

Rav Kook on T'hilim

*from an unpublished work
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Tearless Cries

The Tachanun prayer

This psalm - T'hilim 6, that keenly articulating the author's pain and anguish over his shortcomings, is well known as it is included in the daily prayers. It even has a special name – Tachanun (Petition) – and is recited immediately following the Amida prayer (on days when Tachanun is said).

According to the Ashkenazi rite. The S'fardi tradition is to recite Psalm 25.

When we recite the Amida, we reconnect with our true goals and aspirations. But after this uplifting prayer, we return to reality and come to terms with our flawed traits and failings. The roller-coaster dive from the heights of the Amida to the disheartening depths of Tachanun can be heart-wrenching. “Be kind to me, God, for I am wretched” (6:3). We recite the psalm with bent heads and covered faces, expressing our profound embarrassment at our inadequacies.

“I am weary from my groans. Every night I cause my bed to float, I melt

my couch with my tears. My eye is hardened from anger. It has aged because of my tormentors. Go away, all you evildoers! For God has heard the sound of my weeping.” (6:7-9)

A vivid picture of despondency and bitterness. For many years, the Midrash states, King David's pillow had to be changed seven times(!) during the night, as it was repeatedly drenched with his tears.

But what about us, who recite this psalm with dry eyes? Can we claim in all honesty that our beds are soaked with tears?

Hardened Eyes

The crying described here comes from a pure heart and a lofty soul. It reflects the sincere bitterness of an individual distraught over his faults and mistakes.

But as long as evil has its hold on a person, it captures the heart and hardens it, preventing it from crying. Even though the heart is aware of the bitterness of the soul, our eyes are like stone, unable to let loose a single tear.

Thus the psalmist complains, “I am wearied with groaning.” If only I could cry, this would at least ease some of my anguish and pain. But I can only sigh and groan, with dry eyes. If I could cry, I would soak my bed with tears. But “my eye is hardened from

anger” (6:8) and self-revulsion. It has become stiff and toughened by my negative traits – the tormentors of my soul.

Before God, however, there are no secrets. God accepts my weeping, even if it lacks tears. He knows that the absence of tears is not because I lack a genuine desire to reject evil and improve, but because evil tendencies have hardened my heart. Therefore, the psalmist pleads, “Go away, you forces of evil, for God has heard the sound of my crying.” Even though you prevent me from shedding tears, “God has accepted my prayer” (6:10), since it flows from a sincere heart.

*(Adapted from Olat Re’iyah vol. I,
pp. 302-304; 443)*