

Parashat Vayehi Save Your Tears for Another Day?

The ultimate tearjerker of *Sefer Beresheet*, if not all of Tanakh, is the story of Yosef. So much so that the shoresh **ב.נ.ה** (cry) appears eleven times in the story of Yosef, out of a total of sixteen times in the book of *Beresheet*. Why are there so many tears shed around this specific story? What is the impetus for not only the readers of the story, but also the characters who experience the story, to burst out in tears so many times?

In order to comprehend what defines the tragedy of this story, it is important to analyze the essence of the first appearance of the root **ב.נ.ה** in Tanakh. In fact, Hagar is the first to shed tears in Tanakh; she cries over Yishmael's impending death due to the immense thirst he experiences in the desert while being expelled from the house of Abraham and Sara.

Beresheet 21:16 states:

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לֹה מִמִּגְדַּל הָרְחִיק כְּמִטְחָוִי קִשְׁתִּי כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל-אֶרְצָהּ בְּמוֹת הַיָּלֵד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִמִּגְדַּל וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרַךְ:
 She went and sat across from him, about a bowshot away, because she said, "Let me not see the death of the child", and she sat across and raised her voice and **wept**.

Not only does Hagar cry, but she also separates herself from her son even before he dies. She doesn't want to experience being near Yishmael when he dies, so she preemptively experiences his death through both physical and emotional distance and weeping. The relationship between separation and crying is significant and continues throughout *Sefer Bereshit*.

Not only is the possible death of Yishmael accompanied by crying, but the deaths of significant biblical figures often follow with crying. For example, in *Sefer Beresheet* Abraham cries for Sara, Yaakob for the seeming death of Yosef, Yosef for Yaakob, and even the nation of Egypt for Yaakob. We know this. When people die, we cry. But why? The answer lies in Hagar's action of separating before Yishmael died. Separation is hard. As humans, we are reliant on others. We are dependent on each other. We are connected. To lose someone is to lose a deep connection with someone who meant something to us. To cry is not only to express feelings of separation with the deceased, but it is also a sign to others of the need to depend on others who are living. Psychologists regard the act of crying as a "tool enabling social

connectedness.”¹ Crying sends signals to those around us; it shows that we are asking for help, for a connection, for empathy. Tears are “a form of nonverbal social communication aimed at eliciting assistance, comfort, and social support from others.”² Therefore, crying is often found in situations where one relationship may be culminating and/or another is on the brink of being enhanced.

Recognizing tears as a signal of both separation and unity sheds light on the misfortune of Yosef, his brothers, and his father. Yosef experiences a rollercoaster of bonding and dissociation with both his father and his brothers. He cries when he rekindles his eternal bond with his father when Yaakob comes down to Egypt.³ He cries as his father dies.⁴ He cries incognito as he feels the extreme distance between himself and his brothers when they come down to Egypt.⁵ He cries when he reveals himself as one of the twelve brothers, as one of them, as a part of a whole, as a deeply connected human being.⁶ Yosef’s life can be traced through the theme of separation and unity, of division and independence. His striped coat and his odd dreams have deemed Yosef as different from the start, however, in spite of those differences, when he reveals himself as Yosef he “exhibits his willingness to move on, his desire for reconciliation, over such a long time.”⁷ However, Yosef’s final tears express that his relationship with his brothers consists of an unresolved connection.

Beresheet 50:17 portrays the last act of crying in *Sefer Beresheet*:

כֹּה-תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אֶחָיִךְ וְחַטָּאתֶם כִּי-רָעָה גִמְלוֹךְ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹקֵי אָבִיךָ וְיִבְרַךְ יוֹסֵף
בְּדַבְרָם אֵלָיו:

'Thus should you say to Yosef: 'I beseech you; please, forgive the crime of your brothers and their sin for they have dealt badly with you.' And now, please, forgive the crime of the servants of your father's God." Yosef **wept** when they spoke to him.

The brothers portray their fear that Yosef will seek revenge for their past misdeeds—for throwing him in the pit, selling him, etc. Yosef weeps. Why? This form of crying depicts that although Yosef has endeavored to bridge the gap between himself and his family, it was not successful. The brothers still feel the distance. This is the

¹ Sidebotham, Charlotte. "Viewpoint: Why Do We Cry? Are Tears 'Purposeless'?" *The British Journal of General Practice : the Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 26 Mar. 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7098498/>.

² "Why Do We Cry? Exploring the Psychology of Emotional Tears." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201804/why-do-we-cry-exploring-the-psychology-emotional-tears>.

³ *Beresheet* 46:29 Although the person crying is ambiguous, Rabbi Hirsch identifies the crier as Yosef, not Yaakob.

⁴ *Beresheet* 50:1

⁵ *Beresheet* 42:24, 43:30

⁶ *Beresheet* 45:14, 45:15

⁷ Lichtenstein, Harav Aharon. "'And Yosef Wept as They Spoke with Him.'" *"And Yosef Wept as They Spoke With Him" | Yeshivat Har Etzion*, 25 Mar. 2018, <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayechi/and-yosef-wept-they-spoke-him>.

ultimate catastrophe of the story of Yosef. After all he's gone through, after all the disunity, after all of his efforts to unite—the story of the brothers and Yosef ends in an unsettled connection. That is why he cries.

The relationship between the twelve brothers is complex—exciting at times and depressing at others. It is an experience of constantly seeking a bond, despite the obstacles. Yosef serves as a prime example for the need to triumph through interpersonal distances in order to reinstate dependency. Whereas tears may have signified a sense of weakness in the past, the story of Yosef highlights the beauty of crying as a signal to others that we need each other. Dependency is not a weakness, but a key for enhancing our humanity and our relationships.

Vivian Cohen spent the past year in Midreshet Lindenbaum, developing her love and knowledge of Torah. She is currently getting a BA in Judaic Studies from Brooklyn College. Vivian teaches senior girls in Yeshivah of Flatbush's Inquiry Bet Midrash program and is an Allegra Franco fellow, working towards her goal of becoming an expert Judaic studies educator.