Neilah: the gates of tears are never closed

"He who does not shed tears on Rosh Hashanah bears witness to the deadness of his soul" (Isaac Luria)

Let me start with a confession. But not a sin like we do over and over again during Yom Kippur. Here it is: **I cry a lot. Thanks to God I cry more because I'm moved by things than from sadness or distress... but I still cry very often.** Just to give you an example. Do you remember the TV show "Extreme makeover Home edition"? Every time the presenter said "Move that bus" I started crying. Every single time. Seeing the emotion of that family having their house rebuilt, watching them crying brought tears to my soul. I cry many times alone when I'm truly moved by some music that touches my soul or when I read something that for me is a great and powerful idea, what we call in the Jewish tradition a "*chidush*". I cry also when I think about some very special people that I lost in my life. I cry every time I remember my grandmother "la Iaia" died, and I cry every time I talk about my rabbi who recently passed away. And as you can see I´m not afraid to say publicly that I cry. **I believe in the power of tears. I believe that it is good to cry.** Crying and tears is what I want to talk about during this closing moment of Yom Kippur.

This service that we are about to begin is only part of our Yom Kippur liturgy. Traditionally speaking we are invited to pray three times a day, on Shabbat and holidays four times but only on Yom Kippur five times. **This concluding prayer is called "Neilah" which literally means "the closing". We are at the closing time of the day of forgiveness. Some say that these services receive this name because at the sunset the doors of the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple of Jerusalem started to close so the last prayers were pronounced by the High Priest on Yom Kippur at this moment. Still others think that what Neilah stands for is the closing of the divine gates.** At this time God starts to close the gates of repentance. He is about to seal our futures, this prayer is our last appeal to ask for forgiveness, to forgive and to commit ourselves to do better in life. **The store of "Teshuvah" is closing.** You see the curtain

of the store rolling down and you just run faster to try to get in. When Neilah finishes there is no way back. It's over.

In a couple of minutes we are going to pray:

פתח לנו שער בעת נעילת שער כי פנה יום

Open the gates of heaven to us. At the time of closing gates. Because the day has turned.

Every store has hours. Our time is over. This seems to be so conclusive, so final… but the Talmud believes that there are some doors that are never closed. Some stores that are open 24/7, 365 days a week:

וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר: מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעֲלוּ שַׁעֲרֵי תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וַאֲשַׁוֵּעַ שָׂתַם תְּפִלָּתִי". וְאַף עַל פִּי שֶׁשַּׁעֲרֵי תְּפִילָּה נִנְעֲלוּ, שַׁעֲרֵי דִּמְעָה לֹא נִנְעֲלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שִׁמְעָה תְפִלָּתִי ה' וְשַׁוְעָתִי הַאֲזִינָה אֶל דִּמְעָתִי אַל תֶּחֱרַשׁ"

Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked and as it is said … Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked the gates of tears were not locked. (b. Brachot 32b).

There is something more powerful than prayers, says the Talmud, tears. Many times we don't really feel our prayers. We just repeat words from our tradition or we use our own pleas but we are not truly connected to what we are saying. **Many times, unfortunately, prayers are just empty words. But not with tears. Tears come from the bottom of our souls. When we cry our soul is speaking even without words.**

King David in his Psalms said to god: *"Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silent at my tears"* (Psalms 39:13). **God can remain indifferent to our prayers but he cannot be indifferent to our tears. When most of us watch someone crying we attach our souls with their souls and we feel the need to cry also. God too.** When we cry, we open our true self to others and to God and that is why

according to the Talmud "Shaarei Dima lo Ninalu - The gates of tears are never closed". **If God doesn't close the gates of tears, we should also not close our hearts when someone cries.** In those salty tears is a soul that is trying to tell us something. We need to be there. Not talk, but listen, give our shoulders and maybe even cry with them. **There are dozens of stories from hasidic rabbis like Dov Beer or Israel Salanter that talk about the holy responsibility of not being indifferent to a crying baby**. Tears compel us to action more than words.

Tears are powerful. Very powerful. The Talmud shares some stories of people crying because someone else hurt them or let them down and while they were crying in pain God punished those responsible. **We are told about a wife waiting for her husband to come back home on the eve of Yom Kippur after spending one year studying Torah but yet he doesn't arrive because he got so engaged in some study that forgot to go back home. Disappointed, alone and sad "a tear fell from her eye" (אחית דמעתא מעינה) and, according to the Talmud, the roof where her husband was sitting studying collapsed** (b. Ketubot 62b). Tears are powerful.

Tears are the external reflection of our souls. We can hide ourselves with masquerades or with words but tears show our true self. Think about Joseph. After many years of being in Egypt after being sold by his brothers he eventually meets them again. He recognizes them but they don't recognize him as he became a very important minister in Egypt. At the beginning he doesn't trust them. In the end, they sold him as a slave more than 20 years ago and never went back to look for him. But still, at one moment he breaks, he cannot control himself any longer, says the Torah. And finally reveals his true self to his brothers saying "Im Joseph your brother": "His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear" (Gen. 45:2). He reveals his true self and cries at the same time. **When we stop hiding, when we stop pretending to be something we are not, we cry. We cry like Joseph. We reveal our true selves when we cry.**

Tears have no languages, tears have no borders. We can't talk different languages but when we see someone cry because of joy we understand the joy in our own hearts. When we see someone crying because of the pain of losing someone we understand that feeling without having to speak the same language. Tears are the language of the soul.

That is why the blast of the Tru´ah according to the Talmud simulates a crying baby. *Iebabot* are called in the Talmud. Maybe God won't hear or understand our prayers but he can't be indifferent to the wails and weeps of the Shofar.

Tears do not only reveal our true self but also connect us with what really matters in life. Tears are a spring of water, of truth. Let me share with you one of the most beautiful stories I have ever read. It is about two friends. Two very different hasidic rabbis but still very close friends:

The time came when Reb Yitzhak died. His son Mendele kept expecting to hear from his father in some way, even if just in a dream. No message came, so about a month after his father's death, Mendele went to visit the Kotzker Rebbe to ask why he had not heard anything. The Kotzker Rebbe said that he too had expected Reb Yitzhak to contact him from Heaven and when he heard nothing he decided to go to Heaven to find him. He looked in all the palaces in Heaven and found no Reb Yitzhak. Desperately he went to the angels and asked. From them, he learned that if he wanted to find his dearest friend, he would have to search for him in a dark forest at the farthest end of Heaven. He mustered all of his strength and entered the forest. Finally he came to the end of the forest and saw a huge ocean. Leaning on a walking stick, staring out over the vast sea, was Reb Yitzhak. The Kotzker Rebbe rushed to him, embraced him, and asked what was happening. Reb Yitzhak pointed at the ocean and said: "Don't you recognize this ocean?" Kotz replied: "No, what is it?" Reb Yitzhak said: "This is the ocean of tears. In it are all the tears shed over the centuries by God's Holy people, the community of Israel. I can not leave this dark place. I spoke to God about the countless people whose suffering this embodies. When I left, I vowed to God that I would not leave this place until he has wiped away all the tears of our people!"

Every time I read this story about the ocean of tears I add my own tears. What a powerful story! What a lesson for all of us. The tears shed by those who suffer should move us in a way that we never depart from them until we bring justice to their life or

at least some closure to their legacy. Because of the tears shed by our grandfathers and grandmothers in the Shoah we are committed to remember. Because of the tears shed by our founding fathers and mothers of Israel we are committed to support the State of Israel. Because of the tears of the innocents in the world that suffer from wars / poverty we have to stand side by side with them until finally all their tears have been wiped. This should be our commitment. We cannot be indifferent to those who cry. Their soul is asking us to be there for them.

The ocean of tears keeps growing and growing. With your tears and my tears. Sometimes tears of joy, of emotion. Sometimes tears of distress and pain. As a rabbi I learned that it is ok to cry together with you. A few years ago I was sharing some words of Torah, when I was a rabbinic intern, and became so moved that I started to cry. The senior rabbi of the congregation, a few minutes after I finished my words, pulled me aside and told me that I need to learn how to control my feelings because a rabbi "shouldn't cry" when he is on the job. At that moment, I stopped considering that rabbi my teacher. Maybe what he was saying was right but that wasn´t me. Many times I cried over the years when delivering a sermon during Yizkor. Many times I cry hearing family members eulogizing their loved ones in the chapel at the cemetery. Many times I cry of joy when I'm transmitting something that I'm passionate about in the Talmud or about the story of modern Israel. I connect through tears. And many times when someone shares with me their problems or their sufferings I don't have words of wisdom to share with them but I have my tears. And when that happens, I'm reminded of this beautiful quote of Rebbe Baruch of Medzhibozh: "I know that there are questions that have no answer; that there is a suffering that has no name; that there seem to be injustices in divine creation, and that there are plenty of reasons for you to be furious. Okay, let's be furious. Together". Let's cry together. Many times we don't have answers to other people's problems but we always have our tears. Sometimes crying together is the only thing we can do. And that is a lot. As a Rabbi I allow myself to cry. According to the Talmud (b. Baba Batra 14b) even the great Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher, wrote the last lines of the Torah with the tears of his eyes. Tears became the ink that sealed our Torah.

Tears are what make us humans. Animals do not roll with tears along their faces. We, human beings, are the only creatures that are able to cry. This connects us with the angels that according to our tradition also have the possibility of crying. Let me start winding down, not with my own words, but with some words I read a couple of days ago by Rabbi Joel Seltzer (which of course brought tears to my eyes):

"To cry is to live, and not merely to sleep through life; tears are not something we experience only when we come into contact with death, but rather they are the very essence of our lives. And on days like today and on Yom Kippur, instead of running from them – I implore us to embrace our tears. For it is only through our brokenness that we can become whole. It is only through honesty that we can repent, and it is only through our tears that we will be redeemed.".

Let's embrace our tears. Let us cry together. Let us cry our truths. Let us cry our pains until God wipes our tears. Let us cry of joy. And like the psalmist said to God:

You keep count of my wanderings;
put my tears into Your flask,
into Your record. (Psalm 56:9)

God, count our tears. Count the tears we spill over our loved ones that died. Count the tears of our sufferings. But also count our tears of joy. Count our tears when we connect to the true meaning of being alive.

Gmar Tov,
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