

The Power of Tears – Yom Kippur 5774

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Rav Yona Furst, a survivor of the Holocaust who became a teacher at the ultra-Orthodox Nitra Yeshiva in Mount Kisco New York, tells a story of Rosh Hashanah celebrated in Thereisestadt in 1944. A group of Jews gathered in secret for prayer, and you can imagine that the emotions were high. Standing in the shadow of death, he writes, “It is clear that their heartfelt prayers burst the gates of heaven open.” When the service ended, one inmate asked about Kiddush. The other prisoners just stared back in shock – of course there was no wine to be found in Thereisenstadt.

Sensing the emotions of the moment, Rav Furst suggested: “Let us make Kiddush on a commodity so dear, available in great quantities, even in this hell. Let us substitute wine with our tears.” A cup was placed in the room and in moments it was filled with hot tears of these prisoners, and he chanted the traditional melody. Rav Furst writes, “It is hard for a mortal to envision the deep pride and holiness that permeated us at that moment.”

I want to speak this morning about the redemptive power of tears, which has kept the Jewish people alive through thousands of years of trial and tribulation.

It is said that Napoleon Bonaparte was once walking along a street on Tisha B’Av on a hot August day when he stopped in front of a synagogue. He heard crying from within and he asked the soldier at his side what these Jews were doing. “They are mourning over the destruction of their Temple,” he was told. He asked when the Jewish Temple was destroyed and was told it was nearly 2000 years ago, to which he replied, “They are still crying after 2000 years? A nation that mourns so long will never cease. They will surely return to their land and see the rebuilding of their Temple.”

These were bitter tears, but there was a redemptive aspect to them as well. Not just on Tisha B’Av, but every day for the last 2000 years, Jews have faced Jerusalem and prayed. And in our own era we have witnessed the sweetness of at least the beginning of that redemption in the modern State of Israel, established in the wake of all those tears.

I want to go back to the very beginning of our people’s history. Moses brought us out of Egypt, the Egyptians gave chase, God split the Sea and our people crossed through to safety. And they sang and they danced with gratitude to God. But the Torah tells us that it didn’t last long. The people walked on for three days and found no water. “They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah.” (The word Marah means bitter). “And the people began complaining against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.”

The Rabbis of the Midrash were amazed by what they called נס בתוך נס, a miracle within a miracle. God used something bitter – a branch – and injected it into the bitter water to create something sweet. They point to a similar story of the prophet Elisha in Jericho. The men of the town complained that their water was putrid and causing illness. Elisha told them to bring him a dish of salt,

which he sprinkled into the water to make it sweet and wholesome. Such is God's great power, להמתיק, מר במר, to sweeten bitterness with bitterness.

These vignettes serve as a frame for the entire wilderness narrative, and indeed for all of biblical – and Jewish history. It is impossible to have contentment, it is impossible to encounter freedom, it is impossible to appreciate sweetness without bitterness. God's first promise to Abraham in Genesis: Your descendants will be plentiful ... they will inherit the land ... but they will suffer first in slavery. The promise to Moses: You will take the people out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land ... but you will wander for 40 years and you yourself will not make it. And in the modern era: Later today in the Martyrology service we will read Nathan Alterman's haunting poem, which is based on President Chaim Weizman's famous words, "No state is handed to a people on a silver platter." The state was built on the foundation of tears, which extinguished the flames of persecution.

להמתיק מר במר, To sweeten the bitterness with bitterness.

From my personal experience as a parent: It seems that this summer my children skinned their knees A LOT; we've been learning to ride bicycles in our house. Sharon and I cleaned and sprayed a lot of cuts. And inevitably each time our kids would complain: It stings. And we would tell them to hold on because the stinging is just the beginning of the healing process.

להמתיק מר במר, To sweeten the bitterness with bitterness.

I was thinking back recently on one of the more painful moments I have experienced here at B'nai Israel. It was 12 years ago this past Shabbat, as the congregation was celebrating the babies that were born the previous year. We don't speak about it often, but before our three beautiful children were born, Sharon and I suffered for a number of years through "unexplained infertility". We visited doctors, we took medicine, we listened to countless people tell us to relax – we were young, it would happen. Moments like the baby blessing were painful and isolating because while we wanted to celebrate other people's joy, it was difficult to get past our own disappointments.

That particular Saturday, another couple experiencing a similar struggle happened also to be in the synagogue. And I remember the four of us sitting around the table in my office and going through an entire box of tissues. The crying didn't change our predicament. But that morning proved to be very special. We created a new friendship. We were new to B'nai Israel but we could feel our little community being formed, and suddenly we didn't feel quite so alone. Our shared bitterness was sweetening life's bitterness.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen describes something similar in her bestselling book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. Dr. Remen had been living with the effects of Crohn's disease for many years, but at some point she started experiencing frightening symptoms. She was waking up in the middle of the night, spiking high fevers, and she was concerned. She visited her doctors regularly and they took a whole bunch of tests, which all said there was nothing wrong with her. Of course she knew otherwise, and the symptoms continued. So finally she decided to make an appointment with another doctor. She was hesitant, wondering what this new doctor could possibly find that all the other tests had missed.

But it turns out that this appointment was different from any other she had experienced. The doctor introduced himself and just asked her to explain why she had come to see him. Dr. Remen started describing the symptoms and – somewhat to her surprise – the doctor didn't interrupt. So she kept talking and adding details that she had never told anyone else. The experience brought her to tears. And when she was finished, the doctor didn't offer a new magic-bullet solution. He just reached for her hand. He concurred that there was something wrong and admitted that he didn't know what it was. They would have to wait until something would eventually declare itself more clearly. But he looked at her and smiled and told her, "We will wait together."

Those words gave Dr. Remen tremendous strength because suddenly she was not alone. In time an abscess in her abdomen did appear on an X ray and this doctor repaired it surgically. But she insists that the healing began with her tears, which became a gateway to companionship.

The Tel Aviv University evolutionary biologist Dr. Oren Hasson calls crying "a highly evolved behavior." Tears are not only a signal of physiological distress. They function as an evolution-based mechanism to bring people closer together. Which is good because, as Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin wrote in a book that she formulated in response to her painful experiences with two miscarriages, "It is so very hard to heal alone."

Crying is a familiar motif throughout the Bible. Jacob cries. Rachel Cries. God Himself is portrayed as weeping in response to our people's exile from the land. But no tears strengthen relationships and begin a process of healing more powerfully than those of Joseph in Egypt.

You recall that Joseph had lived a troubled youth. His brothers hated him. They sold him into slavery and Joseph continued to fall to the deepest depths before finally rising to prominence in Egypt. Joseph was 17 years old when his brothers first threw him in the pit, but he was a grown man with a wife and two children and power surpassed only by the pharaoh when he saw his brothers for the next time. They came to him during famine in search of food. Joseph recognized his brothers. He wanted to test them, but also to demonstrate the extent of his power, and so he put them through the ringer. Joseph didn't reveal his identity. He tortured them with mind games – as if to say, "It doesn't matter what you may have done to me in the past. I've risen above that, and I'm in control now."

But he couldn't keep it up. The Torah says: "ולא יכול יוסף להתאפק, Joseph could not control himself." He was all alone in his deception and the emotions welled up inside. He sent all of his attendants away and then he burst. He cried so loud that his screams were heard throughout Egypt and in the house of Pharaoh.

Joseph had almost been afraid to cry, but it turns out that the release was just what he needed. The bitter tears wiped away the years of suffering. They restored Joseph's connection to his family and he finally revealed to them his true identity. No need to feel guilty, he told them; for all had transpired according to God's plan. The bitterness of the past was sweetened. The reconciling family sat down for a meal. Jacob came down to Egypt; and the children of Israel were reunited.

Tears are powerful cleaning agents, enabling us to see the world through what Rachel Naomi Remen calls "new eyes."

She writes of a gifted cancer surgeon who came to visit her while struggling with depression. She couldn't understand how this man who offered new leases on life to his patients every day could feel so disillusioned and isolated. But he seemed detached. Dr. Remen suggested that he create a journal and spend a few minutes every evening writing the answers to three questions: What surprised me today? What moved me or touched me today? What inspired me today? The idea was to create a new perspective, but it was very difficult. For the first few days he couldn't even answer the questions. Nothing surprised him. Cancers grew, cancers shrunk. Patients came in and patients went out. But he was encouraged to keep trying, to look at things differently, and eventually he started to write a few things down.

One day he reached a breakthrough. A woman came into his office. She was 38 years-old and had undergone major surgery and debilitating chemotherapy to treat ovarian cancer. But on this particular visit the doctor saw something he had never seen before. He noticed her four-year-old on her lap and her six-year-old leaning against her chair. Both girls were clean, well-fed; they seemed happy and well-loved. The doctor suddenly saw this patient in a new light. He knew what kind of ordeal she had been through and he was amazed at how great her children looked. They talked about the symptoms as was usual for their visits, and then he continued, "You are such a great mother to your kids. Even after all you have been through, there is something very strong in you. I think that power could maybe heal you someday." She smiled in a way he hadn't seen before and said, "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

At that moment, this doctor realized that he was seeing through a new set of eyes. He wasn't just seeing disease and treatment and surgery. He was seeing *people* and connecting with them, and his new relationships were making him a better doctor. Suddenly his work was not just professional. It was holy.

We have all known pain. We have all felt struggle. But what else do we see? Who else can we help? Where else can we make a mark on this world? How might the future that we envision be sweeter than the past? להמתיק מר במר.

In her book *To Begin Again*, Rabbi Naomi Levy describes an experience I can relate to: Being in the supermarket with her son and having him put up some kind of tantrum over a particular toy that she didn't want to buy for him. Eventually he calmed down and Rabbi Levy was ready to give him a tissue, but he refused, saying "No mommy," he said. "I want to wear my tears." Tears have tremendous cleansing power. They can wash away some of life's most bitter disappointments. But moving on does not obviate to remember the pains of the past.

Yom Kippur, according to tradition, is also the day that Moses received the second set of tablets at Sinai. The sins of the past were forgiven and God's covenant with the Jewish people began anew. But the Rabbis teach that the painful part was not to be completely forgotten. The ark that they carried in the wilderness contained those shattered tablets alongside the shiny new ones.

Last Saturday I read about a donation that is being made to the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is scheduled to open in 2015. The family of Jim Jimerson, a white Baptist minister who had been active in racial issues in Birmingham Alabama in the 1960s, is donating a section of stained glass from the bombed out 16th Street Baptist Church, which the minister had picked up shortly after the blast. Tomorrow is the 50th anniversary of the bombing, which killed 4 girls but also marked a turning point for the Civil Rights movement and contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The director of the museum, Lonnie G. Bunch, explained how important this artifact is. "This bombing was a moment that the world would never forget," he said. "It came within a month of the March on Washington, and it reminded us that there is not change without loss." We dare not forget those tears.

Today is the Day of Memory. We remember those from among our people who suffered through the centuries of Jewish history. We remember Jews and non-Jews who struggled for the cause of justice. In this Yizkor hour we remember loved ones and the impacts they made on our lives and on our families. We remember joys we shared; and inevitably also moments of pain and illness and suffering; relationships that never developed, dreams that were left unrealized. Let us not fear to remember. Those disappointments are forever a part of us, even as we consider how we have grown since and we imagine how we might continue to change as time marches on.

My colleague Rabbi Steven Moskowitz of the Jewish Congregation of Brookville on Long Island's North Shore, says it this way. He says: There are two types of tears. There are tears of pain that burn our cheeks and crush us with pain and heartache and despair. And then there are the tears of memory. These tears do not sting. They are sweet. They roll as we recall stories of loved ones and laugh and smile. These tears still hurt. They are bitter. But they do not sting. The sweet tears of memory are no longer incapacitating, but ennobling.

That is God's power to create sweetness out of bitterness, להמתיק מר במר. In this hour of Yizkor, I pray:

- May we be strengthened by our shared history of hope and renewal and rebirth.
- May we feel supported by the power of community and companionship.
- May we be cleansed by the rolling of our tears.
- And may we be emboldened to see the world through new eyes, that might enable us to best recognize God's goodness and mercy in our world.

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Hatimah Tovah, May we be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.