

Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon 5780  
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz  
B'nai Israel Congregation

“I’m not crying. You’re crying.” This phrase has become ubiquitous, particularly on social media, as a caption for a heartwarming story or a video that tugs at the heartstrings. The phrase comes from the 2004 film adaptation of *Starsky and Hutch*, featuring Owen Wilson as Hutch and Ben Stiller as Starsky. In one scene, Starsky discreetly tries to wipe tears from his eyes when Hutch takes note and asks, “Are you crying?” Starsky responds, rather defensively, “Am I crying?! I’m not crying. You’re crying.” Despite Starsky’s stoic attempt to hide his feelings, Hutch notices, and goes on to encourage him that it is *okay to cry*. That is an important message for us to all hear, and particularly relevant on Yom Kippur: It is okay to cry.

American synagogues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century promulgated a stoic approach to religious life, especially prayer services. The sanctuary service was to be a place of decorum, where congregants sat like spectators in a theatre, looking on as the clergy conducted a ritual service. The congregants knew that they were to participate only in the prescribed fashion and when called upon to do so. Today, American synagogues across the denominational spectrum are breaking down the third wall of prayer services; trying to change that stoic approach to religious life. We have worked harder to encourage congregational singing. We craft moments for meaningful recognition and participation. We facilitate dialogue and exchange. Some have reconfigured their sanctuaries altogether, lowering the *bima*, bringing it closer to the congregation. All of this is intended to increase participation, and to thereby *move you*, make you feel something as a result of your participation in the prayer experience. Showing up and being present is only the first half of the equation. We need participation and engagement. The

intended outcome is a more meaningful experience, one that makes you *feel* something, maybe even one that brings you to tears. We want you to feel comfortable expressing those feelings, encouraging you to be demonstrative, not decorous.

The philosophy of stoicism is more than two thousand years old. Founded in Athens in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Stoics argued that happiness is found in accepting things as they are, overcoming our desires for that which is good and suppressing our fears of that which is painful. The road to happiness was paved with self-control. However, that self-control can be stifling and restrictive. The feeling of being stifled in the synagogue was expressed already in 1962 by Rabbi Norman Lamm, who would go on to serve as Chancellor of Yeshiva University, in a Rosh Hashanah sermon in which he said,

Once upon a time the *mahzor* was stained with tears; today it is so white and clean—and cold. Not, unfortunately, that there is nothing to cry about...It is rather that we have embarrassed ourselves into silence...And so the unwept tears and unexpressed emotions and the unarticulated cries well up within us and seek release.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, nearly six decades later, there is still much to cry about in the world. We could cry about the loss of life in armed conflicts and brutal wars. We could cry about the extinction of flora and fauna, plants and animals whose beauty and benefit are eternally lost to the world. We could cry about the senseless hatred that is expressed in words and deeds. We could cry about our own mortality, the recognition that we will die. We could cry about the death of a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a partner, God-forbid a child, a friend. But we are accustomed

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman Lamm, "Three Who Cried," speech given at the Jewish Center (New York City) on the first day of Rosh HaShana, September 29, 1962; cited by Dr. Erica Brown in "Teaching God to Cry," an excerpt from *In the Narrow Places: Daily Inspiration for the Three Weeks*.

to regulating our tears, expressing them only when it is acceptable to do so, and holding them back whenever we can. I have seen people stifle their tears at the bedside of a loved one, beside a grave as the casket is lowered, standing for Kaddish in a *shiva* home. What we all need, in moments like these, is to feel that we have permission to release those “unwept tears and unexpressed emotions and the unarticulated cries.” We all deserve that permission to cry.

Judaism does not teach us to quash our emotions or suppress our feelings. The release of unbridled joy and mournful sadness is part of the rituals of our tradition. We demonstrate unbridled joy at *s'machot* through song and dance. Rebecca loves to tell people that the *hora* at our wedding lasted for nearly an hour. We spun around, we danced, we were raised high in the air, and I sat on my friend's shoulders as he spun around the room. Those who know me well know that I am even-keeled and regulated, but that moment of dancing the *hora* at our wedding was so joyous. I saw everyone around me celebrating, and that gave me the permission I needed to express how I truly felt within, so I let go and I danced. It is time to stop stifling ourselves. It is time for us to stain the pages of these new *mahzorim* yet again, with the truest and most honest of tears: Tears of joy and thanksgiving; tears of loss and grief.

The Book of Lamentations, *Eikhah*, which we read liturgically on Tisha B'Av, laments the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. In one *midrash*, God is the one in need of permission to cry. At first, when God sees the Temple destroyed and ransacked by our enemies, God removes the Divine Presence from the earthly realm, and angrily conceals it in its heavenly abode, like a teenager slamming their bedroom door when parents anger them. In the classical conception, this destruction was brought on by the sins of Israel, so God's initial response is to be expected: God is frustrated and angry, and thus God turns away from Jerusalem and its

inhabitants. The destruction and desolation is their fault, but God must suffer the consequences of their actions. What becomes clear in the *midrash*, however, is that God is not just angry; God is disappointed, God is sad, and God wants to cry.

The ministering angels of heaven take note and realize that God is sad and upset, even if the outward behaviors suggest otherwise. In a clever plan, they lead God back down to earth, back to Jerusalem, back to the site of the Temple, to experience again the pain of its destruction. Moved by this scene and prepared to acknowledge the sadness thereof, God tells the prophet Jeremiah, “Go and call upon Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Call them from their graves for they know how to cry.” God needs them to teach God how to cry, how to mourn, how to be honest about one’s innermost emotions. It takes some convincing, but eventually Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses arise from their graves and follow Jeremiah to the Temple. When they see the scene of destruction and desolation before them, they rend their garments, they hold their faces in their hands, they cry out, and they weep. God sees them mourning, and learns from them—it is okay to cry. So God too cries out, and establishes the day for mourning. We must be for each other what the *Avot* and Moses were for God. We must give one another permission not to be embarrassed, not to be shamed, but to be honest and to be expressive, to show our emotions. We must help each other realize that it is okay to cry.

The Talmud (Berakhot 3a) records an incident with Rabbi Yosei. One day, while traveling down a road near Jerusalem, the time arrived for Rabbi Yosei to stop and *daven* Mincha, to offer his afternoon prayer. There was a desolate building set back from the road, uninhabited and partially destroyed, collateral damage from the destruction of Jerusalem. He entered the building to begin his prayers in an effort to avoid being bothered by passerby on the road. As he

prayed, Elijah miraculously appeared and guarded the entrance to the building until he had completed his prayer. Afterward, Elijah asked Rabbi Yosei, “What voice did you hear in that ruined building?” Rabbi Yosei replied, “I heard a Heavenly voice cooing like a dove and saying: Woe to the children, due to whose sins I destroyed My house, burned My Temple, and exiled them among the nations.” Elijah replied, “Not only did you hear that this one time, but that voice cries out three times each and every day!” In other words, as much as we are compelled to pray and cry out, God too prays three times each day, bemoaning the tragedies that we endure. We might notice that voice crying out on occasion. God cries out and prays for a better world just as often as we might do the same. If we listen carefully, we might hear the echoes of our prayers, a yearning that amplifies our voice. We are reminded that we are God’s partners in this ongoing work of Creation, and that we are God’s agents in making this world a better place.

In the *Sifrei*, a *midrashic* collection on Deuteronomy, we see another example of God mourning. After Moses’ death, Joshua cries, wails, weeps, and mourns for Moses day after day. Finally, taking note of Joshua’s prolonged period of mourning for Moses, God calls out to him and asks, “Why are you still mourning? Do you think that Moses’ death was only a loss for you?! I, too, am mourning for Moses.”<sup>2</sup> Joshua imagines that he alone is suffering Moses’ death. When we face difficult moments, we may also feel as if we are alone, that no one else can imagine or understand our pain. We fail to recognize the empathic power of the people around us. We do not give them enough credit. They too have experienced loss; they too have experienced hardship. If only we mourned with them, rather than beside them, perhaps we would not feel so isolated and alone. Joshua needs God to mourn with him, as much as God

---

<sup>2</sup> *Sifrei Devarim*, Parshat Nitzavim.

needs Joshua. They mourn together. God mourns the death of each and every individual. God cries out to us and says, “You are not suffering this loss alone. I, too, am in mourning. Be with me, and I will be with you. Let us mourn together.”

Rabbi Noah Zvi Farkas writes, “God alone bears witness to the unceasing universality of death within all of existence.”<sup>3</sup> God carries the heaviest burden, mourning each and every individual who dies. We mourn the loss of those whom we know—God mourns every loss. Rabbi Farkas goes on to demonstrate that, word by word, line by line, the recitation of the Mourner’s Kaddish is like paying a *shiva* call to God. Yes, we are the mourners, and so is God. Death prompts us to retreat, to take refuge, just as God does in the *midrash*. Experiencing loss can be lonesome and isolating. But when we recite Kaddish, we move towards God, and we ask that God come back to the world to be with us, to be our partners in Creation, even when we experience destruction. We give God permission to mourn, and God reciprocates.

These moments of meaningful connection with God, whether they are built upon tears of sadness or tears of joy, they are the moments that we must grasp and then allow them to carry us through the year ahead. It is precisely these moments that encourage us to act, to bring about change in the world, to be more than just God’s partner in mourning and rejoicing, but to be God’s partner in the ongoing work of Creation. When we build a relationship with the Divine based on truth and honesty, when we give permission and are granted permission to be our truest selves, that enables us to live a life with suffused with purpose and meaning, a life that reflects our values and the values bequeathed to us by our loved ones who have departed from this world. When we act, we do so in their name and in their memory.

---

<sup>3</sup> Noah Zvi Farkas, “For a God Who Mourns,” *Kaddish*, Mesora Matrix, Birnbaum & Cohen, p. 51.

In a few moments, some of us will rise to recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. This is an opportunity to cry, to shed tears of sadness that these individuals are no longer physically a part of our lives, and to shed tears of joy that we had the pleasure of knowing them and experiencing the gift of their lives as a part of ours. But not all who are here today will stand to remember—some of us are fortunate enough to not have suffered devastating loss yet in our lives. Today's message is for you too: When you are moved to cry, whether it is from sadness or joy, do not hold back those tears any longer. Let them fall down. It's okay to cry. If you listen carefully, you may hear God crying with you.