



Why do Big Boys in the Bible Cry?

Do Tears Spring Out of the Essence of the Soul?

Since childhood I have often shed tears. I cried when I felt lonely – when I felt the lack of love and compassion. Since then, I am easily moved to tears. I cry over an emotional episode in a well written book, when I hear exquisitely moving music, when silently meditating, at the end of a releasing yoga class, when someone I care about throws an insulting remark, and when my feelings are hurt by a loved one. Today, I first and foremost cry out to Hashem in prayer – for that which my soul yearns for the most. While there are crocodile tears used to manipulate others, as in the case of Shimshon's wife Delila (*Shoftim* 16:15), most tears are cathartic expressions of our inner emotions and at times they spring out of the essence of our soul. I relate to Chana – The Mother of our Prayers – when she desperately cried out to Hashem for a child (I *Shmuel* 1:7, 10). She was finally rewarded as it states, “the gates of tears are never locked” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 32b). Like my namesake, I too, thank G-d, experienced my tears transformed into a healthy baby more than two decades ago. Now I'm crying the same tears – to pierce through the gates of heaven – for Hashem to grant him, his soulmate. According to Rabbi Karelitz in *Benei B'rak*, a woman's suitability to convert to Judaism, depends on her shedding tears at the notion that she may never be able to become Jewish. When Naomi repeatedly turned Ruth away, she wept and cried, in her desire to follow Naomi to the Holy Land and become Jewish (*Ruth* 1:9,14). We all need to learn from Esther, who taught us to cry out to Hashem from the depths of our heart to avert evil decrees (*Esther* 8:3). Although women generally cry four times more often than men, and parents have conditioned their sons saying, “big boys don't cry!” in the Torah many holy men shed heartfelt tears. The most famous is David, who cried deeply over the death of Yonatan (I *Shmuel* 20:41), and poured out his soul, in his Book of *Tehillim*, in which he shared how he cried out, through suffering, repentance and prayer in his yearning for closeness to Hashem. It is less well-known how Yosef, who represents the masculine *sefirah* of *yesod*, cried on no less than eight occasions, two of which occurs in *Parashat Miketz*.

Tears are Healthy Cathartic Expressions of Our Inner Emotions

I have always known that it is healthy to cry, both emotionally and physically. Tears are cleansing, even when crying over peeling onions. A research team at Johns Hopkins concluded: “Tears aren't simple. They're complex creations of water, mucins, oils, and electrolytes. They also possess some protective bacteria-fighting substances that help reduce our risk of getting eye infections.” For the cornea, tears provide a smoother optical surface, so that our vision remains clear; they also help keep the cornea properly moisturized and rich in oxygen. For the eye in general, tears act also as wiper fluid, allowing the eyelids to wash the eye free of debris with every blink. Without tears we would quickly go blind. Emotional tears are initiated by a different part of the brain than the part that initiates reflexive tears, the part of the brain which responds to sad, happy, painful, or pleasant experiences. Tears help us express our grief at the loss of those who are precious to us. When we go through hardships, many of us experience a cathartic healing release after a good cry. Consequently, holding back tears, is a negative way of dealing with stress, pain and hardships. Hashem granted us the process of weeping to help us deal with the unhealthy effects of stress. Tears enable us to get in touch with our deepest feelings, giving us a glimpse of who we really are. They can bring us greater emotional awareness, as an indicator of which things in life triggers our various emotional states, be it pain or pleasure. Crying arises from the heart and signifies an open and softened heart. Perhaps that is why so many people are embarrassed to cry; being afraid to reveal their vulnerability.

Yosef's Tears of Compassion

Yosef lived a dichotic existence. On the outside, he is the strong determined leader and provider, the prime example of worldly accomplishment. Yet, on the inside, he suffers much emotional pain from the alienation and hatred of his brothers that spurred them to attempted murder and finally to sell him as a slave, sending him far away to decadent Egypt. Yosef's struggle with this pain emerges through the names he gives his sons: "Yosef named his firstborn Menashe, saying, because G-d has caused me to forget all my trouble and all my father's household" (*Bereishit* 41:51). When Yosef's second son is born, he has already acclimatized himself to his exile existence, cut off from his family and faith. Yet despite his success as the viceroy of Egypt, Yosef still misses home and regards Egypt as the land of his affliction: "The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (*Bereishit* 41:52). Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l explains that the eight instances, where Yosef cries in the Torah, express the process of dealing with his inner world of pain, moving from restraint to outward weeping. The first time that Yosef cries, is when he hears his brothers speaking words of repentance among themselves, for the way they had treated Yosef.

ספר בראשית פרק מג פסוק כד

וַיִּסַּב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּבֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב אֲלֵהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲתָנָם אֶת שִׁמְעוֹן וַיֹּאסֶר אוֹתוֹ לְעֵינֵיהֶם:

When Yosef hears his brothers admit their guilt, "He turned away from them and wept, then returned to them and spoke to them; and he took Simeon from among them and imprisoned him before their eyes" (*Bereishit* 42:24).

According to Sforno, Yosef was moved to tears upon perceiving his brother's anguish, as the saying goes: "*tears are often the first sign of the ice beginning to melt...*" Yosef's tears express his desire to be reunited with his brothers immediately. Although, he gives expression to his emotions, and his tears flow freely on the inside, on the outside, Yosef must hide his emotions from his brothers, and deal harshly with them, in order to fulfill his dreams. Yet on the inside he was filled with compassion for his brothers, when he heard them repenting (Gur Aryeh). The element of compassion, the inner, emotional bond that contrasts so starkly with the royal role that Yosef plays in Egypt, rises up all at once, and with great power. It ignites his Jewish soul, as a sign of a Jew is to be "merciful, descendants of the merciful ones" (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot* 8b).

Tears Turn the Inner Chamber Inside Out

The second instance when Yosef sheds tears, is when Binyamin finally appears before him. Now Yosef actively seeks to weep:

ספר בראשית פרק מג פסוק ל וַיַּמְהֵר יוֹסֵף כִּי נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמָיו אֶל אָחִיו וַיִּבְקֶשׁ לִבְכוֹת וַיָּבֵא הַחֲדָרָה וַיִּבֶךְ שָׁמָּה: (לא) וַיִּרְחֹץ פָּנָיו וַיֵּצֵא וַיִּתְאַפֵּק וַיֹּאמֶר שִׁימוּ לִחִם:

"Yosef hastened, for he felt compassion towards his brother, and he wanted to weep; so he entered his chamber and wept there. He washed his face, went outside, restrained himself and said, bring bread" (*Bereishit* 43:30-31).

In his first encounter with his brothers, Yosef wanted to restrain himself, but was unable to. Now, Yosef seeks to weep – he has come to greater terms with his inner world and is entirely accepting of his weeping here. The fact that "he entered his chamber" to weep, expresses more than just a physical transition from one place to another. It is a transition from one level of existence to an entirely different one: from the external functional world to the inner emotional world. At the first encounter, Yosef's tears are less forceful, he needs to do nothing more than turn his face aside to hide them. Yet when encountering his full brother, Binyamin, Yosef's weeping busts forth with such intensity that, when he emerges, he must recompose himself, wash his face and restrain himself. The washing of the face is more than a physical act – it represents rearranging his official mask of viceroy

over Egypt. Yet, eventually when Yosef reveals his identity, he sheds his mask and transforms his restraint to uncontrollable weeping: "Yosef could not restrain himself before all those who stood before him, and he called out: 'Take every person from my presence!' So, no one stood with him when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers. He gave his voice to weeping, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard" (*Bereishit* 45:1-2). Yosef's weeping here expresses release and transformation. Yosef allows his inner chamber to become outwardly revealed as he becomes master of an emotional domain that contains both ([Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, *Yosef's Tears, Alei Etzion* 16](#)).

The Spiritual Experience of Crying

I connect with Yosef's emotional inner world, which eventually bursts forth to the outside. We all have inner chambers that we hide from others and sometimes even from ourselves. Tears truly draw out our deep feelings of connection with others as well as with our own inner world. Through crying we can get in touch with this inner world and allow it to merge with our outer world. In this way through allowing ourselves to shed tears we can deepen our relationships, our self-awareness, and our connection with the Divine. Tears are an expression, a potent non-verbal communication, to others, to ourselves and to Hashem about who we are and who we want to be, of our inner desires, passions and yearnings. Tears can be a bridge between our soul and body. Pouring out our soul in heartfelt cries is not only a cathartic emotional and physical healing release, but also a spiritual experience of expressing our heart and soul. Let us not be afraid or embarrassed to cry! When we overcome our fear to reveal our vulnerability, we express our greatest strength!