

Three Who Cried

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This derasha was given by Rabbi Lamm at the Jewish Center (NYC) on the first day of Rosh Hashana, September 29, 1962.

Ours is an age which has forgotten how to cry. Whether at Rosh Hashanah services or Tisha B'av Kinot, whether at a funeral or theater, tears are conspicuous by their absence. Once upon a time the machzor was stained with tears; today it is so white and clean - and cold. Not, unfortunately, that there is nothing to cry about. A generation which saw the finest of its sons and daughters destroyed in the most terrible massacre in recorded history; a generation which, the more it probes the heavens, the more it ignores the heart - a generation of this sort has much to cry about. How many people here today do not have their private woes, their secret sorrows?

It is rather that we have embarrassed ourselves into silence. It has become a style of the times to restrain our tears on the theory that maybe that way the pain will go away, that by refusing to display genuine emotions the agonizing facts of our lives will be altered. But we are, nevertheless, human beings. And so the unwept tears and unexpressed emotions and the unarticulated cries well up within us and seek release. What insight the Kotzker Rebbe had when he said that when a man needs to cry, and wants to cry, but cannot cry - that is the most heart-rending cry of all.

Granted that crying is an experience we ought not to deny ourselves. But is there not a difference in how and why people cry? Is there not a vast difference between the various types of weeping and what motivates them?

I believe there is. And Rosh Hashanah suggests three separate causes for tears, two that are vain and unfortunate, and a third that is heroic and constructive.

The three types are symbolized by three Biblical characters, all women, whose tears are recalled on this holiday. They are: the mother of Sisera, Hagar, and Rachel.

The Mother of Sisera

Sisera was a Canaanite general, leader of an army which was, so to speak, highly mechanized compared to the peasant people of Israel which it attacked. This arrogant, pagan warlord was defeated by the Israelites who were led by Deborah. In Deborah's song of triumph, she paints the picture of Sisera's mother, usually over-confident, this time anxiously awaiting the return of her son.

Through the window she looked forth, and peered, the mother of Sisera, through the lattice: 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why do the wheels of his chariots tarry? The wisest of her princesses answer her, 'Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A damsel, two damsels to every man; to Sisera a spoil of dyed garments, a spoil of dyed garments of embroidery, two dyed garments of broidery for the neck of every spoiler?'

Shoftim 5:28-30

בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם
סיסרא בעד האשנב מדוע בשש
רכבו לבוא מדוע אחרו פעמי
מרכבותיו: חכמות שרותיה תענינה
אף היא תשיב אמריה לה: הלא
ימצאו יחלקו שלל רחם רחמתי
לראש גבר שלל צבעים לסיסרא
שלל צבעים רקמה צבע רקמתי
לצוארי שלל:
שופטים ה:כה-ל

She peers intently out of the window, a nagging question burning within her: why is his chariot so late in coming, why do the wheels of his chariot tarry? She answers, soothing herself: my son and his soldiers are busy dividing the spoils of their great victory; they are splitting up the dyed cloths, the embroidered garments, and the damsels of conquered Israel. But the delusion cannot last forever. The truth must emerge. Her son is dead. Va-teyabev, the mother of Sisera breaks out into uncontrolled sobbing. There were 100 sobs, the Talmud²² declares, and for this reason we Jews, on Rosh Hashanah, sound a total of 100 notes on the Shofar.

A beautiful, compassionate story. A shining example of historical generosity and forgiveness - we relive the pain and anguish of the mother of our enemy. But were there no Jewish mothers who were bereaved of their sons in the same war? Was no Jewish blood spilt in our long history, no Jewish tears shed by grieving mothers?

What the Rabbis intended, I believe, was a moral of great significance: the mother of Sisera lived in a dream world. She refused to face reality and contemplate its bitter side. And when you live in a dream world you must expect nightmares. She had imagined that her exalted position as mother of a successful conqueror inured her to pain and tragedy - that was reserved only for the contemptible enemy, Israel. She was guilty of an immoral optimism, the kind of outlook that characterizes the unthinking and arrogant of all ages. Hers was a strutting and pompous dream which collapsed under the weight of its own illusions. And this indeed is what the shofar and Rosh Hashanah remind us of: there is a yom hadin, a Day of Judgment and accounting. Al tityaesh min ha-paraniot. Do not go through life blithely ignoring consequences which you dread. He who sits on top of the world has no assurance that his world will not collapse under him. Absolute security is a myth. Life is not as certain, as guaranteed as the haughty, unreflective mentality of a mother of Sisera lead her to believe. Beware of such vain and dangerous illusions.

Do we not know in our own lives the kind of mentality that discovers its smugness and self confidence punctured, only when it is too late? We see it in international affairs, as when our government naively assumed that Communism could never gain a foothold on this continent -

²² Rosh Hashana 33b

so we neglected the masses of Cuba, we supported tyranny, we ignored the oppressed population - and now we have Castro and his Russian allies 90 miles off our coast. Va-teyabev.

The couple who neglect to seek advice for their serious problems; the man who ignores medical symptoms he inwardly fears; the mother who notices her children going off in the wrong path, and says and does nothing - all of them lull themselves with false balm, assuring themselves that all is really well and nothing will be wrong. Va-teyabev - how pitiful the tears that are so futilely shed when, later, there is divorce, and incurable illness, and a child gone astray. Broken homes, broken bodies, broken hearts - all in the inglorious tradition of Sisera's mother. Rosh Hashanah reminds of this, tells us that nothing in life is guaranteed, that by ignoring danger you invite it, and that better face reality now than cry vainly later.

Hagar

And the water in the bottle was spent, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow-shot; for she said: 'Let me not look upon the death of the child.' And she sat over against him, and lifted up her voice, and wept.

Bereishit 21:15-16

ויכלו המים מן החמת ותשלך את
הילד תחת אחד השיחים: ותלך ותשב
לה מנגד הרחק כמטחוי קשת כי
אמרה אל אראה במות הילד ותשב
מנגד ותשא את קלה ותבך:
בראשית כא:טו-טז

Hagar was the second of the three who cried. We read about her in the Torah portion of the first day of Rosh Hashana. You recall that she was the servant of Sarah whom Abraham, at Sarah's behest, banished from his home. She took her child Ishmael into the desert, and when the water in her jug gave out, she cast the child away, pathetically saying she did not want to see him die. And she raised her voice and cried. No attempt to save the child, no looking for an oasis - which factually was there, before her eyes - no real effort at changing her dangerous situation. She merely raises her voice and cries - it is the cry of desperation, a morbid, fatalistic pessimism. Hers is a "realism" that leads to resignation. Unlike Sisera's mother, she sees the "facts" only too clearly. Hagar beholds the great desert of life - and submits to it.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us of this weeping too. Just as it discourages us from harboring the dangerous illusions of total security, so it warns us off from the equally dangerous fatalism of a Hagar, the hopelessness that paralyzes all will and initiative. By recalling these tears, we learn to avoid living so that we too will be forced to shed them.

And how important that advice is. Take the matter of the danger to the future of humanity from nuclear war. Most of us are under the impression that the majority of people are indifferent to its ghastly possibility; that they never consider such horrors as real.

I believe, however, that the reverse is true. Contemporary man's attitude to the A-Bomb is not that of Sisera's mother, but of Hagar. If they do not discuss it, it is because deep down, psychologically, they have already given up and accepted it. They have surrendered and have the feeling that they are living in the end of time.

The results, morally speaking, are disastrous. If there is no future, then the present loses all value. If there is nothing to build for, there is nothing to live for. If death is certain and universal, then, like Esav, let us sell our birthright to fill our stomachs. If, as the cynics quoted by Isaiah said, “machar namus”, tomorrow we die, then indeed “let us eat and drink and be merry” - and forgo any serious purpose in life.

This, then, is the result of the Hagar-mentality in its fatalism, its absolute hopelessness in the face of adversity. It is the type of mind which, seeing before it the desert is so overwhelmed by it that it stretches out and prepares to die with a whimper. And in that interval between despair and death - is it worth being temperate or sober or chaste or law-abiding or pure? The tears of Hagar and her whole frame of mind suggest a despair of which is born delinquency.

Both these approaches are dangerously wrong. A society, like an individual, which alternates between the moods of exhilaration and depression, em Sisera and Hagar, shows symptoms of moral mania and spiritual psychosis. Neither the one weeping nor the other is for us. Rather - it is the tears of a Jewish mother which inspire us this day.

Rachel

The third woman who cried is Rachel. We read of her in the Haftorah of the second day of Rosh Hashana, in what is one of the most moving passages and most stirring images in all literature. Jeremiah describes Mother Rachel crying from her grave over her children who are banished from their homes into exile.

Thus saith the Lord: a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping; it is Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not.

Yirmiyahu 31:14

כה אמר ה' קול ברמה נשמע נהי בכי
תמרורים רחל מבכה על בניה מאנה
להנחם על בניה כי איננו:
ירמיהו לא:יד

Here is a woman whose tears have moved history. Unlike Sisera's mother, they do not come from living an easy life and deluding herself into imagining that a day of reckoning will never come. Rachel lived a hard life and a brief one; she knew trouble and anguish. She sees her children going into exile and recognizes the bitterness of reality.

But unlike Hagar, she refuses to bow to these realities. So Meianah le 'hinachem, she refuses to submit, she refuses to adjust, she refuses to accept exile and destruction as the last word. Her cry, her tears, her protest to God, are the characteristic of the Jew throughout all time. The Jewish soul beholds reality in all its ugliness, but sets out to transform it. The tears of Rachel are the tears of a gallant soul who will not yield to the world but rather will make the world yield to it, though it may take centuries. They are not the tears of vain sentiment and self-pity, but of powerful protest; they are a sign not of weakness but of strength; not of resignation or frustration, but of determination. The tears of an em Sissra or a Hagar are the end of their story; for Rachel it is a beginning. To Rachel's cry there comes an answer: Koh amar haShem, thus saith the Lord, min'i kolekh mi bekhi va feinyikh mi-dimah, refrain thy voice from

weeping, and thine eyes from tears, for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord, and thy children shall come back from the land of the enemy; and there is hope for thy future, saith the Lord, and va shavu banim li-gevulam, thy children shall return home. The Jewish attitude, symbolized by Rachel's crying, is one which steers clear of the extreme of ignoring facts and that of surrendering to them. Judaism teaches, in the language of the Kabbalah, that the itrauta di-le leila, the impulse from above, or divine assistance, can only come in response to the itra'uta di-le'tat, human initiative. For G-d helps those who help themselves - and G-d help those who don't.

Has not this Rachel-mentality distinguished the authentic Jew throughout the ages? Are not her heroic tears our saving grace even today? We did not rely on Britain or the U.S.A. or the League of Nations or the U.N. to take care of us, assuming in naive and idolatrous optimism that all will be well with us. We knew the harsh realities of creating an old people anew on a renewed land – with ancient enemies waiting to devour us. But Jews fought. They went into battle inspired by the tears of a Rachel who is meianah le 'hinachem, refusing to accept defeat, refusing to acknowledge surrender, refusing to submit to overwhelming odds. That is why ve'shavu banim li-gevulam; that is why there is an Israel today.

Fourteen or fifteen years ago, the great question was Palestine or the State of Israel. Today two other central questions present themselves to us Jews, questions equally as significant as that of Israel.

The first is Russian Jewry. There is, at present, not too much we can do about it. We must recognize the brutal facts, the wily and cunning enemy we are dealing with, and the incalculably tragic results of a generation of Russian Jews denied any and all Jewish education. But we must vow never to give up hope. Maianah le'hinachem. We must apply pressure. We must talk of them and inquire about them. We must never despair, but rather prepare for their eventual release and return to the House of Israel.

But the second is one we can do much about- and that is the most momentous issue in the Jewish life of this generation - the future of American Jewry. Here the attitude we take can determine whether we shall survive and thrive or, Heaven forbid, eventually vanish without a trace.

If we adopt the genuinely Jewish approach of a Rachel, then there is hope for us. We dare not consider the complacent ideas of those who foolishly tell us that all is well and there is no cause for worry - those who, imbued with the same opiate that dulled the mind of Sisera's mother, are blind to the densely negative features of American-Jewish life: inter-marriage, vast ignorance of the most elementary aspects of Judaism, a desire to mimic the non-Jews, and a growing vacuum in the lives of our children.

Yet, at the same time, we dare not take a Hagar like attitude and assume that things are so far gone that nothing will avail. The pessimists are blind to the resurgence and growing independence of Orthodoxy; the spreading Jewish Day School movement; the growing and developing Yeshiva University; the flourishing Hebrew book industries. Either attitude,

ignoring the problems and ignoring the promises, thoughtless optimism and hopeless pessimism, paralyzes all initiative and must result in national mourning.

Ours must be the tears of Rachel. Knowing reality, let us proceed to transform it to a better reality. Let everyone here decide to come to Shul at least once a week instead of making a perfunctory 3-day-a-year visit. Let every parent send his or her children to a Yeshiva or Day School or at least Hebrew School. Let every thinking adult leave this synagogue today determined to learn more about Judaism, about the Jewish people - about yourselves. Tears of determination, of meianah le'hinachem - the tears of Rachel; these shall save us.

Ha-zor'im bedimah be'rinah yiktzoru - those to whom tears are not the distillation of vain illusions or morbid resignation, but the dew drops of creative moral heroism -- they shall sow the seeds of hope with these tears - and reap a harvest of joy, of happiness, of nachas and unending blessing.