

Crying gets a bad rap.

I used to make fun of my father for crying...and then I became a parent. Suddenly my tears would fall at the drop of a hat—a new milestone reached, a sweet word share. Reliving an experience I treasured as a child but this time as the parent especially caught me by surprise. (Why am I crying at the Children's Symphony?)

Tears of a mother may not be so unusual, but men and boys constantly hear the message that crying is weak, babyish, and for losers.

I think that our Biblical Joseph proves otherwise, and examining his tears might empower our boys and men to reclaim their emotions and let the tears flow.

Throughout the Genesis narrative of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph cries a total of eight times: First, when his brothers appear before him in Egypt (Gen 42:24), then when Joseph sees Benjamin. (43:30) When Joseph makes himself known to his brothers, (45:2) and then again after revealing himself to his brothers. (45:14-15) When Joseph sees his father again, he weeps on his father "a good while." (46:29) Following the death of Jacob, there is a three-fold weeping, first upon his death, (50:1) then all of Egypt joins Joseph in wailing (50:3), and finally Joseph cries again when it becomes clear that with their father gone, the brothers suspect that Joseph will take revenge on them. (50:15-17)

In examining Joseph's crying, it is important to look at the instances where he notably does not cry.

Joseph does not cry when he is thrown into a pit with snakes and scorpions; when he is sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites who carries him away from his family and everything he had known; when he becomes an indentured servant to Potiphar, and is subsequently framed by his wife, thrown into prison, and left there to rot when the butler forgets his promise to remember him.

Joseph does not cry when he is afraid, angry or uncertain of his fate, as he must have been in these instances. In times of stress, he remains calm, focused and resolute. Though he might be a victim in these circumstances, he does not "play the victim." Instead, he meets his reality head-on with the psychological wherewithal to deal with it. Some people call this "resilience."

Notably, it is not Joseph's own situation that moves him to tears. He cries in encounters that are not dangerous, but that are of greater personal significance to him: the renewed contact with his brothers. One may even conclude that perhaps what he had feared most all along was never to see his family again.

When we look closely at Joseph's crying, we see that he is unashamed of it. In the first two instances of his crying, he hides the tears from his brothers: "He turned away from them and wept." (42:24)—he is not yet ready to share his feelings with them. When he is ready, he allows his brothers and indeed all of Egypt, to see his tears, and feel his emotions along with him. Joseph shows strength in the way he controls who gets to witness his crying and when they are permitted to do so.

In the words of a psychologist friend, "Tears communicate, to others and to ourselves, and we can feel more present and stronger when we attend to and accept their message. It would be helpful for all of us, men and women, to accept tears with understanding and without shame. Tears are powerful affective punctuation."

Boys learn to stifle their tears early in life. As a mom of boys, I'm happy to introduce them to a biblical hero who shows nuanced emotion, particularly compassion and love. Joseph's tears are a sign of his strength—he is strong enough to know how he feels and to choose when, with whom and under what circumstances he shares those feelings.

I hope my boys grow up to be like Joseph. Strong, resilient, and sensitive—to himself and to others.