



In the Depths of Sorrow

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Today, we arrive at the second of the four annual fasts commemorating the destruction of the Temple. According to the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:6), 17 Tammuz marks the end of the offering of the *tamid*, the daily sacrifice, as well as the breaching of the city walls. Until this point, despite the siege, the routine of Temple life had continued with the *tamid* as the daily offering before God. But from this point forward, as a result of the siege, there were no longer lambs left to bring to the altar and the *tamid* went unoffered. This break in Temple life, along with the breaching of the Temple walls, must have been heartbreaking for those living in Jerusalem.

The first of the four annual fasts, 10 Tevet, marked the beginning of the siege. If 10 Tevet marked the beginning of a prolonged end, 17 Tammuz indicates that the end is imminent. The 17th of Tammuz is a day of sadness and despair when we are not wondering **if** the Temple will be destroyed, but **when**.

The *midrash* of Eikhah Rabbah teaches that God's own response to the destruction of the First Temple was to cry. God sees the ruins, God despairs, and God weeps. The angel Metatron, however, is uncomfortable with God's sadness:



Eikhah Rabbah Petihta 24**איכה רבה פתיחתא כד**

At that moment, Metatron came and fell upon his face and said before God, “Master of the World, I will cry and you will not cry.”

באותה שעה בא מטטרו"ן ונפל על פניו ואמר
לפניו, רבונו של עולם אני אבכה ואתה לא
תבכה.

It seems the angel Metatron just can't bear to see God crying. Perhaps he's uncomfortable with witnessing the Being that is all-powerful and all-knowing falling to tears at the sight of the ruins. Perhaps, he cares too deeply for God and seeing God in pain brings pain to him. Whatever the reason, Metatron falls on his face and begs God not to cry. God, however, is not deterred from God's sorrow. God responds:

“If you don't let me cry now, then I will go to a place where you do not have the ability to enter and I will cry, as it's said, ‘For if you do not give heed, My soul will cry in an inner chamber, because of your arrogance’ (Jeremiah 13:17).”

אם אין אתה מניח לי לבכות עכשו,
אפנס למקום שאין לך רשות לכנס
ואבכה, שנאמר (ירמיה יג, יז): ואם לא
תשמעוהו במסתרים תבכה בפני מפני
גוה וגו'.

God rebukes the angel Metatron, saying, “If you don't let Me cry, then I will just separate myself from you and cry elsewhere, where you won't have the ability to reach Me.” Later in the *midrash*, God similar rebukes the prophet Jeremiah:

“I am like a person who had only one son and made him a *huppah* (wedding) and he died on his wedding day at the *huppah*, and you have no pain for Me or for My sons! Go and call to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moshe

אני דומה היום לאדם שהיה לו בן
יחיד ועשה לו חפה וימת בתוך חפתו,
ואין לך כאב לא עלי ולא על בני, לך
וקרא לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב ומשה

from their graves, because they know how to cry.”

מקבריהם, שהם יודעים לבכות.

Just as with Metatron, God rebukes Jeremiah, saying, “If you can’t cry with Me, then I’ll go cry with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moshe because they know how to cry.” They know how to grieve. While in these *midrashim*, Metatron and Jeremiah seem to shy away from tears, God’s response to despair is to weep.

Metatron and Jeremiah’s discomfort with tears is all too familiar. Often, we are uncomfortable when we cry, and we are uncomfortable when other people cry. When we cry, we look away, we feel embarrassed, we apologize for ourselves; but God is not apologizing here. God is saying, “You either get comfortable watching Me cry or I’ll take My presence elsewhere.” When other people cry, we struggle for where to look, how to respond, what comfort to offer. Neither Metatron nor Jeremiah know how to be with God in God’s sadness.

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, writing during the time of the Warsaw Ghetto, teaches us how. The *midrash* understands the verse from Jeremiah to describe what happens when God cries: God goes to God’s innermost chambers in God’s hidden place.¹ R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira teaches that when we learn Torah, we can enter into that secret place of God’s, the inner chambers, and there we can be close with God.

R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira

It is the Holy One Who is crying within the inner chambers. And whoever presses himself closer to God through Torah is able to weep there together with God and also to learn Torah with God.

אש קודש, פרשת החודש

הוא יתברך נמצא בבתי גואי ובוכה, ומי שדוחק ומתקרב אליו בתורה, אז בוכה הוא שם עם הקדוש ברוך הוא וגם לומד תורה עמו.

¹ See also Talmud Bavli *Hagigah* 5b.



Not only should we not turn away from God's crying, R. Shapira suggests that, by learning Torah, we can access God's hidden places and weep together with God. Neither we nor God need to be alone in our tears. When we cry, we have the potential to draw closer to God.

R. Shapira continues and teaches about the difference between grief that we experience on our own and grief that we share with God:

This is the difference. The pain and grief someone suffers over their own situation, alone, in isolation, can break a person. They may even fall so far that they become immobilized by it. But the crying that a person does together with God makes them strong. They cry and are strengthened.

וזזהו החילוק, הבכיות והצער שהאדם מצטער בעצמו לבדו על צרותיו יש שנשבר ונופל מהם עד שאינו יכול לעשות מאומה, והבכיות שבוכה עם הקדוש ברוך הוא יחד, מחזיקים אותו, בוכה ומתחזק.

According to R. Shapira, when we experience suffering and sorrow on our own, when our tears stay locked up in the *mistarim*, our hidden places, this pain can break us. But when we share this pain with God, we are not only not alone in our tears but in fact our tears make us stronger. Grief is transformed from being something internal, that draws the whole body concaving inward, into something shared externally that pulls us out of ourselves, connects us to God, and strengthens us.

These past nine months have been filled with immeasurable grief. In some ways, for some people, that which is *tamid* or constant, the daily routine and offerings of our life, have moved forward in the midst of a heart-shattering war. In other ways, though, the comfort and rhythm of the *tamid* has been broken. There are so many people for whom there has been an



irrevocable rupture, and life will never be the same. There is no longer a *tamid* that can be brought forward.

If we have gained anything from these past months, I hope that it is a deep sense of knowing that there is strength in coming together—to cry, to grieve, to rage, and to support one another. May this 17 Tammuz remind us of the importance of allowing ourselves the space to cry and to witness the tears of another. Today, when our sadness breaks us open, may we come together in communities and across communities to find strength in one another so that tomorrow we may re-approach the altar once again.

