

“No Crying In Baseball”
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Good *yuntif*, everyone, and Shanah Tovah!

Most of the time, I don't get to watch a lot of TV. Fortunately, our college junior, Shira, was home for the summer, and she and I bonded over some streaming TV series. We became especially fond of the Amazon remake of *A League of Their Own*, starring Abbi Jacobson, Chanté Adams and D'arcy Carden. It's based on the 1992 movie of the same name, about a women's professional baseball league that briefly flourished during the Second World War. The Amazon remake – which was sadly canceled – went into territory that the original movie did not, sensitively and sympathetically exploring the romantic relationships that develop between some of the women on the team. This actually happened in real life, in an era when (as the show reminds us in one violent scene) the patrons of gay bars were routinely being beaten up in police raids.

Some of you may remember that a line from the original film became a popular catchphrase. The hilariously vulgar manager of the women's baseball team, played by a note-perfect Tom Hanks, screams into the face of one of the players, chastising her in front of the rest of the team for botching a routine play and

allowing a run to score. As he storms away, fuming, she begins to sniffle, then softly cry. And the Hanks character, turning back to her, repeatedly bellows the famous line, "There's no *crying* in *baseball*!" The manager so mercilessly browbeats the young woman, that the umpire comes over and tells Hanks' character to leave her alone. The manager responds with an insult too vulgar to quote on erev Rosh Hashanah. As a result, he is ejected from the game while the rest of the team looks on, smiling in satisfaction.

Let it be said that there may or may not be crying in baseball, but there is an awful lot of crying in the Torah. Between Genesis and Deuteronomy, and even further into the rest of the *Tanakh* (that is, the Hebrew Bible, or what your Christian neighbors call the "Old Testament") copious tears are shed.

Joseph, for example, cries, more than once, when he comes face-to-face with the brothers who sold him into slavery so many years before.¹ Esau, the Torah tells us, "broke into wild and bitter sobbing"² when he realized that his younger brother, Jacob, had tricked him out of their father Isaac's deathbed blessing. Later, Jacob and Esau cry tears of relief and reconciliation when they meet again after many years.³ Ruth and her sister, Orpah, break into weeping more than once when their widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, insists that they part ways.⁴ Hannah prays silently

¹ Genesis 42:24, 43:30, 45:2

² Genesis 27:34

³ Genesis 33:4

⁴ Ruth 1:9-10, 14

before the altar at Shiloh, tears streaming down her face, with such intensity that Eli the priest accuses her of being drunk.⁵ And the great King David weeps for so many days upon learning that Absalom, his son, is dead, that his army commander rebukes the king, demanding that David pull himself together and go address the troops.⁶

Yes, there's lots of crying in Jewish Scripture, but oddly enough, there is only one explicit instance of a *child* crying in the entire Torah.⁷ It's when the daughter of Pharaoh hears the crying of baby Moses, floating down the Nile River in the waterproofed wicker basket, where his mother, Yocheved, has tried to hide him from the genocidal Pharaoh.

In the Torah itself, however, the adult Moses never cries. This might not be remarkable except for the fact that Moses experiences more disappointment, anger, and frustration than just about any other biblical character with the possible exception of Job, who, to quote our forty-fifth president "goes through some things."

Moses complains repeatedly to God of the whining, irresponsibility, and stubbornness of the people that God has tasked him with leading, a job he told God he didn't want as far back as their first conversation at the burning bush. "Did I

⁵ I Samuel 1:7, 10

⁶ II Samuel 19:1-9

⁷ Banished to the wilderness with his mother, Hagar, Ishmael raises his voice and God listens, but the word for "crying" isn't used.

give birth to these people," Moses later says to God, "that you should say to me, carry them in your bosom as a nursemaid carries a child, all the way to the land that you have promised to give them?"⁸ At one point his despair is so great that Moses says to God, "If this is what this is going to be like, God, just kill me and get it over with."⁹ So much frustration, so much disappointment, and yet, no crying.

As far as the Torah is concerned, Moses somehow even keeps it together at the absolute low point of his prophetic career. The famous story goes like this.

For the second time in their wanderings in the wilderness, the people complain to Moses that they lack water.¹⁰ When this happened the first time, God told Moses to strike one of the rocks to get water for the people. Moses did so, water gushed forth from the rock, and the people drank and were satisfied.¹¹

This time, God again tells Moses to *speak* to a rock to get more water. But instead, Moses turns to the people and snarls, "Listen, you rebels! Don't you think [Aaron and I] can get you water from this rock?" Moses bashes the rock twice with his staff, and water again gushes forth from the rock.¹²

⁸ Numbers 11:12

⁹ Numbers 11:15

¹⁰ Numbers 20, verse 2 ff.

¹¹ Exodus 17:1-7

¹² Numbers 20:9-11

And then the unthinkable happens. God tells Moses, "Because you failed to uphold My holiness before all the people, you will not be the one to lead them into the Promised Land. I'll let you see it from a distance, but you will never enter it."¹³

Why the harsh decree? Would it surprise you that the Jews have many differing opinions about this?

Some Jewish commentators say he is punished because Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it, which seems to me like a mere technicality. Some say it's because when Moses said, "Don't you think Aaron and I can get you water," he implied that the miracle was to come from their own magical powers, rather than from God.

Alternatively, I particularly like the idea that when God heard Moses call the people "rebels," God realized that Moses no longer respected the people he was chosen to lead, and therefore, his time as leader needed to end. Whatever the reason, Moses learns that he will be replaced by Joshua, who will lead the people into the land.

According to the Torah, when God delivers this decree, Moses says nothing. But later, in the book of Deuteronomy, which is written as Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites, Moses has plenty to say.

Moses blames his punishment on the unruly generation of Israelites who were condemned to die off in the wilderness during the forty years of wandering.

¹³ Numbers 20:12

Reminiscing, Moses says, "Adonai was furious at me because of you, saying, you too, [Moses] shall not go there. Joshua son of Nun, who stands before you will go there."¹⁴

Still later in Deuteronomy, Moses recalls an episode that's absent from the original story, in which he claims to have *argued* with God about his fate. "I *begged* Adonai at that time," he says: "God... let me cross and see the good land that's across the Jordan, this good hill country and the Lebanon!" But Adonai was angry at me on your account and would not listen to me. And Adonai said to me, you have so much. Stop speaking to me about this thing. Go... and see the land [from afar] with your eyes because *you won't* cross the Jordan. Instead, command Joshua and strengthen *him* and make *him* bold, because *he* will cross in front of this people, and *he* will get them the land..."¹⁵

Moses doesn't shed any tears in the Torah text in response to God's decree that his career as Israel's leader, not to mention his very life, will soon end, and he doesn't push back very hard, either. But our sages pick up where the Torah leaves off, imagining Moses fighting his punishment tooth and nail, not at all "going quietly into that good night." Here are a few excerpts from that "ancient rabbinic fanfiction" that we call *midrash*:

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 1:37 ff.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 3:23 ff.

"When Moses realized that the decree of death had been sealed against him, he drew a small circle around himself, stood in it and said, "Master of the Universe, I will not budge from here until you cancel that decree." At the same time, Moses wrapped himself in sackcloth, sprinkled ashes upon himself, and persisted in prayer before the Holy One, until heaven and earth – indeed, until everything made during the six days of creation – were trembling...

Then Moses said to the Holy One, "Master of The Universe, you know the trouble and pain I suffered on account of Israel, until they came to believe in Your Name. How much pain I suffered *because of them*, until I taught them the Torah and its precepts! I had always thought, As I bore witness to their [enslavement], now I will be allowed to witness their [freedom]! Yet now that this time has come, you tell me, "You shall not go over this Jordan!"... Is *this* the *reward* for the forty years of labor I worked until Israel became a holy people loyal to their faith?" And the Holy One replied, "Nevertheless, such is the decree that has gone forth from My Presence!"...

Then Moses said, "Master of the Universe, if you will not let me enter the land of Israel, allow me to remain alive like the beasts of the field, who eat grass drink water and thus savor the world – let me be like one of these!" And God replied, "Enough. Speak to me no more of this matter."

But Moses spoke up again, "Master of the Universe, if not like a beast of the field, then let me become like a bird that flies every day in every direction to gather its food, and in the evening returns to its nest – let me be like one of *those*!" The Holy One replied again, "Enough."

... [As the midrash continues, Moses begs heaven and earth, then the stars and the planets, then the mountains and the hills, and finally the oceans, to intercede with God on his behalf. But each of them, in turn, tells him that they are unable to avert the divine decree.]

The midrash goes on, "Moses put his hands on his head and *lamented and wept* as he said, "to whom am I to go now to entreat mercy on my behalf?"

At last, our sages grant Moses something that the Torah text denies him: the space to break down and cry.

To our rabbis, Moses is *Moshe **Rabbenu***, the greatest rabbi of them all, and you can sense how much they feel for Moses in these midrashim, understanding the loneliness of leadership. So, they give Moses the emotions that any of us might feel in his position, including, it must be said, a significant dollop of victimhood and self-pity.

This Moses is angry. After all the misery he has pulled the Israelites through, he feels entitled to the reward of leading them into their land. He is, in a word, heartbroken.

But it's more than that. Moses isn't merely stepping aside. He is also about to be replaced by his assistant, Joshua. The midrash goes on:

"Moses said to the Holy One: Master of the Universe, if I must die to vacate my post for Joshua, let *me* be *his* disciple in my remaining hours." The Holy One replied: "If that is what you wish to do, go and do it."

When people came to Moses's doorway to study Torah and asked, "Where is our teacher, Moses?" They were told, "Moses got up early and went to Joshua's doorway." They went and found Moses at Joshua's doorway...

Then the people said to Moses, "Moses our teacher, teach us Torah." Moses replied, "I no longer have the authority."

They said, "We will not leave you." Then a divine voice came forth and commanded the people, "*Be willing* to learn from Joshua." With that, the people submitted to the command to sit and learn from Joshua...

[When Joshua's lesson was over,] Moses [and Joshua] entered the Tent of Meeting, and the divine pillar of cloud came down and created a partition between [them]. After the cloud departed, Moses went over to Joshua and asked, "What did [God] say to you?" Joshua replied, "When [God] used to be revealed to you, did you [ever] tell me what God said to you?"

In that instant, Moses cried out in anguish and said, "Better a hundred deaths than a single pang of envy. Master of the Universe, until now I sought life. But now my soul is surrendered to you."¹⁶

At this point in the rabbinic portrait of Moses taking leave of his people, he is painfully resigned to his fate, but not reconciled to it. His is a resignation tinged with humiliation, jealousy, and anger.

Moses had a dream of triumphantly crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land at the head of the people he has led for forty years. And Moses is so stuck in that story, so unwilling and unable to let it go, that when God says to him, as we quoted earlier, "[Moses], *you have so much*" – in other words, Moses, look at all you have done – *Moses cannot hear it*. He is so fixated on that one unrealized goal that his life and achievements up to that moment now feel like fiction.

As I revisited these biblical stories and rabbinic elaborations on the life of Moses, I was once again struck by the fact that in the Torah, God's purposes are worked out through a succession of deeply flawed human beings. Or, as I once heard the noted author Rabbi Daniel Syme say, "One of the most compelling aspects of the Torah is that there's nobody in the text that you'd want your kid to date."¹⁷

¹⁶ The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, pp. 101-103.

¹⁷ When Rabbi Syme was a scholar in residence at Congregation Beth Israel many years ago.

No joke. Jacob, later renamed Israel, is a conniving and depressingly transactional manipulator. Noah stumbles out of the Ark after the flood, plants a vineyard and promptly gets drunk. Young Joseph is a vain, self-absorbed teenager with no talent for “reading the room.” Abraham nearly sacrifices his only child, while Sarah throws her stepson out of the house. If you think *your* childhood was dysfunctional, read Genesis and feel better about your relatives.

And Moses? Moses has anger issues, is prone to self-pity and despair, cannot accept the inevitability of change, and as a result, comes across in the midrash as fearful, self-absorbed, jealous, and small.

Does Moses get to a better place? Yes, I believe that he does. How so? We’ll get to that in a moment, but first, a word from our pets.

Known collectively at Research Pet and Bird Hospital on North Route 183 as “The Goldman Folberg Zoo,” our menagerie includes three dogs, all of them rescue mutts, plus Sammy the bird, who often hangs out in my office.

Penny, the oldest dog, is a tiny Chihuahua mix, a love slob through and through and a textbook lapdog. Theo, who is always ready for a nap and will curl up next to you and soothe you into blissful slumber like a softly breathing weighted blanket, is a beautiful but oddly proportioned shepherd mix. He is the only one of our three mutts who you look at and think, “Yeah, that one *could* be descended from wolves,” the other two dogs being obviously descended from Muppets.

Stella, the youngest is, according to the canine DNA test that I swore I would never pay for, an amalgam of fourteen different breeds, which helps to account for the hilarious, curly Mohawk on top of her head. She is joyful and exuberant. She has multicolored fur that, like one of those microfiber cleaning cloths, attracts dirt and backyard debris so well that you could tie her to a broom handle and dry mop the floor with her. Stella romps and prances, wags her tail furiously every time you look at her, and then flops over on her back to get a belly rub. Stella will wake you up in the morning by licking any exposed part of your body.

Anyway, last January, I was washing dishes after breakfast when suddenly, I found myself sitting on the kitchen floor crying quite loudly. For some reason, at that moment, rinsing out my cereal bowl before putting it in the dishwasher, the reality that I would soon be entering my final year at congregation Beth Israel hit and hit hard.

Now, had this scene in the kitchen come out of a Disney movie, our dogs, seeing one of their humans having an ugly cry, would have sensed the human's distress, and comforted them with a cyclone wagging tails, nuzzling snouts and puppy kisses. Instead, Stella, Theo and even Penny, the love slob, slowly backed away, tails drooping, ears pinned back, as if to say, "Please stop shaking and making those weird noises, dad. You're freaking us out."

Whether or not there is crying in baseball, there is crying in the Bible, and there is crying in your personal Torah, the one woven from your own life story.

Throughout my thirty-two years at CBI, I have had the sacred privilege of bearing witness to so many of your tears, learning again and again that our capacity for releasing our most intense emotions through those tears is an essential part of what makes us human.

I can't tell you how many times, following a death in the family, one of you has said to me, "Rabbi Folberg, I find myself breaking down at the oddest moments. I'm afraid I'm not coping very well." And I will respond, "Your crying shows that you *are* coping, so I'm not worried about you. The people I worry about are the ones who are completely shut down."

These wrenching tears will visit all of us multiple times throughout our lives, bursting forth involuntarily from a very deep place. Crying in this way is our body's response to the truths that we affirm repeatedly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: that we are finite, that change is unavoidable, that the future is uncertain, and that the relationships we love the most, especially the ones upon which we build our understanding of who we are, are finite, as well.

We weep these tears when we lose a loved one. We shed these tears when we let go of a cherished dream. We try to hide these tears from our children as they move haltingly toward independence, thrilled and awestruck as we witness their

emerging maturity, yet grieving for the intense emotional and physical intimacy of their early childhood, knowing that it can never return.

So how *does* Moses move beyond the place of constriction, suffering and anger in which we left him a few minutes ago? I think it has something to do with a shift in perspective.

Imagine a modern midrash in which Moses is talking with his therapist, or, better yet, with his father-in-law, Jethro, the one who warned Moses way back in the book of Exodus that if he didn't learn to delegate some responsibility to others, he would go to pieces and take the Israelites down with him.¹⁸ Imagine Jethro seeing his son-in-law, depressed and furious, unable to let go, and saying to him, "Moses, when are you going to grasp that, with all the things you have done, *this isn't about you*? You are part of something much, much bigger than yourself."

Does Moses finally figure that out? I think he does, based upon this story from the Talmud.¹⁹

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be God, sitting and tying [decorative] crowns on the letters of the Torah. Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, who is preventing You from giving the Torah *without* these [crowns? What is their

¹⁸ Exodus 18:13-26

¹⁹ Menachot 29b.

purpose?]

God said to him: There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name; he is destined to derive, from each and every thorn of these crowns, mounds upon mounds of laws. It is for his sake that the crowns must be added to the letters of the Torah. **Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, show him to me.** **God said to him: Turn around.** Moses [found himself projected into the future, sitting in the very back row of] Rabbi Akiva's study hall, but [he] **did not understand what they were talking about.** Moses felt faint, [thinking that] his Torah knowledge was deficient. **When Rabbi Akiva arrived at the discussion of one matter, his students said to him: My teacher, from where do you derive this?** Rabbi Akiva **said to them: It is a principle transmitted to Moses from Sinai.** When Moses heard this, **his mind was put at ease.**²⁰

When God grants Moses a future glimpse of Rabbi Akiva teaching Torah, he gains a perspective that soothes his soul. He understands that he is, indeed, only one link in a chain of wisdom that will outlive him. Most of us are not so lucky as to be reassured that our goodness will outlive our time on earth in such a positive way. As Rabbi Harold Kushner often said in his public addresses, "We don't want to live forever. We just would like to know that we are getting it right." But then, that's

²⁰ The Talmudic story takes a dark turn, when Moses asks God what Akiva's reward for his teaching will be, and God shows Akiva being put to death by the Romans for his role in fomenting the rebellion against Roman occupation.

been the point of Moses's career, hasn't it? Laying down the foundations of a great wisdom tradition that can help each of us, in our own way, to get it right.

And at the end of the day, I believe that Moses separates from the Israelites at peace, based upon his final words to them, words that we read from the Torah on Yom Kippur morning every year: "This mitzvah that I command you today isn't too baffling for you, nor too far away. It's not up in the sky that you would say, who will go up for us to the sky and get it for us and enable us to hear it so that will do it? And it's not across the sea, that you might say, "Who will cross for us, across the sea, and get it for us and enable us to hear it so we'll do it? No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it."²¹

Moses now understands that although he led the people for a while, they never *belonged* to him. And he can look toward a future time when the people will understand that Moses has never belonged to *them*, either. Rather, if he has done his job well, the time will come when they realize they *no longer need him*. That's why he makes references to going up into the sky and crossing the sea, alluding to climbing Mount Sinai to get the Torah, and leading the people across the Sea of Reeds on their way out of Egypt. "You don't need me anymore," he explains. "I've taught you the best I can, and the wisdom is as close to you as breathing, and as

²¹ Deut. 30:11-14

familiar as the beating of your heart. Once you realize that you know what to do without me, you'll be fine."

In this way, over the past eight months, Moses has taught *me* what *I* most needed to know: that teaching you and standing beside you for thirty-three years will have been an extraordinary gift not negated by saying goodbye, that a rabbi serves their congregation, but the community does not belong to them, and that, in the best of circumstances, a rabbi separates from the congregation knowing that their community has internalized a joyful, diverse and inclusive spirit that will extend long beyond that final farewell.

And what better symbol of that continuity than the light of this beautiful, new *Ner Tamid*, the light of God's presence, the light of learning and the light of a love that never goes away?

Is there truly no crying in baseball? Maybe yes, maybe no. But I am confident that, long after we have passed from the scene, our children will still know that both *their* laughter and *their* tears will always be welcome here.

Amen.