

Yizkor Shemini Atzeret 5784
To Feel What We Need
Rabbi Betsy Forester

“I think my tears are stuck,” Tani told the Rabbi on yom tov, a few days after her grandfather’s funeral. “Everyone was crying but me.” The Rabbi could relate. She often was the one who did not cry—on the last day of camp, at funerals and burials. She sometimes felt like the biblical Aharon. When two of his sons were taken, suddenly, in a fiery spectacle before his eyes, not a word, not a tear. But when he did speak, later, his words were laced with pain. Or Rachel, whose beloved is married off to her sister Leah in an act of deception, and does not cry; the same Rachel who dies giving birth to Binyamin—naming him “the son of my travail” —but even there, she does not cry. It so bothers the rabbis that they imagine her crying over the fate of her descendants over 2,000 years later, when they are exiled from the place where her family settled after her death. So painfully absent are her earlier tears that the rabbis make her imagined tears strong enough to move God, strong enough for God to make it up to us, to care for us and take us back in t’shuvah over 2,000 years past the exile.

“How come some people cry and some don’t?” Tani asked the Rabbi.

Tears can be very shy,” the Rabbi answered, knowing that not crying can come at a personal cost.

The Rabbi recalled the first day of her clinical pastoral training at a local Hospital in Nosidam, when her supervisors asked about her goals. Besides the obvious—learning to provide spiritual and emotional support to the sick and dying and their loved ones—she recalled saying something about learning how to process the sad experiences that are part of her service to her people.

The supervisors pushed: “when you say you want to process your experiences, what do you mean?”

And she had answered, “There must be a way to sit down later, and deal with the sadness.”

She described going directly from a deathbed to a simcha and how when she finally got home, she wanted to cry but tears would not come.

She recalled how she learned that we are not designed to cry on a schedule, especially a delayed one. It doesn't work out so well for us when we save our tears for another time.

She looked at nine-year-old, freckle-faced Tani. "Did you want to cry today?" she asked.

"I don't know," Tani said. But I feel like a big cry is stuck inside me."

"Where do you feel it?" asked the Rabbi, and Tani pointed to her belly as the Rabbi nodded.

"Do your tears get stuck there, too?" Tani asked.

"My tears get stuck sometimes, too," the Rabbi said, "but not there. Here," she said, pointing to her chest, "here is where mine get stuck.

They were standing outside the shul, each having left the sanctuary seeking a few moments of fresh air to clear her mind. A light rain began to fall. "Let's go inside," the Rabbi suggested. "No, I want to stay out here, with all of these sky tears," Tani said.

"Sky tears," repeated the Rabbi as she opened the door and headed toward the sanctuary.

It was Sh'mini Atzeret. The Rabbi recalled reading Rabbi Arthur Waskow's idea that when we pray for rain on Sh'mini Atzeret, the same day when we remember the dead in Yizkor, we are praying also for our own tears, pleading that drops of rain will fall not only to nurture the soil as they fall from the sky but to nurture our own broken hearts as they fall from our eyes, as tears.

A discussion was underway in the synagogue. People were invited to share personal testimonies to loved ones who had influenced the course of their lives. A man in his 40's stood at the shtender, waiting for words to come. The moderator, a therapist and member of the congregation, drew him out slowly and carefully, using a methodology the Rabbi recognized from feminist circles, known as "hearing someone to speak." When words are stuck, listeners reinforce whatever cues they see, whatever sounds escape. When words emerge haltingly, affirming gestures and faces and occasional verbalizations—"mm hmn," and "ah," "mm," and "yes" draw out more words. That's what she was witnessing now, as the man found his voice. The rabbi felt a shift in the

room as he began to speak. The speaker's heart was open and it was now up to the people sitting in the congregation to open theirs to him, or not. They were learning, slowly, that when vulnerability works both ways it can be a powerful spiritual experience. They were also learning that it could be both strengthening and emotionally challenging to share vulnerability, not only as a speaker but also as a listener.

The Rabbi knew that she often “heard people to cry”—that is, she offered her presence to help people cry as they needed—and that occasionally she was able to cry when someone lent her their compassionate presence. Often, though, she felt like Tani, straining in vain to hear her own inner voice coaxing open the well of her own tears.

It was almost time for Yizkor, and the Rabbi was called to the bimah to guide the kahal into a sacred moment of remembrance. She took her place at the shtender and pictured Hagar and Ishmael, cast out in the desert. When their water was gone, Hagar placed Ishmael under a bush and, sitting down a bowshot away, she burst into tears. And God heard. But what did God hear? “וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָ” —God heard the voice of the child (Genesis 21:17). Even when we do not hear Yishmael cry, God hears.

“We have a tradition,” the Rabbi said to her congregation, “that ever since the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer are much harder to get into, so much so that often it feels to us that they are locked. But the gates of tears are never locked. God hears us when we cry, and God answers us. Now, maybe God doesn't answer by changing our reality. But I like to believe that God answers with presence, that God is the compassionate listener who hears us to speak and hears to cry, and answers in the most profound way one can—with presence (BT Bava Metzia 59a:5).

“When we feel we cannot cry,” she went on, “God is listening for our tears, hearing them fall before they begin to well up in our eyes. Trusting in that possibility requires that we call upon faith, sometimes in times when God feels especially distant. Perhaps that is why the Pietzetzner Rebbe, chief Rabbi of Poland who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto, taught: ‘The tzadik—the righteous person—is one who owns their heart, and a person who owns their heart can access their tears.’ Crying is a righteous act,” the Rabbi said.

“I can't tell you how many grieving people say to me, ‘I'm doing okay, but earlier today I cried,’” she added. I want to tell them—and usually I do tell them—that however they are doing is okay, and crying when they feel sad, especially when grieving the death of a loved one, may be the most okay thing they can do.”

“Yizkor invites the reality of our losses into this room,” she said. The words in the siddur may not be enough. But I hope that the words on the page may help you access your own, internal words and that that will serve you helpfully today.”

The Rabbi looked up and her eyes met mine. I thought to myself, “Here is a sacred space filled with people who are prepared to stand with me as I cry—whether my tears are still inside or whether they fall from my eyes. God sees my tears. God sees me when I hold them and when I release them.”

“And God has designed us to feel both sadness and joy,” the Rabbi went on, “We are not meant to remain despondent. We are built with the capacity to process our emotions, and tears often are part of that processing.

"הַזֵּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרָגָה יִקְצְרוּ:"

“They who sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Psalms 126:5), “she quoted from Psalms. “We may go out weeping with our bag of seeds, but if we allow our tears to come, we just may return with our sheaves, despite everything—singing a song of joy.”

Tani had come back inside. She stood, damp-faced, next to her father as he prepared to recite Yizkor for his father for the first time. I watched as he wrapped her under his tallit, his hand resting on her upper arm. I remembered standing with my own parents, and later, my husband, as they recited Yizkor for their parents, and how sometimes they cried tears but mostly they didn’t. The words only took them so far before Yizkor was over.

I recited my own Yizkor prayers—for my grandparents and other relatives. I recalled friends now gone. I felt my own tears in my throat. I knew they would remain there and I let them be as they were, hearing them speak my memories and my sadness in the private language of my heart.

The Jews of Nosidam had made themselves as vulnerable as they could on that day. Their protections would soon return. I hoped that those whose wells of sadness ran deep had found a bit of comfort in shared losing and remembering. As the Rabbi intoned the Memorial Prayer on behalf of every soul remembered on that day in that place, I felt grateful for the hope of eternity in God’s loving embrace and for my own, human impulse to be silent at times, or to cry, and at other times to laugh and to sing.

To feel what we need to feel: may that be our blessing.