In the 1970’s football star Roosevelt “Rosey” Grier sang “It’s Alright to Cry” on the landmark record album “Free to Be You and Me,” produced by Marlo Thomas. The former New York Giants defensive tackle told us, in the Carol Hall song, that “crying gets the sad out of you. It’s all right to cry; it might make you feel better.” Feminism had arrived in America, and men — including football stars with feminine nicknames — were permitted, even encouraged, to show their emotions and cry.

A decade earlier, on the cusp of the feminist era and of an era of turmoil in America, I saw my dad cry for the first time.
He stood in front of the TV, tears streaming down his cheeks, as he watched the events of that afternoon in November 1963 when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Stunned by the horrific tragedy, I was also jolted by my father’s open display of emotion. My dad was a caring and loving man, but as a child, I suppose I too was influenced by the norms of the day: Grown men didn’t cry! It would take the Kennedy assassination, Marlo Thomas’s recording and a whole series of events and social changes in American life to make a man’s crying, even in the private confines of his home, socially acceptable.

In this week’s parashah, a man’s tears play a central role as well. Joseph struggles with his tears, fighting them back, as he encounters his brothers again after so many years.
When the brothers appear before him to procure food, Joseph recognizes them immediately. His first response is anger which is typically the first stage of grief. As the text tells us: “When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them” (Genesis 42:7). This is not a surprising response given the pain and suffering his brothers had inflicted upon him. But Joseph is then moved to tears when he hears his brothers talk about the way they had mistreated him: “They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. He turned away from them and wept” (Genesis 42:23-4).

The second time Joseph sheds tears is when he finally beholds his full brother Benjamin.
Here the text tells us that Joseph “was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there” (Genesis 43:30). The Hebrew phrase used “vay’vakesh liv’kot,” could be translated as “he wanted to cry” or even “he asked permission to cry.” Joseph is caught in a bind. A public leader who has successfully kept his emotions hidden for so many years, Joseph now realizes that his model of leadership will no longer work.

The wording of the text suggests that Joseph recognizes that he needs to stretch the bounds of normative behavior – for a ruler, for a man – to display his feelings openly and publicly. Here, Joseph succeeds partially. Not yet ready to cry in public, he goes into another room, where the tears he sheds begin to transform him.
Joseph’s tears are no longer filled purely with rage; this time his tears are tears of pain. He surely cries for himself – for his lost childhood, for the gulf between him and his brother, for his loss of innocence, for his feelings of abandonment, for his suffering. By acknowledging his pain, Joseph could begin to imagine a future that included both his public role and his private relationship with his family. Unprepared to go public quite yet, he washed his face (Genesis 43:31), “reappeared, and- now in control of himself – gave the order: ‘serve the meal.’” Joseph’s transformation is completed only in next week’s parashah, when he finally reveals himself to his brothers. At that moment, “his sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear... He embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them” (Genesis 45:2, 14, 15).
Only then does full reconciliation and healing take place.

America in 1963 was just beginning to experience what would come to be known as the second wave of American feminism, a revolution that would have profound effects on all aspects of both American life and Jewish life, for men as well as for women. While the impact on women’s lives in terms of educational opportunities, careers and liberating attitudes is better known, men’s lives were also transformed. One of the ways men benefited is that it became acceptable for them to understand and come to terms with their personal as well as their professional lives.
It is partly because of the influence of this same wave of feminism that the field of Jewish studies has been transformed as well. Feminist perspectives and gender analysis often reveal aspects of our sacred texts that we never noticed before. Traditional commentators say little about Joseph’s tears, but according to Sefer Hayashar (a medieval Midrashic work), quoted in Louis Ginzberg’s Legends of the Jews, Joseph cried because Benjamin reminded him of his mother Rachel and “only tears extinguish the burning coals of the heart.” I agree. Joseph’s tears are a necessary element in his transition to adulthood and to true leadership.
Only when he has found a way to reconcile his childhood grief with the possibility of a new relationship with his brothers, his public persona with his private life, and his invincible power with his vulnerability, only then does he emerge as the biblical hero that fully ignites the empathy and admiration of both men and women.

Many Americans remember Walter Cronkite, the premier newscaster of the day, breaking down in tears as he announced the death of President Kennedy. In the wake of the assassination, polls identified Cronkite as the most trusted man in America. His public power was enhanced by his vulnerability and emotionalism. By themselves, tears can be bitter. As a prelude to empathy, tears can be bittersweet. As a harbinger of better days to come, our tears can even be fully sweet.