

## Going Through The Emotions

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Devarim/Chazon 5783

The playwright Wilson Mizner was known for his one-liners. Even on his deathbed, he was quipping. When a priest came to administer last rites, he said to Mizner: “I’m sure you want to talk to me.” Mizner told the priest, “Why should I talk to you? I’ve just been talking to your boss.”<sup>1</sup>

Last words, especially from famous people, are often famous themselves. This week, we begin the book of Devarim, which is, in essence, a long account of Moshe’s last words. And how did Moshe begin his last words, his valedictory address? According to our sages, he did it through a veiled rebuke. Every one of the locations mentioned at the beginning of our Parshah are interpreted by our sages as references to another location where the Jewish people misbehaved. The simple question is, why Moshe did Moshe wait until now to rebuke them, and not at the time they sinned? Is this how he wanted to be remembered?

Rashi writes that Moshe took a page from the playbook of Yaakov, who rebuked his own children before his death.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/58534/64-people-and-their-famous-last-words>

ויהי בארבעים שנה בעשתי עשר חדש באחד לחדש. מלמד שלא הוכיחן אלא סמוך למיתה; ממי למד? מיצקב, שלא הוכיח את בניו אלא סמוך למיתה, אמר, ראובן בני אני אומר לך מפני מה לא הוכחתיך כל השנים הללו, כדי שלא תניחני ותלך ותדבק בעשו אחי;

AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE FORTIETH YEAR, IN THE ELEVENTH MONTH, ON THE FIRST OF THE MONTH, [MOSES SPAKE] – This tells us that he reproved them only shortly before his death (Jewish tradition holds that Moses died on the seventh day of the twelfth month; cf. Megillah 13b). From whom did he learn this? From Jacob, who reproved his sons only shortly before his death. He said, “Reuben, my son, I will tell you why I have not reproved you for your unfilial conduct during all these years: it was in order that you should not leave me and go and join Esau, my wicked brother”.

The son who endured a particularly intense rebuke was Reuven, Yaakov’s oldest. In Yaakov’s waning moments, Reuven was chastised for his impulsive nature and his role in meddling with Yaakov’s sleeping arrangements. Why did Yaakov wait until the end of Reuven’s life to rebuke him, rather than in real time? Rashi quotes the Midrash as saying that if Yaakov would have admonished Reuven at the time of the incident, he would have left Yaakov’s house and aligned himself with Esau.

The great Yerushalmi Darshan, Rav Mordechai Druk (1944-2010), asked a simple question in his work *Darash Mordechai*. How could it be that Reuven would leave Yaakov so easily? The first born, the one who was so loyal to his brother, was so thin skinned that he would leave his father after a tongue-lashing? Woe betide any of us who have ever yelled at our children!

Rav Druk answered with an observation. Nowadays, our emotions are generally dulled. Our love is less passionate, our hatred less burning, our sadness less deep and our joy is less heartfelt. Rav Druk describes the Jews he recalled from his youth. Even the simplest, most unlettered Jews would dampen the pages of their machzorim on the High Holidays with tears of remorse and trepidation. At the time of the recitation of Kinot, they would bawl, so acute was their pain at the loss of the Beit Hamikdash- even if they didn't understand the words they were saying at all. On Simchas Torah, the same simple Jews would dance with the Torah with a look of ecstasy on their faces. (I'd add that their grudges were also incandescent, harbored for decades). In short, they were real people, with real emotions deeply felt. Today, we are not connected emotionally in this way, whether out of fear or disconnection. When the Nine Days begin, instead of feeling a heavy weight of sadness descend on our shoulders, what do we do? We menu plan, or look for which *fleishig* restaurants have special Nine Days Menus.!

The great mashgiach, Rav Eliyahu Lopian, illustrated our lack of emotion by describing what happens these days to someone who is caught stealing. Assuming no incarceration is imposed, there is still some embarrassment...for a week. For a week, a person like this is afraid to leave the house. The following week, they leave the house, and by the third week, they are back to purchasing fancy *kibbudim* in shul, with no shame whatsoever. In this, Rav Lopian was astute, if not prescient. A few weeks ago, the popular podcaster Reb Dovid Lichtenstein dedicated an entire episode of his show Halacha Headlines to the issue of affinity fraud in the Orthodox community. The high cost of an Orthodox life, social anxiety and jealousy of wealthier neighbors, a lack of financial education and sophistication and an innate trust in anyone who is "*fun unzere*," one of ours, render many frum families sitting ducks for hucksters peddling predatory, illegal or wildly unrealistic get-rich-quick opportunities. Instead of treating community members like friends, these grifters view them as marks, often cleaning out the entire life savings of numerous struggling families in their communities. What happens to the criminals? According to Reb Dovid, they still come to shul with impunity, davening alongside the families whose financial future they've knowingly devastated. Where is the shame? Where is the humiliation? This is why, Rav Druk says, Reuven would have left Yaakov. His emotions (in this case, the emotion of shame) would have been so intense, that he would not have been able to withstand it at his relatively young age. Only as an

older, mature adult would he be able to take it in stride- to accept the rebuke, live with it and integrate it into his future behavior.

Rav Druk's statement rings true, and indeed, it is our *Avodah* for this time period leading up to Tisha B'Av. Rav Soloveitchik identifies the challenge of Tisha B'Av as connecting with what is called an *aveilut Yeshanah*, an old, ancient mourning. It is extremely difficult to connect with a sadness that didn't happen to us directly, when our lives carry on as normal- particularly when sadness, in general, is an emotion from which we recoil, and about which we are especially concerned. This view of sadness is understandable. In February, the CDC released an especially worrisome report about the mental health of teens. According to the survey<sup>2</sup>, three in five teen-age girls reported having felt "persistently sad and hopeless" in the past year, thirty per cent reported that they had seriously considered suicide, and thirteen per cent said that they had attempted suicide. Among teens who identify as L.G.B.T.Q.+ kids, the numbers were even worse: two-thirds reported feeling persistent sadness, forty-five per cent had thoughts of suicide, and twenty-two per cent had attempted suicide. These shocking numbers represented significant increases over previous years. and girls also reported increased exposure to sexual violence. Various theories have been advanced about the causes of this mental health crisis; some of them focused on the overuse of social media. In May, the

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<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/fact-sheets/healthy-youth/sadness-and-violence-among-teen-girls-and-LGBQ-youth-factsheet.html>

Surgeon General issued an advisory about the use of social media in teens, who spend, on average, 3.5 hours a day on social media. Other theories focus on the toxic political climate (though after last week, I hesitate to use the word “climate” in a sermon) today, and still others focus on the psychological havoc wrought by the pandemic.

In the aftermath of the release of this report, many media outlets turned to prominent child psychologist Lisa Damour, author of the best-seller “The Emotional Lives of Teenagers,” to make sense of it. Damour is the mother of two daughters herself, and in an interview with the New Yorker, she made two important points. The first, and here I am paraphrasing a bit, is that old European Jews were real people who felt real feelings vividly. You know who else does? Teenagers, who as we all know, are given to particularly powerful emotions. Second, it is important to properly define mental health. We often think that the meaning of that term is that everyone feels happy, relaxed and at peace. But feeling nothing, or not enough- or feeling relaxed at inappropriate times- is not a sign of mental health. Listen to what Damour said:

*“Mental health is not about feeling good or calm or relaxed,” she told me when we spoke on Zoom in May, days after the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory about the ill effects of social media on tweens and teens. “It’s about having feelings that fit*

*the circumstances you're in and then managing those feelings well, even if those feelings are negative or unpleasant. The adolescent mental-health crisis doesn't end when all teen-agers feel good. It ends when teen-agers have the support they deserve and are able to cope effectively with the distress that they will invariably face."*

To make it crystal clear, so that there is no misunderstanding: As the expression goes, "the struggle is real." There is a mental health crisis in the United States. It is essential that everyone do whatever it takes to ensure their mental health- whether it is through social interaction and the help of friends, through seeing a competent and compassionate mental health professional, through self care or, when warranted, through medication- and often all of the above. But what Laura Damour said regarding teenagers is true for adults, too. Our challenge is to feel the feelings that fit our current circumstances- sadness and pain mixed with optimism and resolve. We should not avoid these emotions- we should accept them and develop the tools to handle them.

Let us learn the lesson of Reuven, and of Moshe- and become *baalei regesh*, feeling people. To feel our own happiness, and rejoice in that of others. To embrace and feel our own pain and sadness deeply, and cry when others are experiencing the same. To attune ourselves to the emotional rhythms of the Jewish calendar, and

embrace each Yom Tov- and indeed, every day- for the emotional opportunities it represents. And may we indeed merit soon to see the fulfillment of God's promise-

ומחה ה דמעה מעל כל פנים

May God wipe the tears of tragedy from all our faces...Amen.