

Parshat Vayigash: On Crying and Catharsis Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

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Parshat Vayigash is high drama. In it, the epic Yosef narrative reaches fever pitch. Yehudah begs Yosef not to hold Binyamin captive lest it kill their father. Yosef, unable to contain himself any longer, reveals his true identity and stuns his brothers into silence:

<p>And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" but his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence. (Bereishit 45:3)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חִי וְלֹא-יָקְלוּ אֶחָיו לְעֹנֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהַלּוּ מִפְּנָיו: (בראשית מה:ג)</p>
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So Yosef continues to speak, absolving the brothers of their crime of selling him so many years prior, for it was God's work that they were doing. And he beckons them to quickly bring their father down to Egypt where he, and they, may reside and be cared for through the remaining years of famine. Finally, words wear thin, tears well up, and Yosef reaches out for an embrace.

<p>14 And he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them, and afterwards his brothers spoke with him. (Bereishit 45:14-15)</p>	<p>יָד וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאֵרֵי בְנֵימִן-אָחִיו וַיִּבְכּוּ וּבְנֵימִן בָּכָה עַל-צַוְאֵרָיו: טו וַיִּנְשֹׁק לְכָל-אָחָיו וַיִּבְכּוּ עִלְהֵם וְאַחֲרָי כֵן דִּבְרוּ אִתּוֹ: (בראשית מה:יד-טו)</p>
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Through cathartic cries and kisses, the chasm of alienation, resentment, and embarrassment is bridged, and the brothers find their way toward speech.

The next big moment of reunion is equally dramatic. With God's sanction, a huge entourage of Yaacov's entire family and all of their belongings, head to Egypt. Decades separated, with Yosef presumed dead, father and son finally meet again when Yaacov arrives in Goshen. The excitement leading up to this moment is palpable.

<p>And Joseph harnessed his chariot, and he went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen, and he appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck for a long time. (Bereishit 46:29)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאסֶר יוֹסֵף מְרֻכְבָּתוֹ וַיַּעַל לְקִרְאֵת-יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גֹּשֶׁן וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאֵרָיו וַיִּבְכּוּ עַל-צַוְאֵרָיו עוֹד: (בראשית מו:כט)</p>
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Tears, hugs, intense and overwhelming emotion characterize the moment. Father and son fall into one another's embrace and cry and then cry some more. The inconceivable has come to pass.

Intuitive and reciprocal as this peak emotional experience seems to be, commentators with a fine ear for language read it quite differently. Says Rashi:

<p>Jacob, however, neither fell on Joseph's neck nor kissed him. Our Sages said that he was reciting the Shema. (Rashi <i>ad loc</i>)</p>	<p>. . . אבל יעקב לא נפל על צוארי יוסף ולא נשקו, ואמרו רבותינו שהיה קורא את שמע: (רש"י שם)</p>
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Noting the singular form of the verbs used in Bereishit 46:29--וַיִּפֹּל (he fell) and וַיִּבְרַךְ (he wept)--the *midrash* argues that only one party disintegrated emotionally and wept abundantly, Yosef. As for Yaacov, he was busy dutifully reciting the Shema. Twenty two years of mourning and suffering for this beloved son, and he could not shed a tear upon seeing him. What a shocking and troubling demonstration of emotional paralysis.

What was the nature of this numbness? Perhaps this was the response of a traumatized, scarred heart crusted over from so much pain and disappointment, no longer able to feel with ease. Perhaps it was a calculated act of restraint by a father whose demonstrations of affection for this child got him into trouble before. Much chassidic and mystical thought suggests otherwise. The recitation of the Shema, on this view, was a conscious act of sublimation on Yaacov's part. Lest he be carried away by overpowering love for his son, he piously submitted to God, affirming that the devotion of his heart--"כל לבבו"--belonged on high and not to his son of flesh and blood. The MaHaRaL, Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Betzalel, articulates this well:

After so much longing and yearning to see his beloved son, when [Yaacov] saw Yosef, and his love reached climactic heights, he worried that this potent love might supercede his love for God. So he strengthened himself with love of God precisely during this moment [of reunion] and recited the Shema, [saying] "And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart [Deut. 6:5]." (MaHaRaL, *Gur Aryeh*)

ויברך על צואריו עוד. . . אבל יעקב לא נפל על צוארי יוסף ולא נשקו, ואמרו רבותינו שהיה קורא את שמע (רש"י). אחרי כל הגעגועים והכיסופים לראות את בנו חביבו, כשראה את יוסף ואהבתו הגיעה אל מרום פסגתה, חשש שמא תעלה אהבה עזה זו על אהבת ה', והתחזק דווקא באותו רגע באהבת ה' וקרא שמע: ואהבת את ה' אלוך בכל לבבך. (מהר"ל, גור אריה)

The Kotzker Rebbe and the Gerrer Rebbe agree. To be pious is to privilege one's relationship with God--actively, even forcefully--above one's relationship with any human being, no matter how intensely and passionately one is bound to them. Yaacov, on this model, becomes another Avraham, another "knight of faith," sacrificing filial relationships on the altar of the divine. The moment of reunion is nothing short of *akeidat Yosef* (the binding of Yosef).

One *akeida*, though, seems more than enough for one tradition to contend with. The sublimation of human love to divine love unfortunately led and continues to lead to so much heartbreak and so much violence. Rather than strip our spiritual teachers of tears, and deny them human attachments, it would seem that a good cry and a tight connection to others is precisely what we need to ground compassion and balanced righteousness.

Perhaps Yaacov's dry eyes ought not be viewed as emblems of stoic sublimation, but rather as indicators of emotional exhaustion. Perhaps Yaacov did not cry not because he wouldn't, but because he couldn't; because he had been crying for so long already. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (on Bereishit 46:29) lyrically suggests just that:

Yosef cried; Yaacov no longer cried. Yaacov already finished crying, but Yosef just began when he spoke with his father. . . Yaacov had lived until this point a life of constancy: He cried for Yosef. His grief ruled his entire emotional/spiritual being. Yosef's life, on the other hand, abounded with change and flux, and he never had the time to turn his heart to the pain of his separation [from his father]. He was always preoccupied with the present. Only now, at the moment when he fell on his father's neck did he feel all the agony of that separation, and he re-lived all of those 22 years past.

יוסף בכה, יעקב לא בכה עוד. יעקב כבר כילה לבכות, יוסף בכה עוד בשעה שיעקב דיבר איתו. בקווים קטנים אלה משתקפת האמת העובדתית. יעקב חי עד כה חיים חדגוניים. הוא בכה את יוסף. האבל שלט בכל חייו הנפשיים. אך בחיי יוסף רבו התמורות והחליפות ולא היתה לו שהות לפנות את ליבו לצער הפרידה. ההווה בכל עת מילא את ליבו. רק עתה בשעה שנפל על צוארי אביו הוא חש את כל צער הפרידה וחי עוד פעם את עשרים השנים שכבר עברו.

What a poignant counter-narrative is presented here. Yaacov did not cry because had spent his entire life crying. There were simply no more tears left to shed, having spent so many years weeping over his unbearable loss. The shocking reunion with his son was for him the blessed culmination of a treacherous emotional process that had run him dry. (The Shema was not a denial of emotion but an expression of gratitude.) For Yosef, though, whose life of luxury in Egypt distracted him from his own traumatic break from his family, the reunion marked just the beginning. It was the rupture that he needed to awaken fully to his emotional recovery. The tears flowed because they had been stymied until now.

To be fair, the gate of tears opened to Yosef from the moment that he spotted his estranged brothers in Egypt (see Bereishit 42:24) and would continue through the death of Yaacov (see Bereishit 50:17). Over and over again, eight times in all, we hear of the *bechi*, the weeping, of Yosef. All that pent-up pain of 22 years finally found release, and he simply could not stop crying. His encounter with his father, climactic as it was, was one very large part of this catharsis.

The story of Yosef's tears and Yaacov's dry eyes, then, is not a story of the sacrifice of emotions per se, but is rather a meditation on the many pathways people take to cope with and to heal from pain.



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