



The Healing Power of Tears: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Miketz*

Genesis 41:1 – 44:17
4 Tevet, 5781 **December 19, 2020**

Prior to this week's Torah portion, Genesis recounts Joseph's ordeals--his brothers' ill will towards him, their throwing him into a pit, and then deciding to sell him to traveling Ishmaelites, who in turn, sell him as a slave in Egypt. After attaining a trusted status in his master's house, Joseph faces new tribulations when he is betrayed by his master's wife and is then thrown into prison. Throughout his sufferings, Joseph seems to maintain a sense of inner surety and balance, and the narrative gives us little insight into Joseph's emotional or psychological reactions to his misfortunes.

Instead, Joseph is presented as a highly functioning man, very much in control of his faculties, who does not overtly express anger. It appears that Joseph is trying to put his painful past behind him when the text tells us that he names his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, which respectively mean, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parent's home", and, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction".¹

It is possible that Joseph's ability to create a new and prosperous life for himself in Egypt is partly due to his efforts to distance himself from the gruesome memories of how he ended up there. For if he had chosen to dwell on the grief of his past instead of immersing himself in his present situation, his personal pain could have been debilitating, and that was something that Joseph could not afford if he was going to survive and flourish in unfamiliar Egyptian society.

When Joseph recognizes his brothers after they arrive in Egypt in search of food, he can no longer avoid remembering the traumatic reality of his younger years. As buried memories surface, Joseph finds himself face-to-face with the betrayal and attempted fratricide by his brothers and the loss of his home and of his beloved father Jacob. Now, as a father himself, Joseph also realizes the excruciating anguish that his own father must have felt when he was told that Joseph, his favorite son, "was no more".²

According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Joseph tests his brothers because he needs to be convinced that not only can he have a different opinion of them, but also that they can have a different opinion of him. Even if his family were to be physically re-united, in order for an intimate relationship to be re-established, the inner feelings that his brothers have towards one another need to have changed.³

Joseph surmises that after his disappearance Benjamin, his younger brother and the only other son of Jacob's beloved Rachel, has become his father's favorite child. With this in mind, Joseph orchestrates events so that he is able to determine if his brothers are still capable of depriving their father of a favored son.⁴

In addition to this, Joseph also needs to find out if *he, Joseph*, is able to uproot and transform the bitterness in his heart that he had pushed aside and tried to bury. When Joseph overhears his brothers' remorse for what they did to him⁵, and when his brothers return to him with Benjamin⁶, Joseph is shaken at his innermost core. His controlled demeanor finally changes and he removes himself from his brothers' presence so that he can weep in private. It is these tears that crack Joseph open at the most primal, healing level. Just as Joseph's tears open him

up and allow him to feel the depth of his pain, so do these same tears slowly sew him back together.⁷

In his weeping, Joseph allows himself to embrace the enormity of his pain, betrayal, and loss. Through reliving and accepting *what was*, Joseph is able to unite his past with his present, and thereby achieve a greater sense of wholeness.

The following Midrash illustrates the healing power of tears:

“After Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, God said to them, ‘Now you are about to enter into a world of sorrow and trouble the likes of which staggers the imagination. However, I want you to know that My benevolence and My love for you will never end. I know that you will meet with a lot of tribulation in the world, and that it will embitter your lives. For that reason I give you, out of My heavenly treasure, this priceless pearl, a tear. When grief overtakes you and your heart aches so that you are not able to endure it, and great anguish grips your soul, then there will fall from your eyes this tiny tear and your burden will grow lighter.’”⁸

May we be graced with the ability to shed tears, and may our tears release that which dwells deep within our souls. May they heal us as we process, reconcile, and continue on our paths toward wholeness and peace.

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¹ Genesis 41:51-52

² Genesis 42:13

³ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Pentateuch, Volume 1, Genesis, pp. 591-2, Judaica Press, Gateshead, 1989.

⁴ Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., Twerski on Chumash, p. 89, Shaar Press, New York, 2003

⁵ Genesis 42:24

⁶ Genesis 43:30

⁷ Joseph weeps for the third time in next week’s parasha, Vayigash, Genesis 45:2

⁸ Midrash (unattributed)



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