

When President Kennedy was assassinated my mom – a woman tough as nails – was overcome. The only other time I recall her shedding tears was when my dad died suddenly at the age of 42. The one time I remember my dad cry was when we as a family volunteered to help children who were blind and deaf. I have wispy memories of being with those kids on ponies and going out on a speedboat. What remains clearest to me about that day, however, is seeing my father well up as he spoke about the challenges those we were with had to face. Decades later, memories of my parents have faded, but I recall their tears.

Rosh Hashanah is a day laden with tears.

In Torah a little later on we will hear how Abraham exiles his own son, Ishmael, born to the concubine Hagar. Wandering in the wilderness, their water gone, Hagar (literally, "the foreigner" or "the stranger") is in agony as she leaves her son far enough away that she not be able to watch him die ... and she bursts into tears. Of Ishmael we are told nothing. If he cries (and why would he not, abandoned by his father, cast aside by his mother?!), his cry is a silent one. Yet God hears him where he is. And in Ishmael is the fulfillment of the words of the Psalm traditionally said throughout the holiday season: "Though my father and my mother (may) forsake me, the Eternal will take me in."<sup>1</sup>

And so ... on Rosh Hashanah we hear the cries of the abandoned, those cast aside. We hear the tears of the stranger in our midst and the foreigner we fear.

In our *haftarah* הפטרה a man named Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninah. While Peninah has children, Hannah cannot get pregnant. Making it worse, her rival ridicules her. Distraught and disheartened, Hannah dissolves into tears. Her husband tenderly tries to comfort her, but she is inconsolable. Hannah's tears are the source of her prayers – and while the holy man in the temple where she prays misunderstands her, in the end, God responds.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27:10

And so ... on this new year we hearken to the tears of those whose pain is personal, who cry for unfulfilled dreams or the family who push them away; who cry in shame or for burdens they feel no one will understand.

Tomorrow we will read the עקידה *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac that is traditionally reading the second day of this holiday. According to one legend, when Abraham lifted the knife to slaughter his son, the angels of heaven broke into tears.<sup>2</sup> And their tears, the *midrash* says, fell into Isaac's eyes, blinding him from seeing his father's violent (some might say abusive) act of faith. This, the rabbis imagine, is why in his later years Torah says Isaac could not see.

And so ... we lament those children or women (and some men) who live with violence and abuse. We feel the anguish of the angels, knowing that some are so devoted to their work or success, their pleasure or even their faith, that they are willing to sacrifice everything else - even those closest to them.

Even one of the sounds of the *shofar* - the תרועה *truah* (a broken sobbing) has its origins in a tear. Specifically, to the mother of the Midianite general Sisera who sought to destroy Israel but was himself cut down. When she realizes that her son will not return, she cries in grief.<sup>3</sup>

And so ... on this day of our own tears, for our own longings and losses, our grief and our guilts we are compelled to hear the wails of even the mothers of our enemies, those who we have the most difficulty feeling empathy towards and whose tears compel us even so.

We say לשנה טובה ומתוקה *l'shana tova u'mituka*, "may it be a good and sweet year", but on Rosh Hashanah we cannot escape the deep brokenness each of us knows. Year after year you have entrusted me with your tears - for a child you desperately want but cannot have, the fear of have revealing you are lesbian or gay or transgender, or for betrayals of trust by those closest to you. Tears for disappointments and failures, friendships lost, or family ties frayed. Tears of regret

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 56:5; 65:10

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 33b on Judges 5:28

for things that were said or words we could have uttered but left unsaid. Tears for a diagnosis you hoped never to hear and tears of those shudder to hear ונתנה תוקף *u'nitaneh tokef*, "who shall live and who shall die." How many tears are in the hearts of those in this congregation? For all our differences, none of us is immune. We all know the anguish and plaint of the stranger Hagar, the barren wife Hannah, the abused child Isaac, the desperate mother of our enemy Sisera.

If the tears that infuse this day are not enough, consider this – as a people we Jews began with a cry.

Enslaved and oppressed in Egypt, our ancestors "cried out, and their cry for help ... went up to God. God heard their groaning and remembered the covenant ... God saw ... and God understood (knew)."<sup>4</sup>

In these few verses comes the counter-cultural moral claim of our people – that the tears of others *are* our concern, and that where there is oppression we must not harden our hearts or close our minds or withdraw our hand. In response to the pain of the people of Israel God calls to Moses out of the burning bush and makes clear why their redemption is at hand "I have heard their cry ... I know their pain."<sup>5</sup>

To know the pain of another. This, I suggest, is the essential call of Torah and what we are reminded of on this day. Many other claims might have been made in Torah for why God acts – to right the wrongdoing, to take revenge on the oppressor, to show God's power. Yet none of these are what moves God. It is, instead, a profound sense of empathy – of caring for the pain of another.

In contrast to God's compassion is the response of Pharaoh. In the face of the suffering of the slaves, his heart only hardens. The lesson could not be more sharply drawn. To be unmoved by the suffering of others is the way of Pharaoh – who not only enslaved the Hebrews, but his own nation in a numbing, callous insensitivity.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 2:23-25

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 37

You think we are the first generation to argue about what makes a nation great?! This is at the heart of our people's origin story. In the tears of Israel – and the response to them – are diametrically opposed claims to a nation's greatness – on the one hand, power and might in the world; on the other, compassion for those who are disempowered or unjustly excluded.

When we take the Torah out of the Ark on these holy days we add the only words in Torah that describes God's attributes. And what is the first? ה' אל רחום חנון *Adonai, Adonai El rachum v'chanun* "God is compassionate and gracious."<sup>6</sup> The word for compassion in Hebrew is רחמים *rachamim*. It comes from the word רחם *rechem*, "womb". Every one of us had a mother, and the intensity of protection we received in her womb is how the Hebrew wants us to understand how God responds to our tears.

Even when we feel abandoned by everyone else we are not alone. In our emptiest place and darkest hole, God is there (as Jonah reminds us at the end of Yom Kippur – finding God even in the fish at the bottom of the sea). But these Days of Awe also remind us that can do more than rely on God.

Empathy is the capacity to feel the pain of another. But רחמים *rachamim*, compassion, is the way God shows us that we can respond to that pain. As the Talmudic sages teach – just as God clothed the naked (Adam and Eve), visits the sick (with Abraham after his circumcision), consoles mourners (after Abraham dies blessing Issac) and buries the dead (Moses), so can (and must) we.<sup>7</sup>

None of us can be as benevolent, magnanimous or forgiving as God, but that does not mean we cannot reach towards a life of greater compassion. It's actually quite easy – and three things can help: first, to be more focused; second, to act; and finally, to accept the imperfection compassion creates.

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 14a

## Focus

A study was done a while at Princeton Theological Seminary where group of divinity students were told to give a sermon on the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan – a story of a man who stops to help a stranger in need at the side of the road. Then, one by one, they were told they had to go to another building and give their sermon. As they went from the first building to the second, each of them passed a man who was bent over and moaning, clearly in need. The question is: Did they stop to help? Not one of them did. Why, it turned that whether someone would stop and help a stranger in need was how much of a hurry they thought they were in, absorbed by what they had to do. In his "Emotional Intelligence", psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests that the reason we aren't more compassionate more of the time is simply this – that we are, quite simply, distracted, that our focus is in the wrong direction.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that Goleman is right. Most people I meet want to be more caring, more attentive and more compassionate, but just get caught up in living. That's why we love the stories of random acts of kindness we see from time to time – the person who gives his shoes to someone who is homeless and decides to set up a non-profit to do it more, strangers buying a car for a fast food worker after finding out he had to walk three miles to and from work every day or the story of Trump supporters wearing a MAGA hat who went into a restaurant known for promoting African-American culture and social causes, and were kindly treated by the waitress, and so left a note: "We may come from different cultures and may disagree on certain issues, but if everyone would share their smile and kindness like your beautiful smile, our country will come together as one people. Not race. Not gender. Just American. God bless!" – and a \$450 tip.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel\\_goleman\\_on\\_compassion/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_goleman_on_compassion/transcript?language=en)

<sup>9</sup> The story about giving someone shoes can be found here: <http://www.itsfromthesole.org>. For the story about being given a car see <https://www.thisisinsider.com/strangers-bought-car-man-walks-to-work-2017-6>. The Twitter feed on the Trump supporters is at: <https://twitter.com/busboysandpoets/status/823894761207721985>

These good news stories remind us to be just a little more focused: "This is who you can be ... and it's easier than you think. Just pay attention to the tears all around you, the shattered lives that don't need your judgement, just your empathy and your love." That is why we show up together to hear the stories of so many tears, a reflection of the many varied ways we all know pain. We are stirred by the *shofar* and the words of the medieval philosopher Rambam, "All of you who slumber, wake up." Hear the sound of the *shofar* and regain your focus.

### Act

One of the most well-known stories of the Yiddish writer, I.L. Peretz, is titled *Oyb nisht nokh hekher* "If Not Higher". It tells the story of a cynical Jew who scoffed at the piety of the followers of the Rabbi of Nemirov, who failed to show up for *סליחות* *S'litchot*, the special prayers asking for forgiveness for Rosh Hashanah. Deciding that the Rebbe is doing something he ought not to be, he decides to spy on the religious leader. One night, in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when he is supposed to be in synagogue, he sees the Rebbe walking out of his house in peasant's clothes. Sensing a scam, the cynic follows him out of town and into the woods. He watches as he knocks on the door of an isolated house and hears a woman inside, "Who's there?" The Rebbe, pretending to be a Russian peasant, tells him "It's Vassily", then comes in, lights her fire, brings her food and – in a whispered voice – says his prayers asking for forgiveness.

After that, whenever a disciple of the Rabbi of Nemirov would speak about how their teacher ascended to heaven during the time of the Days of Awe prayer, the cynic no longer laughed. He simply would add, "If not higher."

In this story Peretz reminds us that the essence of all we do during these Days of Awe is to create within us the capacity to not only feel the pain of another, but to respond to it. On these days we confront our lives and ask, "What is it that God wants of me? How can I lessen – even a bit – the tears all around me?" To answer

that call is not up to our leaders. It is for each of us to do. And when we do, we may ascend – as Peretz suggests - higher even than heaven.

### **Accept the Imperfection**

Heartache, as my former colleague Rabbi Bernie Baskin used to say, “has a passkey to every home in the land.” In this he reminds us that no matter how rich and full someone else's life may seem, there is brokenness in their lives, too. Thus, the chasdic master, the Kotzker Rebbe taught that “the only whole heart is the broken heart.” The first great insight of the Kotzker is that even when there is a resolution to a dispute, even after a healing from some physical illness or psychic pain, even after we make *teshuvah* and forgive, the brokenness remains.

Instead of despair, however, the Kotzker Rebbe is teaching us to learn to gain acceptance. To know that every heart is broken is to understand that life is messy, relationships are complex, politics is filled with imperfect compromise ... and that *only* when we accept that imperfection can we be truly whole.

In his philosophical dictionary, the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire, quotes an Italian proverb *Le meglio è l'inimico del bene* “the perfect is the enemy of the good.” Voltaire and the Kotzker reflect an essential lesson of these Days of Awe – that we can do great things even though we are flawed, and that transgression or sin can be forgiven even if not forgotten. This period of reflection, repentance and forgiveness is not the search for perfection – not for ourselves and not for others. Rather, these days urge us to just turn in a new direction.

Two years ago I spent a day meeting Palestinians to hear about the challenges they face. They were upset with the Palestinian Authority's fecklessness and corruption, repelled by the use of violence by Hamas ... *and* they were frustrated with the Israeli government's subtle ways of limiting their freedoms and making them feel humiliated. As I listened I realized that while it may be true that the leaders of the Palestinians may be devoid of moral rectitude or political vision, the everyday folk I met are truly suffering and feeling a growing sense of hopelessness

– and so I must hear their tears, and respond in ways that can help Israelis and Palestinians with whatever creates a little more dialogue and a bit more dignity. It won't bring about peace, but it's not nothing either.

We live in an age when many want to divide the world into two - "you're with me or against me", winners and losers, racists on the right and snowflakes on the left. Such a view of life can, our traditions warn, only lead to hard-heartedness and brutality. This day calls us, instead, to make *teshuvah* – to turn towards one another, to understand that we have tears and that this is the road towards compassion, which is the beginning of our redemption.

The Kotzker Rebbe's student, Simcha Bunem wondered, if his teacher was right that all whole hearts are broken, how we can legitimately pray to God to heal. He answered his own question, saying: "Even God cannot take away the brokenness. But God can take away the sadness." That is our task - not only to hear, but be moved by the tears and "tears" (*pronounce as "tares"*) in our world, to act ... and not be numbed by knowing we cannot do it all.

The tears of Hannah and Isaac. The tears of Sisera's mother and Isaac's mother Sarah (left behind). The tears of the homeless and the raped. The tears others share and those we share with them, and the tears shed only in the deepest chambers of our hearts. Tears fill our lives. But we are not alone, for – our rabbis teach – God not only has compassion for us, but God cries, too.<sup>10</sup>

And who will bring comfort to the Holy One? You. Me. Us. We cannot take away the brokenness in the world. But if we open ourselves to the tears that are all around us and take note, if we act to wipe them dry, and if we do so knowing it may not be perfect, but it may still be good enough – we can remove some of God's sadness.

A Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night ends and the day begins.

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 8:23, 9:17, 13:17, 14:17; Opening to Eicha Rabbati 24



"Could it be," one student said, "when it is just light enough to distinguish the dark lines on a *tallit*?"

"No," the rabbi answered.

Another suggested, "Is it when you can distinguish the colors and things no longer appear to us as black or white?"

"No. Not then."

Each gave an answer, but each time the rabbi demurred.

"Then when is it?" the pupils demanded.

"It is when you can look on the tears of another and see that it is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

And so our rabbis teach: "All the gates of Heaven are closed except the Gate of Tears. These are always open."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 32b. For additional material on this theme see "A Love for All Seasons: Weeping in Jewish Sources", Herbert W. Basser, *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination* (Kimberley Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley (ed), pp. 178-200.