

The Year I Cried the Most

Introduction to Torah & Haftarah Readings, First Day of Rosh Hashanah

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

If there is one common denominator, one detail that links the Torah and Haftarah readings today, even the haftarah tomorrow, it is tears. Hagar weeps as she loses hope of being able to save her son from dying of thirst. Chana, in the haftarah, weeps bitterly, and publicly as she contemplates her struggle with infertility, a struggle and pain that many families to this day very day know all too well. Tomorrow, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of our matriarch Rachel weeping over the suffering of her descendants, the Jewish people being forced into exile.

In each case there is such desperation, such hopelessness. In their tears there is pain that just seems insupportable.

I am drawn to this particular detail of all of these readings this year, because I'm pretty sure I cried in 5781 more than I can ever remember crying before. Maybe more than all the years of my adult life combined. It's not what you think. Obviously this was a very challenging year for all of us. We all suffered more than our share disappointments, plans changed, rescheduled, cancelled; a world turned upside down. We've all been on the Covid rollercoaster, our hopes plunging and escalating and plunging again...But the tears I shed, and continue to shed is over the loss of my beloved father-in-law just a few months ago. This is the first High Holidays in my entire rabbinate that he is not watching and listening, making mental notes to give me feedback after services. This is the first high holidays in my rabbinate that he isn't schmoozing in the hallways or asking unsuspecting congregants, "So what do you think of the rabbi?" He kept detailed notes of every answer, so I know how each of you responded! His interest in my life, in Sari and our kids; his presence in every moment of our lives both large and small is an absence that we are all still coming to terms with. And I have cried and cried. Before the funeral and after, at random moments when I would have expected to hear his voice or see him bounding into our house. Last night, when, for the first time, his seat was empty at our yontiff table.

On Rosh Hashanah we come before the Creator of the Universe stripped of all pretension, coming to terms with our failures, submitting ourselves to scrutiny and judgment. The sound of *terua*, the aching, weeping blasts of the shofar capture this angst and dread, just as these readings do. But in the Torah and Haftarah, tears are not the end of the story. Hagar was shown a well of water with which she saved her son's life, Chana was blessed with a child, and God responded to Rachel's weeping by assuring her of *B'nei Yisrael's* ultimate redemption and return to their homeland. And you and I are also reassured that the tears we shed and the prayers we recite will elicit a favorable response from God. That we will be forgiven of our sins, and given a fresh start in the New Year.

So many times since May I have turned to God in utter bewilderment about the loss our family suffered. I have found myself so emotionally fragile, so quick to cry just by thinking about the outsized and beloved influence of my father-in-law and the gaping hole it has left in my heart.

And after a good cry, I feel cleansed; I catch my breath again, regain some composure; and I imagine like Hagar, and Chana, and Rachel, I feel the hand of God wiping away my tears and reassuring me that I can go on, that I can continue to live by making his memory a source of blessing and inspiration in my daily life.

The prophet Isaiah (25:8) said: *U'macha Adonai Elohim dim'ah me'al kol panim*...Some day in the future, in the time of the mashiach, God will wipe away all of our tears forever. But until then, weeping is healthy, weeping is consoling, weeping is strangely comforting.

May we all be comforted in our tears, and in the wiping away of our tears. And with occasionally puffy, red, and swollen eyes and flushed faces we still look to the future with confidence, with renewed strength and with hope.

And just as Hagar, Chana and Rachel turned to God and to expressed their pain, similarly, we feel confident in the Almighty's compassionate acceptance of our tears and prayers, in response to which He will grant us and all *Am Yisrael* a year of peace, blessing and prosperity.