

Tears of Sorrow, Tears of Redemption

Rabbi Toba Spitzer

There is such a swirl about us these days, it's hard to keep one's head clear...Never-ending commentary on the radio and TV, projections and conjectures and musings about what's next, and meanwhile many continue to mourn and grieve, to look for the lost, to wonder what the other shoe is and when it will drop.

In the framework of Jewish mourning practice, last week we came out of shivah, out of the initial seven-day period of grief, and now we're in the remainder of sheloshim, the first thirty days that follow a death. Jewish tradition is wise in that it knows we can't just "get back to normal," that a shopping trip is no answer to trauma and loss. It takes time, the pain comes and goes, our awareness is shifting back but not entirely to what it was.

In the midst of all this, I have been wondering what God has been up to lately. Rationally I know that what I understand to be God is quite incomprehensible, and that whatever the Power that makes for Life and Creation is truly up to these days is far beyond the capacity of my brain to grasp. But on some other level, I allow myself to wonder.

On Sunday night I happened to turn on the T.V., and found myself watching an interview with two failed Palestinian suicide bombers. I watched in a kind of horrified fascination as these young men spoke calmly about what they had been ready to do—to turn themselves into human bombs in order to kill their Jewish enemies and to go to their own version of heavenly paradise, where they believe 72 virgins await Muslim martyrs. I felt so many things, watching them, but ultimately I was left with a profound sadness, near to despair. What has humanity come to, I thought, that two human beings would arrive at such a place as this?

If this makes me so sad, then I can only imagine how God is reacting. I find comfort in the fact that many rabbis before me have wondered about this same thing—where is God in moments of despair? I've found one answer I like in a midrash that was written in the wake of the greatest disaster the Jewish people had every experienced up until that time: the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. Beyond the physical wreckage and the many many lives lost, the destruction of Jerusalem meant the obliteration of a religious system that was over 1,000 years old. A true catastrophe.

And so the rabbis imagined God watching this calamity, and becoming overcome with grief. "In that instant the (arch)angel Metatron came, fell upon his face, and spoke before the Holy One: 'Master of the universe, let me weep, but You must not weep.' God replied, 'If you do not let Me weep, I will go into a place where you have no authority to enter, and weep there.'" (Lamentations Rabbah, proem 24)

I love this midrash because it imagines God sitting and weeping with us, refusing to be consoled. And so I, borrowing from our rabbinic ancestors, imagine God weeping today.

I imagine God weeping at what has become of her human creations.

I imagine God weeping for the suffering of thousands on September 11th, and for their families and loved ones who are left with only memories and perhaps a final telephone call to say “I love you.”

I imagine God weeping at the reality of a young man whose mind is confused and whose soul is darkened by hatred and promises of eternal satisfaction, strapping explosives to his body to become a human bomb.

I imagine God weeping at the inability of human beings to understand that our suffering, our fear and our loss are what connect us, weeping at our stubborn insistence on using our suffering and loss to create even greater divisions, rather than to realize our connection.

The ancient rabbis went on to imagine that, after the Temple was destroyed, God not only wept, but God’s indwelling Presence, the *Shechina*, actually went into exile along with the Jews expelled from Jerusalem. This story of God’s exile became a theme for later Jews who lived through the destruction of their communities. The Kabbalists of S’fat, 16th century mystics living in the wake of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, created a new Jewish mythology, declaring that in the very creation of the universe, a shattering had occurred, and aspects of God were in exile from one another. The very cosmos was broken in a fundamental way.

This is a story that speaks to me today. I too feel that our world is fundamentally broken. This is not a new awareness, but today it overtakes me with a sharpness that I can’t ignore.

But the great genius of those Kabbalists, of R. Isaac Luria and his followers, was not to be overcome by despair in this realization of brokenness, but rather to find profound meaning in it. They had the audacity to declare a partnership of cosmic proportions between the Holy One above and God’s servants below. They taught: if the universe is fundamentally broken, then our human role is to repair it (this is the concept of *tikkun*). The great *chutzpah* of Lurianic kabbalah is to say that every mitzvah done by every Jew, with the proper intention, not only does good on this plane of existence, but helps bring about repair within the Godly realm, within the cosmos, as well. It is audaciously human-centered, but that is also its power. God is in exile and God needs us, just as we are in exile and in need of God—whether we

understand the “us” as the Jewish community, or as humanity as a whole.

The Lurianic notion of cosmic brokenness and the need for *tikkun*, or repair, offers us an interesting way of understanding the meaning of *mitzvah*, right action, and of its opposite, sin. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes it in this way:

“The world is not a fully perfect entity, and the task of the *mitzvah* is to bring about the perfection that is lacking. Sin, then, is essentially the want of something, a defect in reality. If a sin is one of default, it consists of a failure to rectify some aspect of the world or of [humanity], while if it is one of deed the sinner has added to the imperfection of reality. [Humanity], possessing free will, is the active force in the world, and [we] are therefore its guardian and keeper. When [we] do not fulfill this function [we] blemish reality or allow it to deteriorate” (in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, pp. 882-883). (With thanks to Rabbi Barbara Penzner for bringing this text to my attention)

In other words, at any given moment we are either adding to the potential wholeness of the world or we are subtracting from it. Sinfulness is not an inherent quality of a person or a group of people; it is the result of particular actions or inactions. This view gives great importance to all of our deeds, small and large, from the intention we have when we take a bite of food to our treatment of other human beings.

When the rabbis of the *midrash* imagined God weeping over the destruction of the holy Temple, they also imagined God waiting in that moment for Her creations, her beloved servants, to do *teshuvah*, to repent and return to the path of *mitzvah*. And this is what I feel in this moment of time: a massive call to *teshuvah*, for all communities of the earth.

Contrary to the lunacy of Jerry Falwell, or to those who seek to blame the horror of September 11th on America’s support for Israel, I don’t mean to suggest that any person or group of people did any thing that in any way can be seen as justification for those attacks. There is no justification, there is no rationality lying behind violence of this sort.

But at the same time I do believe that there is a call to *teshuvah* that awaits us. This disaster has shown us all the good that human beings are capable of—the many many stories of self-sacrifice and heroism, the outpouring of grief and support from around the world, the sense of community and connection that can rise up from the ashes of destruction. But it has also alerted us to the harsh reality of human-created evil. It has woken us up to the reality of suffering—not only in our own country, but around the world. It has made us aware of how much we don’t understand about many people in many parts of the globe.

I understand *teshuvah* as an opportunity, not a punishment. We stand here on Yom Kippur and recite a collective litany of sins—the *Ashamnu* and the *Al cheyt*, which we will say many times tonight and tomorrow—saying together a list of misdeeds that many of us have never committed. Why? Because somewhere in that list may be something that speaks to us, that wakes us up to our own error, to the ways in which we have detracted from the wholeness of the world, rather than adding to it. And in that awareness we are given the opportunity to change. Once we can name what we have done wrong, we can begin to take the steps to make reparations, to change our behavior, to attempt to not do it again.

So this historical moment is like a collective *al heyt* for all of humanity. The blame for the atrocity of September 11th rests with a specific group of people, but its ultimate repair lies with all of us. How have we as a human race gotten to this point? How can it be that we know so little about one another, and are always willing to believe the worst? How has our suspicion and hatred gotten so deep? How have we allowed our religious teachings to become pretexts for violence and prejudice?

Where does our *teshuvah* begin?

The Muslim world has been called to *teshuvah* in a very profound way, called to look closely at how the teachings and sacred texts of Islam have been used and misused to promote violence and oppression. There is repair that must be done, and many in the Muslim community have already responded to that call. But the Muslims are not alone in having to do some hard work. We as Jews—and indeed every religious community—are called to a similar task. How have our sacred teachings been used and misused to perpetrate violence and suffering? What actions have been taken in the name of Torah, in the name of God, that subtract from the wholeness of the world, instead of adding to it?

As American Jews, I think we are called in some specific ways to respond to the needs of the moment, and to do our own *teshuvah* as a community. For too long we have allowed our fears of anti-Semitism, and our own unwillingness to face the complicated reality of the state of Israel, to keep us from acting for peace in the Middle East. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be allowed to fester forever; it endangers the citizens of Israel as well as the Palestinian people, it threatens the moral center of Jewish life, it increases instability in the world. There are plenty of wrongs on both sides, and the game of keeping score is getting tired. It is time to move beyond mutual recrimination towards mutual reconciliation. It is time to seize the opportunity that a world of shifting alliances now opens to us. This historical moment hints at opportunities for transformation that we should not let slip through our fingers.

American Jews have an important role to play in encouraging our government to be honest brokers in

helping to mediate this conflict. Our administration now realizes how important it is to bring the conflict to an end, and pressure is being brought to bear on both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to end the violence and get back to the negotiating table. I hope that American Jews will support this effort, and not be an obstacle to it. It is time to move beyond disinterest and disengagement, beyond bitter criticism that cuts us off from Israel and her citizens. And it is also time to move beyond unquestioning support for all that Israel does, beyond the notion that public discussion and disagreement means betrayal of the Jewish people. There is too much at stake to silence ourselves; we need to engage in a loving and honest way in the hard questions that confront us.

I personally have committed the sin of indifference in recent years, of allowing myself to become distanced from Israel because events there felt too painful for me to watch. My own *teshuvah* is to re-engage, to say that as a Jew I am responsible for other Jews and for the Jewish state, and that I bear some responsibility for helping to bring peace to a region exhausted by war. I invite all of you to think about where you stand in relation to this issue, and how you think you might add, in some way, to the work of *tikkun*. As a community, I am proud that a group of Dorshei Tzedek members has started the difficult and holy work of trying to figure out how to talk about Israel within a Jewish group with diverse views. If we cannot talk about the issue, then we cannot work for the changes that need to occur. This is not easy work, but it is not impossible, and I hope that Dorshei Tzedek as a community will remain committed to modeling open and respectful discussion of an enormously complex issue, will model what it means to be on a journey of honest inquiry. I think this project has much to teach the larger Jewish community.

I read another midrash recently that I think speaks to us at this time. Like the story about God and the Temple, it is also about weeping. It is difficult to translate, but its essence is that Israel will be redeemed from exile when the tears of Esau cease. (Zohar II, Shemot 12b)

It is a text about the messianic time—in classic Jewish understanding, the time when the people of Israel will come out of exile, a time of peace, of wholeness, *shalom*. And what is the teaching here? That this messianic time, the ultimate well-being of the Jewish people, hinges on an end to the tears that are cried by Esau.

Esau was the brother of Jacob, cheated out of his first-born blessing; his tears were those of the pain and betrayal he felt when his father Isaac gave his blessing to the younger son. In the rabbinic understanding, Esau stands for the arch-enemies of the Jewish people: he is the ancestor of Amalek, and the symbol first of the Roman empire, and later the Christian world.

So imagine how surprised I was to find this midrash—which teaches that the tears of Esau, despised brother of Jacob and enemy of Jacob's descendants, are somehow linked to the sufferings of the Jewish

people, and that only when the tears of both cease will the redemption be complete.

Maybe this is what we can learn out of the depths of the tragedy we have witnessed. That redemption will come when all tears have ceased, when all sources of suffering have been repaired. Our redemption is somehow linked to the fate of even those whom we consider our enemies. Their tears and ours are ultimately not so different.

This midrash teaches me that we are called to *teshuvah* on a universal level. As human beings, our well-being is inextricably bound up with the well-being of others: this is the profound teaching of this historical moment. We are called to think deeply and clearly about what it will really take to lessen violence and suffering throughout the world. We are called to address in a fundamental way the profound disparities of wealth, the lopsided use of the majority of the world's resources by a small minority of the world's citizens. We are challenged to think about what sacrifices those of us blessed to live in the United States might need to make to begin to address some of these imbalances in a way that will lead to true stability and security on a global scale.

The Kabbalists teach us not to take our own power to make repairs, to effect *tikkun*, too lightly. They challenge us to be audacious in our living, to actually believe that the foods we eat, the words we speak, our acts of love, the money we give away, have the power to make cosmic change. The task before us may be large, but our response can be a collection of small actions taken over a lifetime: by our efforts individually and in community to live lives of integrity, to act out of love and not fear, to use the earth's resources wisely.

We have heard over and over these past two weeks that everything has changed. Even with the shocks we've felt and the uncertainties that lie ahead, I am not so sure this is true. I think perhaps it's more accurate to say that everything could be changed, if we have the vision and the courage to make it so. There are so many opportunities that lay before us, from the possibility of peace between Israel and the Palestinians to a truly international effort to address the roots of violence. If Boston Red Sox fans can sing songs in celebration of New York, then perhaps anything is possible!

We Jews have learned some important lessons in the past 2,000 years, ever since that moment when Jerusalem fell. We have learned that communal survival can be achieved not just through military might, but in setting up communities of Torah study and holy living. We have learned that strength can be measured not just in armies, but in a commitment to teaching and learning and living with integrity. The Jewish people and Jewish culture have outlasted many empires, and our traditions have never stopped evolving, have never stopped growing and deepening.

I think perhaps we have something to teach those around us, as we head into this time of uncertainty. What new paradigm for strength and survival might we have to contribute to a world that is growing weary of war? What new visions for peace and co-existence can we bring to the land of Israel? How might we teach others about the possibility of ancient traditions entering the modern world, incorporating the best values of modernity, without sacrificing their ancient wisdom?

God needs some time to cry, as do we. But I don't think God will stop there, and I hope we won't either. Every morning we say a blessing: *Modah ani lifanecha melech chai v'kayam, sh'chazarta bi nishmati b'chemla, rabah emunatecha*. "I am thankful before the Eternal Source of Life that returns my spirit to me in love—great is Your faithfulness." *Rabah emunatecha*—every morning we affirm that God has faith in us. I hope we can have a similar faith.

The human spirit is so large when we allow it to be; the incredible outpouring of bravery and love and money in these past two weeks is testament to that. Let's not squander this opportunity to make the most of what we've learned about ourselves, the good and the bad. Let's name the sins that need to be named, let's confess them together, and then let's come together to begin to imagine a better way. Let's dry Esau's tears, and our own, and begin to figure out what it will take to make redemption real.

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