

## **Don't Tell Me Not To Cry: A Year of Tears**

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After this difficult year, I'm reminded of an old **shtetl joke**:

What's the difference between a **Jewish optimist** and a **Jewish pessimist**?

The pessimist says, "It **can't** possibly get **any worse** than this."

The optimist replies, "**Oh yes it can.**"

The day of Erev RH was illustrative of my year – and perhaps yours as well.

I woke up to a text from my friend Lisa in Modiin, Israel.

That morning, her friend's child - Captain Eitan Itzhak Oster, 22 years old - was the first soldier to be killed in the ground operation in Lebanon.

He died in combat with Hezbollah terrorists, just two days after Israel launched its land incursion.

Once again, I started my cycle of waking up – finding my phone – scrolling - and crying.

### **This year has been a YEAR OF TEARS.**

Tears for our Israeli soldiers and the 728 troops killed in combat;

for their families,

for the hostages – those killed and those still captured,

tears for the 26,000 rockets<sup>1</sup> fired at Israel and the horror that Israel is now fighting three wars with Hamas, Hezbollah and the Hooties.

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<sup>1</sup> Times of Israel statistics as of Oct 7, 2024

And tears for the dramatic world-wide rise in antisemitism.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that this has been the most horrific, frightening and sad year in the life of the Jewish people since the Holocaust.”<sup>2</sup>

And the grief **DOESN’T** stop at **our** door:

Tears for the Ukrainians,

for the Sudanese - who face the worst humanitarian crises in the world,

Tears for those in the South East who have lost their homes or lives due to hurricanes,

for the innocent Gazans and Lebanese who are at the mercy of radical Islamic groups,

and tears for our children and grandchildren, who are inheriting a world of hate, anger and violence.

This year has left a **large open wound** in our hearts,

And we’re still bleeding.

No matter your politics, if you’re a Jew,

if you love a Jew<sup>3</sup>,

and frankly if you are **a living breathing human being** –

I imagine a part of you is shattered.

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<sup>2</sup> Words taken from Rabbi John Rosove’s blog on Oct 6, 2024

<sup>3</sup> *Conflicting Visions: Spiritual Possibilities of Modern Israel*, Rabbi David Hartman “Judaism is unique in that, rather than beginning with a leap of faith, it demands a leap of IDENTIFICATION with a PEOPLE and its history...Participation in the suffering and yearnings for security of the Jewish people imbues the solitary individual with a deep sense of collectivity.

There's no escaping our new reality.

As Brett Stephens<sup>4</sup> wrote in the NYT, we Jews have always been aware of antisemitism but after October 7<sup>th</sup>,

“It became personal.

It was in the **neighborhoods** in which we lived,  
the **professions** and **institutions** in which we worked,  
the **colleagues** we worked alongside,  
the **peers** with whom we socialized,  
the **group chats** to which we belonged,  
the **causes** to which we **donated**,  
(and) the **high schools and universities** our kids attended.”

And since that dreadful day, many of us have been putting one foot in front of the other, tight, wound up and tense.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of RH I spoke about the **many reasons we cry** (some beautiful and some tragic). I spoke of the **baggage** we bring when we witness someone crying, and why at times it's **challenging** for SOME of us to cry.

We looked at the biggest crier in the Bible – King David, and the first person in the Torah to cry – Hagar – whose tears saved her son's life.

If you haven't yet heard my sermon from 2<sup>nd</sup> day RH, it's posted. You can watch it.

Today, I want to go deeper.

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<sup>4</sup> The Year American Jews Woke Up, Brett Stephens, NYT Oct 4, 2024  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/04/opinion/israel-jews-antisemitism.html>

Based in Torah, we'll look at additional texts and commentaries about how **crying** has **served** the Jewish people over centuries, and how we can hold our pain **with** our joy.

Just to be clear -my intension **isn't** to make you cry, but to **honor the tears** so many of us have shed – in anger, confusion, frustration, deep disappointment, and of course mourning.

To begin – our *machzor* (HH prayerbook) is filled with many prayers meant to illicit tears –

- After this year, who can read “Who shall live and who shall die” in the *Unetantokef*, without choking up?
- Who can read “*Avinu Malkaynu* - wipe out every **oppressor and adversary** from against us” without one’s heart sinking?
- And during these challenging times, who can listen to the **shofar’s cry**<sup>5</sup>, without **appreciating** the Talmudic teaching that the ram’s horn is supposed to sound like **deep sobs**: wailing for help.

Yet for some of us, the *machzor* might be an **impediment** to an open heart. In that case, remember the Talmud and Zohar teach that when we can’t pray, the **GATES OF TEARS are always open**<sup>6</sup> and that “There’s a (heavenly mystical) **PALACE of tears**, to which no one can gain **entrance except through crying.**”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Talmud, Rosh Hashana 33b – Talmud links the sound of the “*teruah*” to different types of crying - לילול or גגג, which can best be translated as either whimpering or moaning. Our current practice reflects both views. What we today call the *teruah*, the nine quick staccato beats, is a type of quick whimper; what we call the *shevarim*, the three mid-size notes, is a slower moaning sound.

<sup>6</sup> Talmud Berachot 32b

<sup>7</sup> Tikkunei Zohar 26b:4 - is a major kabbalistic text. Written mostly in Aramaic, it is a collection of 70 commentaries on the first word of the Torah, "Bereshit." Quoted in *The Torah of Music*, by Joey Weisenberg, p. 95

So, right now, if the *machzor* doesn't move you (you can quote me on this), **you have my full permission** to spend the rest of today with your *machzor* closed - and your heart open.<sup>8</sup>

Because ultimately our goal is to **swim in God's palace of tears** – however you get there.

The testosterone laden rabbis of the Talmud<sup>9</sup> modeled crying....

Rabbis Ami and Asi - lament that there's no guarantee things will turn out well, even when we suffer and try to live a righteous life.

Rav Yosef - wails because not only do people die young, but also for no logical reason.

And then there's Rabbi Yochanan - who breaks down because bad things often multiply out of control.

I think we can all relate.

I'll ALSO remind you of what Ecclesiastes teaches<sup>10</sup>, that there is a time for everything under the sun:

A time for **weeping** and a time for **laughing**  
A time for **wailing** and a time for **dancing...**

But why?

Is this text trying to say that the **laughing** will one day outweigh the **weeping**?

And our **dancing** will one day make us **forget our wailing**?

I don't know about you – but **I don't buy that.**

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<sup>8</sup> Tikkunei Zohar 26b:4 - Rabbi Yehudah, even teaches that **crying is the highest form of prayer**, because it comes "from the heart." He plays with the Hebrew words "**yelling** / *tza'akah* and **crying** / *za'akah*" – saying that **yelling and crying are closest to God** – even more than prayer and sighing.

<sup>9</sup> Talmud, Chagigah 4b-5b

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:4

And what's the **PURPOSE of all the crying** we've been drowning in - individually and communally this past year?

Besides a release... **do our tears - make - a - difference?!**

On YK morning it's traditional to chant Psalm 130<sup>11</sup> that begins:

מִמְעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ ה'

“Out of the **depths** – *mee'ma'ah'ma'kim* - I **cry out** to you.”<sup>12</sup>

Tears from our depths – are the **deep - raw - unfiltered expression of the heart.**

And when we release tears from our depths – we becomes one with the **universe.**

Let me explain:

Remember - humans are the **ONLY mammals** who **shed tears**,<sup>13</sup>

our bodies are 70% salt water,<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 130 is one of the fifteen [Songs of Ascents](#) recited after the [Shabbat afternoon prayer](#) in the period between [Sukkot](#) and [Shabbat HaGadol](#) (the Shabbat prior to [Passover](#)). In some congregations, it is said on every weekday. It is recited during the [Tashlikh](#) prayer. It is one of the psalms traditionally recited "in times of communal distress". Verses 3-4 are part of the opening paragraph of the long [Tachanun](#) recited on Mondays and Thursdays.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase “*ma'amakim*/from the depths” appears in:

[Isaiah 51:10](#)– “Is it not you (God's arm) that dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, Making the depths of the sea (*ma'amakei yam*) a pathway for the ransomed to pass.”

[Ezekiel 27:34](#)– “Now you (Tzor) are broken by the seas, in the depths of the waters (*be-ma'amakei mayim*); Your wares and all of your company have fallen in your midst.”

[Psalms 69:2-3 and 15](#)– “Save me, O God, for the waters have come as far as my soul. I sink in deep mire, with nowhere to stand;

I have entered deep waters (*be-ma'amakei yam*), and the flood has washed over me... Deliver from the mire, and let me not sink. Let me be delivered from those who hate me and from the deep waters (*u-mi-ma'amakei mayim*).”

<sup>13</sup>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8101718/#:~:text=As%20mentioned%20in%20the%20introduction,ways%20%5B1%2C%2038%5D>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://oceanographicmagazine.com/oceanviz/98-match-between-human-blood-and-sea-water/#:~:text=Our%20bodies%20have%20been%20shaped,we%20called%20'oceano%20plasma'>.

and there's a 98% match between our blood plasma and sea water.

So, when we cry from our depths, **we become one with the earth – embraced and absorbed** into something **greater than us**.

Crying is **our way** of becoming an ocean,

returning to the womb -

to the primordial waters of creation itself.

Which **also** explains why we **read the Book of Jonah** on YK afternoon.

Jonah wants to run away from his responsibilities.

Instead, he's thrown overboard – surrounded by a **huge TEAR** – the ocean – and sinks into a **deep dark place of depression**.

When he reaches the *ma'ah'ma'kim* the depths,<sup>15</sup> “Jonah prays to the ETERNAL from the belly of the fish, saying “**In my trouble I cried out to GOD...**”

Notice, WHEN he **hits rock bottom** – when he's not only **surrounded by one big tear, but cries himself** – that he's able to **take charge** of his life, and **take action**.

**His tears don't paralyze him,**

**they CLAIIFY what's important.**

I'm reminded of the countless inspiring **Israelis** who **in the midst of their tears** did just that this year.

They took action:

- They created makeshift kitchens throughout the country to feed soldiers and displaced families;

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<sup>15</sup> Jonah 2:3

- They turned hotels into schools in the middle of the desert;
- And strangers went from house to house just to help make *shivah minyanim*.
- And of course, people from around the world, traveled to Israel to volunteer, donate funds and bear witness to their collective pain.

Our people were beaten down, the air punched out of us, **and** we got up.

### **We became a shofar.**

Chaim Tyrer of Czernowitz, an 18th century Ukrainian Chassidic rabbi, taught how the **shofar illustrates** how each of us can leave our narrow, tight places and emerge changed, open to new possibilities.

Because the **shofar sound** emerges from a **confined place** – the small mouthpiece - and then with power and precision, air goes through it, and the sound reaches an open space, spreads and grows in strength, ascending higher and higher.<sup>16</sup>

Our own **private and collective** sobs, like the shofar's cry, **CAN** move us higher and higher.

So, if tears can be **clarifying (like Jonah's)**

and **expansive (like the shofar)** –

**how can we ACCESS our tears - if they don't easily flow?**

Maybe **God** can be our teacher.

(Just to clarify – I don't actually believe that God is a character that sits down and weeps – what I'm about to share is all metaphor – **AND** it's beautiful.)

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<sup>16</sup> Be'er Mayim Chaim, Genesis 1:1:76 – The Be'er Mayim Chaim is a Torah commentary by Rabbi Chaim Tyrer of Czernowitz (1760–1816) and is considered a classic Chasidic work.



There is a midrash<sup>17</sup> – rabbinic story – which begins

with Reish Lakish – the famous bandit turned Torah Scholar of the 3rd century - who taught: There were three times the angels wanted to **sing** before God, but the Holy One didn't allow them.

One time was during the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

At that moment God cried,

**“Let me weep bitterly; DON'T comfort me.”**<sup>18</sup>

Then God turned to the angels with a warning:

“(And) anyone who tries to comfort Me, will only **INSULT** Me. So be quiet!.....”

I love this Midrash – God stands up for the **right** to cry.

There are times to simply shut your mouth.

When assuaging someone's sadness is damaging.

When – as they say in Hebrew: אין מילים- there are no words...

The Midrash continues:

And what was God saying when God was weeping?

“Woe is Me.... I lived with the Jewish people, but now (that the Temple is destroyed)...I have to return to the heavens... and **I fear I'll become a laughingstock** to the nations (because they'll wonder how I could've let this happen).”

At that moment, Metatron – God's archangel - came forward:

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<sup>17</sup> Lamentations Rabbah, Intro 24

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 22:4

“Master of the universe, I’ll weep instead of You - but please, **You** shouldn’t weep.’

Then God said: ‘**If you don’t allow Me to cry,  
I’m going to leave all of you,  
and go to a secret hidden place,  
and weep alone.**”

What a beautiful teaching – God was weeping, and the angel Metatron couldn’t take it!

Like a child seeing his parent cry for the first time – he felt disoriented and maybe filled with terror.

But God wouldn’t hear of it!

“No – **LET ME CRY!** And if you don’t, I’m going to disappear, leave you, and cry by Myself!”

The midrash continues:

Then God swooped down to earth, found the prophet Jeremiah – who was the prophet at the time of the Temple’s destruction – and **told** Jeremiah to find Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Where were they?

They were dead.

But that didn’t stop God:

“Just go to their graves and wake them up. **THEY KNOW** how to weep.”

Sure enough, once found,

God informed them of the Temple’s destruction,  
and they **screamed and wept together.**

So beautiful – GOD models for US the **importance of crying**,  
and doing so **IN community**.<sup>19</sup>

As Tali Adler<sup>20</sup> teaches, “**The ‘how’ of mourning is not intuitive.**

Like so many other human activities,  
to do it well, **we need someone to model it for us.**”

Since last YK our world HAS blown up and threatens to continue to do so.

It might do us some good, **to FIGHT FOR OUR RIGHT to cry** - just like God did

–

and **place ourselves with people** and in **spaces where we CAN cry**.

TIOH is one of those places.

AND .... (you might be thinking...) enough already about crying!

We’re the people who hold tears **WITH** joy.

We’re a people who begin **again and again**.

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<sup>19</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 1:1- In a parallel Midrash<sup>19</sup>, the tables are turned. This time GOD learns how to mourn from HUMANITY. According to this 2<sup>nd</sup> Midrash, the Temple is destroyed, and God witnesses the Jewish people going into exile. his time the Holy One asks the angles how **human kings** behave when people they love die. The angels answer that human kings do six things: they hang sackcloth over the entrance, extinguish lamps in the house, overturn their beds, walk barefoot, rip their clothing, and sit silently. After each answer, God replies: “**קָה אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה** - I will do so as well.” Finally, God asks once more: A king of flesh and blood who mourns, what does **he** do - **לְעִשׂוֹת** - “מה דָּרְכוּ לְעִשׂוֹת?” [The angels reply:] “**הוֹשֵׁב וּבוֹכֶה** (**יֹשֵׁב וּבוֹכֶה**).” “**קָה אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה** - I shall do so as well

<sup>20</sup> The Torah of Tears by Yeshivat Maharat, Rabbi Tali Adler

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/338849.8?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

Some call us an “ever-dying people,”<sup>21</sup> others say we are a “**NEVER** dying people.”

We have a responsibility to **dance again!**

To experience joy again –

and to not feel **guilty** when we’re experiencing pleasure.

Israelies themselves have modeled this for us.

Only eight months after the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre, 40,000 people gathered for a **healing concert in Tel Aviv** –

survivors,

those who were abducted and released,

and family members of the atrocities.<sup>22</sup>

They danced into the night with their hands in the air loudly proclaiming:

This will not define us!

We will love again, find joy again, thrive again.

**How** have we done that for generations?

How have we not only **moved forward**, but like the **shofar - gone higher and higher?**

A final Talmudic story<sup>23</sup> –

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<sup>21</sup> The term “ever-dying people” was coined by the historian Simon Rabinowicz in his collection *Israel, The Ever-dying People and Other Essays*, 1986

<sup>22</sup> June 2024 Concert in Tel Aviv brought out 40,000 people: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/we-will-dance-again-first-nova-party-since-oct-7-draws-revelers-survivors/>

<sup>23</sup> Talmud, Bava Batra 60b

First, some context: The year is 70 CE.

The Romans waged a war of annihilation and humiliation against the Jews – slaughtering the old, young, men and women.

Most of those who weren't murdered, died from starvation or were brought in chains to Rome to be enslaved, debased and degraded.

Then the Romans burned the Temple.

This time is known as the “*hurban*” – in Hebrew, a catastrophe, complete devastation.<sup>24</sup>

As the trauma rippled through the community, and the horror of what happened began to sink in – some survivors became **ascetics**.

“How could we possibly eat meat” they reasoned

“which used to be sacrificed at the Temple alter,

Or drink wine, which was poured as a libation –

**When every bite and sip remind us of the destruction?”**

Essentially, they were rejecting the joys of life because they couldn't imagine holding **PAIN AND JOY** simultaneously.

But listen to what Rabbi Yehoshua said:

“OK, no meat or wine.

But then you **really ought to stop eating bread too,**

because the meal offering in the Temple came with bread.”

“OK” they said, “We'll **just eat fruits and vegetables.**”

“Oh, so sorry,” said Rabbi Yehoshua

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<sup>24</sup> The context is taken from *The Amen Effect* by Sharon Brous, p. 90

“You really **shouldn’t eat fruit either**, because the first fruits used to be brought to the Temple too.

And, you know what – **you probably should stop drinking water too**, because remember those water libations in the Temple...”

They were silent.

Stumped!

Rabbi Yehoshua had some advice:

“My children”, he said, “hear me out.

You **must** mourn. It’s **impossible not to**.

But to mourn **too much**,

to live in perpetual devastation,

is also wrong.

Instead, the challenge is to **grieve AND live.**”

How do we hold that tension?

Rabbi Yehoshua offered some **practical guidelines**:

When we **paint our homes**, leave a little patch unfinished, right by the entrance.

When we **prepare a feast**, leave out one delicacy.

When we **get dressed up**, leave off one piece of jewelry.”

YES!!! That’s how we live.

It's impossible to shake the pain of this past year, **we're still in it**, AND we **can't constantly cry**.

This year - may we find the strength to

cry AND dance

weep AND laugh

wail AND celebrate

Perhaps not at the same time - but maybe in the same week, day, hour or even minute.

Because **LIVING is an ART**

And though the **tears may be falling on our canvases**,

**We're the artist**, and the **paint brush - IS - IN - each - of - our - hands**.