This morning I want to speak to you about the experience of crying, and the experience of crying as an opening, as a path that can lead us to action, to healing for us and for others.

Let me begin by sharing with you a personal story:

On Rosh Hodesh Av, I went to the Western Wall, the Kotel, to pray with the activist group Women of the Wall. Women of the Wall, or Nashot Hakotel in Hebrew, is a group of Jewish women from around the world who seek the right, as women, to wear tallitot, prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah collectively and openly at the Kotel. For many, the Western Wall is Judaism’s most sacred site and the principal symbol of Jewish peoplehood and sovereignty. Women of the Wall works to make it a holy site where women can pray freely. The morning I joined the group for tefilah, Anat Hoffman, the director of Israel’s Religious Action Center and chairperson of Women of the Wall, was arrested for carrying a Torah Scroll in public. Needless to say, it was an awful incident.

From my perspective, the most painful part of that morning actually took place before Hoffman’s arrest. From the moment I arrived at the prayer site, I felt sad and I realized how heartbreaking this experience was going to be. I cried throughout much of the morning service, including the joyous prayers of Hallel. The hatred I felt coming from the men screaming at us from the
other side of the mechitzah (partition) was horrific. I was crying because of the intolerance and hatred of these men, I was crying because of the experience of religious extremism, and I was crying because of the power of the ultra-Orthodox in contemporary Israeli life.

It took me a while to realize that there was a positive aspect to my crying. It served as a catalyst for deep introspection. As I reflected on my sadness, I realized that I was crying because this was an issue that touched me deeply, but was also much bigger than me. The negative behavior of the Haredi men affected me directly that morning at the Kotel, but the issue of religious intolerance (including sexism) is an issue that also affects untold numbers of Jewish and other women and men around the world.

This led me to another important realization: it had been too long since I cried about an issue that was bigger than me, bigger than my immediate life circumstances. There is so much to cry about in our personal lives—loss of a loved one, yearning for companionship, or the challenges of parenthood. But can we also cry for others, for those we know and for those we do not know, those close and those far from us? Can we open ourselves to the pain and suffering of others? Can our tears serve to move us to take action with and for others?

In a few moments, we will stand to recite one of the central prayers of our High Holy Day liturgy: Unetane Tokef. Together we will chant, “Be’Rosh Hashanah Yikatevun U’ve’Yom Tzom Kippur Yechatemun,” “On Rosh Hashanah it will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed”, followed by a list of ways that life can get to an end; it is a very painful and frightening list.
Rabbi Avi Weiss, Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah speaks about how in recent years this paragraph outlining different forms of death, has gained new meaning for him. Rabbi Weiss writes: “As I say the words, ‘Who at their [timely] end and who not at their [timely] end,’ I think of Andrew Zucker and Ariel Jacobs, who left their homes on the morning of 9/11 and never came back. Their wives gave birth soon after. ‘Who by water’ could be Katrina, and ‘who by warfare’ brings to mind Daniel Pearl’s final moments… ‘Who by hunger and who by thirst’ suggests Darfur. And ‘Who by stoning’ recalls the towers, those giant buildings made of endless stones, falling down.” (Rabbi Avraham Weiss, Turning Fate into Destiny, Who by Fire, Who by Water – Unetaneh Tokef, edited by Rabbit Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, page 178). The list goes on and every one of us can create our own associations with these words, both from personal experience, but also from our knowledge of local and world events.

David Grossman, a well-known Israeli author and peace activist, lost his son in the last Lebanon war writes: “I feel the heavy price that I and the people around me pay for this prolonged state of war. Part of this price is a shrinking of our soul’s surface area – those parts of us that touch the violent, menacing world outside – and a diminished ability and willingness to empathize at all with other people in pain.” (David Grossman, Writing in the Dark, page 60.)

The shrinking of our soul’s surface area and a diminished ability and willingness to empathize at all with other people in pain: what a terrible thing to happen to human beings! It is true that we can’t cry every time we read about a catastrophe somewhere in the world, or even in our own city or neighborhood. As we often say at TBZ, “being joyful and being grateful” are ways to live a more mindful and meaningful life. But, we cannot let apathy or “compassion
fatigue” conquer our souls; we cannot not let ourselves become numb to the reality of this shattered world and forget that WE can do something to make this world a better place.

It is good and important to let ourselves be troubled by the aches and pains of the world, to have things beyond our immediate circles that make us cry. The truth is that our personal pains can and should help us to be more sensitive and responsive to the suffering of others. This is the meaning of empathy. I opened my Dvar Torah today with the story about the Kotel precisely because that morning I cried from a deeply personal place. I was touched and hurt—as a woman, as a mother of a young daughter, as a Jew, as a rabbi, and as an Israeli. That experience not only helped to connect me with others struggling with similar issues, but it reminded me to open my heart to human suffering more broadly.

In his essay “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “indifference to evil is worse than evil itself” (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, page 224 -226). He continues and says that from his studies on the prophets he learned that “morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of humans beings”. He continues and says that “in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.” Heschel ends this powerful set of sermonic statements with a personal reflection: “As a result, my concern to stop the [Vietnam] war became a central religious concern.”

Heschel challenges us not just to transform our concern for others into action, but to understand this as a religious matter. How do we transcend ourselves,
feeling the pain of others, turning our cries into action? How can our Jewish beliefs and practices help us in our efforts to heal the world?

_al shloshah d’varim ha-olam omed:_ “The world stands on three pillars.” _Torah_-—study of sacred texts and wisdom; _avodah_-—prayer and meditation; and _g’milut chassadim_-—acts of loving-kindness. This statement from _pirkei avot_, from the _ethics of our ancestors_, which we sing regularly in our services, should be heard as a call for spiritual integration, recognizing that these three “pillars” are each needed to live thoughtful, reflective, and compassionate lives. These three realms of sacred experience need to flow together, with each enriching the other. Their interconnection should lead to a situation in which our worship and meditation practices move us to take action in the world; our Torah study should deepen our prayer experiences; and our social justice efforts should lead to new Torah insights. _Torah, avodah_ and _g’milut chassadim_, are not just three separate pillars, they are three fluid elements of a holistic Jewish life. Each helps us to make manifest the Divine presence in our lives and in the world.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to challenge us today by posing a few questions to think about together as community in the coming year:

- What can we do individually and collectively to ensure that the “surface of our souls” do not shrink? How can we enhance our ability to empathize with others—near and far, known and unknown?
- What makes you cry? What keeps you awake at night? What needs to be different in this world—in our local neighborhoods, in our city, in our state, in our country, in Israel, in the world?
• How can TBZ become a place to practice social justice from a Jewish perspective? In Heschel’s words, how can we make this work a “central religious concern” in our community?

• How might we generate a process where we significantly increase the level of communal involvement in sustained social justice efforts through our synagogue?

• What experiences and expertise do you bring to this effort? How can we learn from you and help sustain you in this sacred work?

Over the last several years we have grown into a serious community of spiritual practitioners and students of Torah through our "tfillot," and classes. Let us set as an intention for this year to harness the richness of the inner work we do at TBZ to guide our efforts in transforming the world. As we often ask on Shabbat, how can we bring the spirit of this sacred day into the six days of the week?

I want to call us today to think about how social justice can become an essential part of our religious lives at TBZ.

So, let me ask you again what moves you? What causes you to cry? How can we work together intentionally as a community to help alleviate the suffering of others near and far?