

לע"נ

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The Last Tears

VAYCHI

At almost every stage of fraught encounter between Yosef and his family in Egypt, Yosef weeps. There are seven scenes of tears:

1. When the brothers came before him in Egypt for the first time, they said to one another:

"Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us" ... They did not realise that Yosef could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. (B'reishit 42:21-24)

2. On the second occasion, when they brought Binyamin with them and, deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Yosef hurried out and looked for a place to weep:

He went into his private room and wept there. (43:29-30)

3. When, after Yehuda's impassioned speech, Yosef is about to disclose his identity:

Then Yosef could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Yosef when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. (45:1-2)

4. Immediately after he discloses his identity:

Then he threw his arms around his brother Binyamin and wept, and Binyamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. (45:14-15)

5. When he meets his father again after their long separation:

Yosef had his chariot made ready and went to Goshen to meet his father, Israel. As soon as Yosef appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time. (46:29)

6. On the death of his father:

Yosef threw himself on his father and wept over him and kissed him. (50:1)

7. Some time after his father's death:

When Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Yosef holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Yosef, saying, "Your father left these

instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Yosef: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Yosef wept. (50:15-17)

No one weeps as much as Yosef. Eisav wept when he discovered that Yaakov had taken his blessing (27:38). Yaakov wept when he saw the love of his life, Rachel, for the first time (29:11). Both brothers, Yaakov and Eisav, wept when they met again after their long estrangement (33:4). Yaakov wept when told that his beloved son Yosef was dead (37:35).

But the seven acts of Yosef's weeping have no parallel. They span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited, first with his brother Binyamin, then with his father Yaakov. There are the complex tears immediately before and after he discloses his identity to his brothers, and there are the tears of bereavement at Yaakov's deathbed. But the most intriguing are the last, the tears he sheds when he hears that his brothers fear that he will take revenge on them now that their father is no longer alive.

In a fine essay, "Joseph's tears", Rav Aharon Lichtenstein suggests that

this last act of weeping is an expression of the price Yosef pays for the realisation of his dreams and his elevation to a position of power. Yosef has done everything he could for his brothers. He has sustained them at a time of famine. He has given them not just refuge but a place of honour in Egyptian society. And he has made it as clear as he possibly can that he does not harbour a grudge against them for what they did to him all those many years before. As he said when he disclosed his identity to them:

"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you ... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (45:5-8)

What more could he say? Yet still, all these years later, his brothers do not trust him and fear that he may still seek their harm.

This is Rav Lichtenstein's comment:

"At this moment, Yosef discovers the limits of raw power. He discovers the extent to which the human connection, the personal connection, the family connection, hold far more value and importance than does power - both for the person himself

and for all those around him." Yosef "weeps over the weakness inherent in power, over the terrible price that he has paid for it. His dreams have indeed been realised, on some level, but the tragedy remains just as real. The torn shreds of the family have not been made completely whole."

On the surface, Yosef holds all the power. His family are entirely dependent on him. But at a deeper level it is the other way round. He still yearns for their acceptance, their recognition, their closeness. And ultimately he has to depend on them to bring his bones up from Egypt when the time comes for redemption and return (50:25).

Rav Lichtenstein's analysis reminds us of Rashi and Ibn Ezra's commentary to the last verse in the book of Esther. It says that "Mordechai the Jew was second to King Achashveirosh, and was great among the Jews and well received by most of his brethren" (10:3) - "most" but not all. Rashi (quoting Megila 16b) says that some members of the Sanhedrin were critical of him because his political involvement (his "closeness to the king") distracted from the time he spent studying Torah. Ibn Ezra says, simply:

"It is impossible to satisfy everyone, because people are envious [of other people's success]."

Yosef and Mordechai/Esther are

supreme examples of Jews who reached positions of influence and power in non-Jewish circles. In modern times they were called Hofjuden, "court Jews", and other Jews were often held deeply ambivalent feelings about them.

But at a deeper level, Rav Lichtenstein's remarks recall Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic, an idea that had huge influence on 19th century - especially Marxist - thought. Hegel argued that the early history of humanity was marked by a struggle for power in which some became masters, and others became slaves. On the face of it, masters rule while slaves obey. But in fact the master is dependent on his slaves - he has leisure only because they do the work, and he is the master only because he is recognised as such by his slaves.

Meanwhile the slave, through his work, acquires his own dignity as a producer. Thus the slave has "inner freedom" while the master has "inner bondage". This tension creates a dialectic - a conflict worked out through history - reaching equilibrium only when there are neither masters nor slaves, but merely human beings who treat one another not as means to an end but as ends in themselves. Thus understood, Yosef's tears are a prelude to the master-slave drama about to be enacted in the book of Sh'mot

between Pharaoh and the Israelites.

Rav Lichtenstein's profound insight into the text reminds us of the extent to which Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole are a sustained critique of power. Prior to the Messianic age, we cannot do without it. (Consider the tragedies Jews suffered in the centuries in which they lacked it.) But power alienates. It breeds suspicion and distrust. It diminishes those it is used against, and thus diminishes those who use it.

Even Yosef, called "Yosef HaTzadik: Yosef the Righteous", weeps when he sees the extent to which power sets him apart from his brothers. Judaism is about an alternative social order which depends not on power but on love, loyalty and the mutual responsibility created by covenant. That is why Nietzsche, who based his philosophy on "the will to power", correctly saw Judaism as the antithesis of all he believed in.

Power may be a necessary evil, but it is an evil, and the less we have need of it, the better.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) How do you think families can rebuild trust when it has been broken?
- (2) The Torah often critiques the misuse of power: Can you think of other stories of leaders where this

critique has been applied?

- (3) In what ways does the covenant between God and the Jewish people rely on love and loyalty instead of power?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH