

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



A GOOD CRY SHOULD NOT BE WASTED

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Visitors at shiva houses bless mourners with G-d's comfort "amidst the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem". The phrase might refer to other private mourners in our community. Or it might emphasize that we are all in mourning for past and ongoing national disasters.

A good cry is often a necessary and healthy element of mourning. Allowing ourselves to acknowledge and express the depth of loss and pain we are feeling can free us to maturely and constructively plan for the next phase of life.

Tish'ah b'Av this year was a good cry the Jewish community needed. We have been through so much since last October 6. So many of us are in private mourning of one sort or another. We needed to find comfort in a community of mourners.

Now we need to maturely and constructively plan for the next phase of our communal life.

I was struck by the inclusion of piyyutim for both the Shoah and October 7 in our Tish'ah b'Av liturgy. I think it's worth reflecting on the similarities and differences briefly.

The Holocaust kinah we recited was composed (according to Menachem Butler's moving introduction in shul), by Rav Shimon Schwab z"l in 1959 for the "Breuer's" community in Washington Heights, at the behest of Rav Breuer. That community was staunchly and fiercely anti-Zionist in a way almost incomprehensible to contemporary American Orthodoxy.

Rav Schwab's composition of the *kinnah* was a vehicle for expressing opposition to Yom HaShoah, an argument that the Holocaust could and should be assimilated into the existing day of lachrymose liturgy. Holocaust assimilation or uniqueness mattered because of its implications for Zionism. If the Holocaust was just another travail of exile, then one could deny religious significance to the state as well.

So Modern Orthodoxy enacts a complicated religious compromise by both reciting Rav Schwab's kinah and observing Yom HaShoah. We've reached this compromise only recently. It took almost 75 years.

October 7 generated a somewhat parallel discussion. Many moving kinnot were written; our shul recited Rav Rimon's. However, Rabbi Chaim Markowitz argued that assimilating October 7 to Tish'ah b'Av was a fundamental category error.

Tish'ah b'Av is about the travails of *galut* = exile, whereas October 7 was a travail of *geulah* = redemption.

One difference is that there is simply no chance of establishing a separate day for October 7, since it would have to be on Simchat Torah. (We could I suppose institute a fast for the Monday after. But I don't think that would catch on in practice.)

A second difference is that it is far too early to determine the meaning or historical significance of October 7. We simply don't know where it will lead, if anywhere.

A good test of whether the good cry on Tish'ah b'Av proves constructive may be the way we conduct the inevitable conversation about how THIS Simchat Torah should be affected by last year. One key for me is whether we are capable of acknowledging that what we do THIS year may not be what we should do next year, and almost certainly not what we should do in ten years. The inverse is whether we are capable of expanding our religious vocabulary. For example, I think there is broad acknowledgement at this point that the daily recitation of Avinu Malkeinu is an effective response to an emergency but not to a long-term crisis with no clear endpoint. Should we have realized that at the outset, and taken a different approach?

I'll make a completely awkward transition here to a dvar Torah on Parshat VaEtchanan. I hope some parallels will be evident by the end.

G-d (*el'hyakhol*) intensely dislikes being unfair. And there is no doubt that Mosheh Rabbeinu deserved to enter the Land of Israel. He had paid his dues. None of the sins attributed to him rise to the needed level of severity. Unable to explain Himself, G-d tells Moshe to stop asking.

How should a prophet react to that sort of Divine request? Mosheh famously responds to G-d saying "Leave me be and I will destroy them" by persisting. One voice in Sifri insists that he similarly persisted here.

ומה משה, שנאמר לו רב לך אל תוסף,
לא נמנע מלבקש רחמים מלפני הקדוש ברוך הוא,
שאר בני אדם על אחת כמה וכמה!

If Mosheh, to whom G-d said *You have much; Do not continue*, did not refrain from seeking mercy before The Holy Blessed One.

other human beings, how much more so!

But this reading has no apparent basis in the text. That doesn't mean it's false – all we can say is that Mosheh's own report here of his dialogue with Hashem makes no mention of continued pleading.

The simplest explanation for Mosheh's apparently uncharacteristic acceptance here is that he feels compromised by self-interest. This reads Mosheh in parallel to Avraham's silence regarding the Akeidah contrasted with his protest over Sodom, and perhaps notes that Mosheh does not pray for himself, or whichever of his children is threatened, during the "Episode at the Hotel" in Shemot.

A sharper formulation is that Mosheh understands from G-d's reply that his interests are in conflict with those of *klal Yisrael*. Thus he describes G-d as expressing anger towards him *l'maankhem* = *for your sakes*.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that *l'maan* expresses not a rationale but rather a purpose. Mosheh's death outside the Land serves to justify throughout history G-d's unwillingness to bring the rest of the Desert generation into Israel. After all, G-d imposed this sanction even on Mosheh, and for a much lesser sin!

To my mind, there is an (almost?) unbearable irony here. Mosheh is punished disproportionately in order to show that G-d is fair.

I suspect that Rav Hirsch's reading is true to human experience – leaders who have emotional connections to specific members of the group they lead often feel compelled to show them less mercy than to others, lest they be accused of favoritism. So long as they keep the distinction between justice – which must be completely blind – and mercy clear, this may be a sustainable position. Deborah and I have a longstanding disagreement about the nature of mercy. I argue that mercy – even G-d's mercy - by definition is arbitrary and cannot be deserved, and therefore one cannot complain about not receiving it.

However, the Tosafist collection Hadar Zekeinim, centuries before Rav Hirsch, presented a much more dramatic opposition of interests.

א"ל הקב"ה למשה:
כבר עשיתי לך דבר גדול
שמחלתי לישראל עון העגל,
כי עלה במחשבתו להשמידם,
לולי מה שאמרת ואם אין מחני נא,
ועתה אם אתה רוצה שאשמידם –
אעלה אותך אל הארץ הטובה.
השיב לו השיב לו משה:
א"כ,
ימותו כמה משה כמוני,

ואל תשמיד אותם.

The Holy Blessed One said to Mosheh:

"I have already done a great thing for you
in that I forgave Israel the sin of the (Golden) Calf,
had it not been for your saying *and if not, please erase me (from
the book You have written)*

because it arose in My mind to destroy them,
so now, if you wish me to destroy them –
I will bring you up to *that good land.*"

Mosheh replied:

If so,

let many Moshehs like me die,
but don't destroy them.

Hadar Zekeinim provides no explanation as to why Mosheh's entry into the land is incompatible with Israel's survival. But the straightforward implication is that his style of leadership would be toxic there. (From Chazal onward, commentaries have explained that G-d did not have the option of allowing Mosheh to retire and become an ordinary citizen. Some leaders simply cast too great a shadow on their successors.)

I think I'm still in the realm of the straightforward by noting that Mosheh's leadership assumed that miracles were part of ordinary life, and that nothing would ever happen that could not be directly correlated with the people's virtue or vice.

But this led to a constant irony. Living in the religious moment yields a constant threat of destruction – how can human beings worship idols in the Presence and live? So Mosheh was constantly called on to provide the voice of longer-term perspective. The Jews are heirs to the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and besides You promised their ancestors, and anyway, what will the Gentiles say? Or, although never stated: Will You ever be able to develop a trusting relationship with any other people, or will any such relationship be hopelessly shadowed by the destruction of Your first love?

Mosheh Rabbeinu was the voice of that perspective, but his relationship with G-d was so immediate that, *k'b'yakhol*, G-d and the Jews never had to relate to each other via that perspective.

The question of the meaning of October 7 may depend on whether we have yet been able to relate to each other via that perspective.

Shabbat shalom!

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