41:43; see Rashi ad loc.
to avoid seeing his inevitable death. As the tragic moment approached, “She raised her voice and wept.” Hagar’s weeping was an expression of her despair. The Torah’s inner dimension explains that the impure husks thrive on depression and tears, whereas holiness has an affinity to those who serve God with joy. The first appearance of many phenomena in the Torah is often negative and unrefined. This is true in the case of Hagar’s weeping too.

The next to cry in the Torah was Abraham. He wept when Sarah died, “Abraham came and eulogized Sarah and wept for her.” Weeping over his wife’s death is a proper reaction; Jewish law encourages shedding tears upon hearing that a virtuous individual has passed away. The mourners’ tears express respect for the deceased and stimulate emotional healing for the bereaved. When a loved one passes away, it is not a time for resolutely holding back one’s tears. If social norms tend to encourage such restraint, we should reconsider them.

The third person to weep in the Torah was Esau. When he learned that Jacob was the recipient of Isaac’s blessing in his place, “Esau raised his voice and he wept.” Like the first appearance of weeping, this first appearance of the word “and he wept” (וַיֵּבְךְ) is also an expression of deep despair.

In its next appearance, weeping swings back to the side of holiness. When Jacob met Rachel, “He raised his voice and wept.” This is a new form of weeping. In each of the three previous examples, weeping was related to some type of loss, but Jacob’s weeping was an expression of intimacy. Fleeing from Esau’s death-threat, Jacob suddenly encountered a kindred soul, a member of his own family. Like someone who has met a long-lost brother, he burst into tears.

The two brothers, Jacob and Esau finally meet in an emotionally charged reunion after years of separation; and they weep together. “Esau ran towards him [Jacob] and hugged him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” However, in this case, it is unclear whether Esau’s kisses and tears were truly whole-hearted, as Rashi suggests, quoting the midrash, “He did not kiss him with all his heart.”

From this point onwards, weeping remains in Jacob’s family, as if it has found its natural abode. Jacob wept when he believed that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal, as the verse states, “His father wept for him.” Alternatively, according to Rashi, it was Isaac, Jacob’s father (who was still alive when Joseph was sold into slavery), who wept in sympathy with Jacob’s pain. Although Isaac knew that Joseph

4 Genesis 21:16.
5 See for example Tanya ch. 26.
7 Shabbat 105b.
8 Genesis 27:28.
9 Ibid 29:11.
11 Bereishit Rabah 78:9.
12 Genesis 37:35.
was alive, he was not permitted to reveal the secret to Jacob. This indicates another type of weeping—in sympathy for someone else’s sorrow.

Joseph resembled his father Jacob in many ways, including his characteristic tears. Every one of Joseph’s encounters with his brothers in Egypt are accompanied by weeping. At first, Joseph conceals his tears and turns aside to weep (twice in the previous parashah). Now, as Judah pleads with him, he allows himself to weep aloud, kissing his brothers and weeping, like Jacob when he first met Rachel.

**Influential Tears**

So far, we have identified four types of weeping:

- negative weeping in despair;
- the positive weeping of bereavement;
- weeping as an expression of intimacy;
- weeping in sympathy with another person’s sorrow.

Joseph’s weeping does not fit into any of these categories. It is an expression of profound compassion. The second time Joseph weeps, the Torah states explicitly, “Joseph made haste because his compassion for his brothers overwhelmed him and he felt a need to weep, and he entered the room and wept there.” The connection between compassion and weeping is clear: a sensitive person will be moved to tears when his or her mercy is aroused.

There is a fine line between self-pity and real compassion. Tears of self-pity are passive and inert. They only serve to inflate the individual’s ego with self-centered thoughts about how deprived and unfortunate he is. This egotistic tendency may become so powerful that it even causes the individual to turn against others by blaming them for his misfortune. Ultimately, self-pity can deteriorate into turning against the Almighty Himself.

True compassion motivates the individual to actively influence the situation in some way for the better, whether by offering assistance, or through prayer, etc.

In Kabbalah, Joseph represents the masculine sefirah of yesod (the sefirah of foundation), which transmits all that it receives to the feminine malchut (the sefirah of kingdom), its recipient. From this perspective, Joseph’s tears are a form of influence. Such tears are a positive emanation from within, which transmits immense potential to the recipient. Joseph is the ultimate conduit of such positive influence, as we see from his ability to feed the Egyptian multitude and to provide for them in their time of need.

Jacob’s wife Leah, also cried, so much so that her eyes were “soft” from crying. From the literal perspective, she cried over her own fate, thinking that she was destined to marry Esau. Kabbalah teaches us that Leah’s tears represent the concealed world of

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14 Genesis 43:30.
15 Genesis 29:17.
16 Ibid, Rashi ad loc.
thoughts. In contrast, Rachel, who was generally a happy soul, adopted the attribute of positive weeping. “Rachel weeps for her sons.” Thus, Joseph inherited his tendency to weep from both his father, Jacob and his mother, Rachel. Rachel and both of her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, represent the revealed world. Their task is to realize the hidden abundance in mundane reality.

Yet, the passage between the hidden world and the revealed world is sometimes blocked. The phenomenon of heartfelt tears releases the blockage to allow us to navigate the strait and realize that abundance in the physical world. As mentioned above, Joseph and Benjamin wept upon one another’s neck. The neck relates to the narrow channel of abundance that connects the mind (concealed thoughts) with the heart (revealed emotions).

**Tears Lodged in the Heart**

So far, we have related to tears of sorrow and sadness as negative, following the directive that we should “serve God with joy.” However, sadness can sometimes be constructive. There are many positive references to weeping in the Bible and in the sages’ teachings, even when they relate to an individual’s unfortunate circumstances. In the book of Psalms, for example, King David often refers to his tears.

Refining our feelings of sadness is one of the main topics that Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe deals with in the Tanya. He distinguishes between negative sadness in the sense of morbid depression, and positive sadness, which he relates to as, “bitterness.” Positive sadness reflects our broken heart that results from realizing how distant we are from God. Broken-hearted weeping of this type is not a sign of dejection and despair. It purifies the heart and leads to constant refinement through repentance.

Paradoxically, this type of bitter sadness does not contradict our sense of joy, as stated in the Zohar (and quoted in Tanya) “Weeping is lodged in one side of my heart, and joy is lodged in the other.” The heart can bear these two contradictory emotions at once. As a result, the rectified individual can weep about his sorry state, while simultaneously rejoicing that God is always with him.

**Tears of Revelation**

The realization that tears and joy reside together in our hearts brings us to a new and deeper understanding of our emotions. Have you ever watched as parents escort their children to the chuppah (wedding canopy)? At such times of joy, we sometimes feel tears gathering in our eyes. On such occasions, something beyond our comprehension makes its first appearance, and our heart overflows with emotion, so much so that

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17 Jeremiah 31:14.
18 Psalms 100:2.
19 Tanya ch. 26.
20 *Zohar Vayikra* 75a.
21 Tanya ch. 34.
tears spill over. Together with a sense of joy and yearning, the revelation emphasizes my own distance from the beauty and purity of this new level. This paradoxical type of tears appears from the highest, super-conscious level of the soul, the yecheidah (“single one”), where all opposites unite. This is alluded to in the numerical value of yecheidah (יְחַיְדָּה), 37, which is also the numerical value of “weeping” (יְבָע). Similarly, the numerical value of “living one” (יְחיָה)—the second super-conscious level of the soul—is 23, which is the numerical value of “joy” (יְחָדוּס). In the soul, the yecheidah, the root of weeping, is higher than the chayah, the root of joy.

Weeping relates to revealing a secret hidden in the future. This is apparent in the Zohar, which explains that when Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept, he was crying over the destruction and exile of the ten tribes who later would be dispersed to all ends of the earth. Similarly, when Joseph and Benjamin wept on each other’s necks, Joseph wept for the two Temples that were destined to be built and later destroyed in Benjamin’s land-inheritance, as Rashi interprets. Benjamín also wept for the Mishkan (Tabernacle) that was destined to be constructed in Joseph’s land-inheritance and would also be destroyed. Their weeping was an expression of profound sorrow.

However, the Zohar continues, although Joseph and Benjamin wept, their brothers did not weep. Joseph and Benjamin were blessed with “a spark of Divine inspiration,” which their brothers did not merit. Similarly, the Zohar relates that when Rabbi Akiva heard the hidden secrets of the Song of Songs from his teacher, Rabbi Eliezer the Great, “his eyes poured with water.” Such weeping results from the revelation of one’s soul-root; the “singular” level of the soul, where the deepest Torah secrets are hidden. This is the type of weeping that will herald the redemption speedily in our days, as Jeremiah prophesies (in the same prophecy in which he describes Rachel’s weeping for her sons and their ultimate return to their borders):

Behold, I bring them from the northern land and gather them from the loins of the earth; among them are the blind and the lame, the pregnant [woman] together with the birthing [woman]; a great company, together they shall return here. They will come weeping, and with supplications I will lead them, I will conduct them along rivers of water, upon a straight road upon which they will not stumble; for I have become a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn.

The tears of the future redemption are the tears of the reunion between the Jewish People and their Father in Heaven, tears of intimacy and arousal of great compassion; influential tears; tears of the revelation of the innermost secrets. The sages teach, “Just as Joseph appeased his brothers only by weeping, so too, the Almighty will redeem

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22 Zohar Bereishit 209b.
23 Rashi, Genesis 45:14.
24 Ibid.
25 Zohar Bereishit 209b.
26 Ibid 98b.
27 Jeremiah 31:7-8.
28 Bereishit Rabah 93:12.
the Jewish People by weeping, as the verse states, ‘They will come weeping, and with supplications I will lead them.’

29 Jeremiah 31:8.