

Cry Me a River

It is not unusual to open up a Siddur in our chapel, and find a trace of a long-gone moment, a hint of a story about one of the many people who have, over time, held that book in their hands. Pencil markings by a Bar or bat Mitzvah student, indicating how to sing a phrase when leading part of the service. A wine stain on the page where you find the Friday night Kiddush. A lip stick smudge where someone kissed the page after completing the Amidah, or after reading a prayer that particularly touched her heart. Perhaps even a tear stain, although tears, once dried, are harder to detect.

In an ordinary book, a wine stain or a smudge would be considered an imperfection, something that devalues the book. But in a Siddur, they are mementos, pointing to lived moments in the spiritual lives of people, and of communities.

About five years ago, the prominent auction house Sotheby's put up for auction a prayer book of rare beauty. It was the Siddur ha-Besht, one of only two existing hand-written prayer books once owned by the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of the Hassidic Movement in the 18th century. Apparently, after the Baal Shem Tov's death in 1760, the book passed into the hands of his disciple, Menachem Mendel of Chernobyl, the Chernobyler Rebbe. It was passed down and lovingly preserved, from father to son, down to modern times. The only other occasion on which it was seen publically was in Tel Aviv, in 1960, in an exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Baal Shem Tov's death.

The book was written in a beautiful calligraphy by a well-known scribe. It includes illustrations to elucidate the Kabbalistic concepts found in the text, and other beautiful illustrations, including unicorns. But the most intriguing feature is a stained page of the High Holiday *viduy* prayer that is believed to hold the remnants of the great rabbi's penitential tears. A reporter who was shown the open page prior to the auction attested that "Unmistakable stains (clear, with a dense residue) and smeared, diluted ink appear only on the *viduy*, sloping vertically towards the bottom." "Once you see it," he wrote, "it's hard to question the assertion."

Imagine for a moment the Baal Shem Tov, davening in his small Polish synagogue on Yom Kippur, surrounded by his disciples and intoning, like you and me, the words of the Vidui: "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu- We abuse, we betray, we are cruel...*" One may wonder, which words on the page, what thoughts and emotions arising in the Baal Shem Tov's heart, elicited those tears? I imagine, being the Baal Shem Tov, he felt the responsibility of his community's fate on his shoulders, and that his tears were inspired by love and pity. The tears were offered as a plea that God show them kindness, in spite of their all too human failures and frailties.

But we can only guess; for who can really know the heart of another, or the wellsprings from which his tears flow?

The fact that the book was known to have been owned by the Baal Shem Tov, and even more, that it was tear stained by this revered religious leader, increased its estimated value by some 2,000 percent. Would you like to guess what it sold for at auction....? \$572,500. That's right, over half a million dollars. _____

I thought of that tear-stained book, and of its great value, when I saw an online ad this summer about a very different bit of tear-inspired memorabilia, and the price that it was fetching. It came from the world of sports. The large bold print read "**Wilmer Flores Autographed**

‘Crying in Dugout’ 8x10 Photo (MLB Authenticated). \$139.99 with Frame. \$69.99 without Frame.” People were paying \$140.00 for signed photographs of Mets shortstop Wilmer Flores crying. Hardly a half a million dollar Baal Shem Tov Prayer Book. But still...I was intrigued. I wanted to know, not being a baseball fan, who was Wilmer Flores, and why would fans want, according to the ad, to hang his teary photo above their fireplace? Those of you who follow sports probably remember the story. Wilmer Flores has played for the Mets since he was sixteen years old. It’s the first and only pro team he has ever played on. He’s a decent player and the fans like him. The Mets is his home.

Halfway through a night game against the Padres one evening this summer, word filtered out through the stadium that Flores was being traded. The word spread so quickly, that when Flores enters the batter’s box in the seventh inning, the fans gave him a standing ovation, because they assumed that this was the last time that he would bat for the Mets. By then, Flores, too, had heard about the trade, and he was devastated. After eight years of devotion to his team, this was how he was being repaid? But what could he do? He continued to play his best for the rest of the game, but he couldn’t hold back his tears. Pictures of him wiping them away went viral among fans.

In the end, however, Flores had a reprieve. Either the rumors were false, or the contemplated trade fell through, but Flores, for now, continues to play for the Mets. And, if you like happy endings, this story has one. Two nights later, he wrapped up the game by hitting a walk-off home run, finishing the evening as a hero.

It is unusual for sports figures to cry in a game. Fans could have responded negatively, seeing the tears as a sign of weakness. The public, however, saw something else. They were

drawn in sympathy by this unguarded moment of emotion because it reminded them that sports heroes are really just people like us. Tears, you see, are a great equalizer.

More than that, there is an honesty about tears, a stripping away of the protective stories and half-truths that we often tell ourselves, and a revealing of our deepest human emotions. Tears are a seal of truth. So I guess people were willing to pay \$139.99 for that photo because it caught an unstaged moment of truth and authenticity, and it reminded them that baseball is still a game with heart.

I imagine that Flores' tears on the field that evening might have expressed sadness, betrayal, love for his teammates, anxiety over an uncertain future, and vulnerability in the face of decisions being made that were beyond his control. And who among us has not been visited by these same emotions, though they are sometimes difficult to acknowledge. Tears often serve to bring the deeper truth, the truth that lies below the surface of day-to-day experience, to light, where it is seen front and center. And this is so for the most joyous moments of life, as well as the most difficult.

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, who wrote a guidebook for pre-Bar Mitzvah families, called, "Putting God on the Guest List," devotes an entire chapter to what he calls "the River of Tears." Why, Salkin asks, do Bar Mitzvah parents and grandparents, week after week, cry on the bima, sometimes directly onto the Torah scroll? Their tears, he suggests, are part of river that began flowing in ancient Israel, and continues to wend its way in every part of the world where Jews have lived until this very day.

And what are the reasons that families in every generation add their tears to this river? On the one hand, we see that we are part of something transcendent, and timeless. As parents and grandparents, we remember our own coming of age, and the people, no longer with us, who

once stood and watched us stand in front of the Torah. Looking at the child, we see his place and ours in an endless chain spanning both the past and the future.

And on the other hand, we see the fleeting, constantly changing nature of things. Parents, gazing proudly at their competent son or daughter, no longer a child, realize, perhaps with a little trepidation, that they are no longer parents of young children. Their family is changing, and they struggle with the realization that this is the beginning of a new, uncharted journey for them: the process of letting go. Grandparents see their younger selves in their children. Entering their twilight years they see how much they have handed over to the next generation, and how their roles have become less vital or vibrant than before.

Yes, our tears in those moments are fed by our joy. They reflect our love and pride, and gratitude for everything that has brought both child and family to this moment. But the river is also fed by deeper wellsprings, wellsprings that acknowledge both our deep connection to others, and our fragility. And this River never stops flowing.

This River of Tears is fed at all the peak moments in our lives. Last month, I went to the wedding of the son of my favorite cousins. I entered the room where the *Tish* was being held: As the groom, Nathan, attempted to give his speech, his friends continually interrupted him, as is the custom, with singing and shouting. The drinks were flowing and the merriment was great, as it should be. The ceremony wasn't scheduled for another half hour, and it was already a wonderful wedding.

Yet, when my cousin Elliot, the father of the groom, saw me, he walked straight over, put his head on my shoulder and began to weep, uncontrollably. For what seemed like several minutes. You see, only six weeks before, we had buried his 90 year old mother, Frieda. Barely out of shloshim, my cousin was celebrating the marriage of his youngest child.

And so I knew that my cousin's tears were not simply tears of grief, though they were that; they held love, and gratitude, joy, and sadness, all in the same moment. They were tears filled with the wisdom and understanding that comes from living. They were part of that eternal River of Tears.

I'll digress, just for a moment, to tell you about my cousin's mother. Frieda knew the difference between what David Brooks calls the "Resume Virtues" and the "Eulogy Virtues." The resume virtues include your accomplishments and prizes: the degrees you have, the professional positions you have attained, things like that. But the eulogy virtues speak to the qualities of character; they are the things you really want people to remember about you when you die. Were you kind and loving? Did you know how to face adversity with grace? Were you skilled in building loving relationships?

Frieda had them both, the resume virtues and the eulogy ones. She graduated MIT with a degree in Architecture. You do the math: not a lot of women in her generation pursued architecture, or nearly any other profession. She enjoyed working in her chosen field. Frieda gave it up however, in order to marry and raise a family. Years later, her granddaughter asked her if she regretted giving up her career. She answered, "What would I have accomplished-build another building? How can you compare that to raising four boys, each one so completely different from another?" Frieda's truth moves me to tears, just to tell you about it.

Death is no respecter of calendars, or of proper timetables for mourning and celebration. We all know this from our own experience. *So often*, we are forced to hold death and life, pain and joy, together at the same time; two inseparable sides of existence. I'll share one more story with you.

Some of you may remember that my Dad passed away in his home in Jerusalem eight years ago, just four days before my daughter Tali's wedding. Those first days were a blur for me. I landed in Tel Aviv early Thursday morning, we buried my Dad in the late afternoon, and I was boarding a plane back to the States by late Thursday night. I had to be home by Shabbat, because there would be a wedding on Sunday. For me, Shiva was just going to have to wait until afterwards.

By the time I got home from the airport on Friday I was numb. So numb that I hadn't yet shed a tear. I'm sure many of you have experienced that. Fran and the kids were alternately mourning grandpa Norman's loss, comforting me, or preparing the house for Tali's guests, who were coming for the Shabbat Kallah, a Shabbat celebration for the bride and her close friends.

The first thing that I actually remember from that Shabbat was the Seudah Shlishit, the Shabbat afternoon meal hosted by friends of ours. I saw my children leading Zemirot, traditional Shabbat afternoon songs around the table. I *kvelled* looking at them, seeing the love that they shared for each other, and the joy with which they were celebrating for their sister. And then I thought of my dad, and how he would have loved all of this, and that thought made me smile. My Dad was a very emotional guy. Tears came easily to him. And, I knew that if he were there, looking at these grandchildren, he would have cried a storm. So I looked at the scene through his eyes, and I did the crying for him. My tears were a gift to my Dad, and to myself. Through them, I could simultaneously hold nachas, joy, gratitude, and grief, at the same time, all part of the whole package. Tears can open the heart and bring us comfort. In such moments, we may reach beyond our pain, and see a larger picture.

Rav Haym Soloveitchik once wrote an essay in which he elaborated on his observation that Jews no longer cry on Yom Kippur, as they once did. He says that, among the

immigrant Jews who grew up in the shtetels of Europe, you could always expect that, come the hour of Neilah, the tears would flow throughout the synagogue. It was like that in Soloveitchik's childhood, even among those who were not particularly religiously observant. Yet today, he observes, one no longer witnesses such a scene. Why?

Soloveitchik is speaking about his experience in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities, but he could be speaking for us, as well. He suggests that what has disappeared for contemporary Jews is a "primal fear of Divine judgment, simple and direct." The immigrant generations had absorbed from earliest childhood, and never quite shook off, the notion that life literally hung in the balance as the hour grew late on Yom Kippur. And so they cried out of fear. Soloveitchik suggests, "These people did not cry from religiosity, but from self interest, from an instinctive fear for their lives. Their tears were courtroom tears, with whatever degree of sincerity that such tears have." As, moderns, however, our view of how the universe, and God, work is very different. We are moved by the powerful poetry and language of the Unetaneh Tokef, but no one among us mistakes it for a literal description of what happens on this day. I agree with Soloveitchik. In the 21st century, Yom Kippur is not about fear and dread. But that's not to say that our futures don't hang in the balance. They do. But the work is ours to do.

I would suggest that for you and me, the power of this day is in its potential to lift us out of the mundane, day-to-day striving to cultivate our resume virtues, and to bring us back, in an awesome reawakening and humble return, to the eulogy virtues. Death runs throughout the liturgy and ritual of this day, and the message is that yes, we could die tomorrow. And we need ask ourselves, how would we want to be remembered?

Through prayer, through silence, through paying attention to the weakness of our bodies-brought on by nothing more than the forfeiture of a day's food, we open a window through

which we begin to glimpse the truth of our lives. We see more clearly our frailties, our desires, our occasional ridiculousness, and our moral blind spots. We recognize that it is hard to be the human beings that we, all of us, want to be. And we meet that truth with compassion and love....with *compassion and love*. For we also glimpse today our potential to do better, because we are created in the Divine image. Over the course of the day, we gradually uncurl our fingers and turn the closed fist with which we pound our chest, into an open hand that caresses and comforts. And if, in the intimate soul-searching space of these hours, our heart opens to the truth, and tears fall, well, those are hard-won tears. Such tears just may be our guide to transformation and renewal.

Some of us may cry a bit during Yizkor, as we remember our loved ones, and the generations who came before us. For others, a turn of phrase in the Mahzor will catch us by surprise and unexpectedly take our breath away. Perhaps, you will notice your eyes moisten with a warm saltiness, during the Vidui- the Confessional, as apparently once happened to the Baal Shem Tov. Tears may come, or not. But, if they do, know that in that moment, they are the seal of truth. In that moment, you are in touch with something holy, a truth that lies just beneath the surface of the mundane, the day-to-day. Listen to it. Learn from it. For that is why we are here today.

And, if a tear drops on the page of your Mahzor, don't worry. It isn't damaging the book at all, it is only adding to its value.

L'shannah Tovah Tikateivu v'Techateimu May we be written and sealed for a year of healing, a year of growing, and a year of loving.