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A story is told of the famous Ba'al Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hasidic movement. The Ba'al Shem Tov was regarded as a holy man who legend says was able to converse with the angels. It is taught that he had a special set of mystical kavanot – prayers of intention – that anyone who wished to blow shofar in his congregation at Rosh ha-Shanah would first need to learn, to ensure that each sound would ascend to the heavens to serve its divine purpose. One man from a nearby village longed to blow shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov's congregation and he studied the kavanot for many years, gradually mastering their intricacies. Finally when he felt ready to demonstrate his proficiency he went before the Ba'al Shem Tov, but when he entered into the presence of the great man he felt so awed and overwhelmed that all of the kavanot slipped out of his mind and he couldn't remember any of them. Overcome by emotion he began to cry, mortified at his complete and total failure. The Ba'al Shem Tov saw this and told the shofar blower he was hired. The man was dumbfounded: he hadn't been able to remember even one of the kavanot that he had worked so hard to learn. "That is because," the Ba'al Shem Tov explained, "The kavanot are keys to the locks of the doors that bar the Throne of Glory from us, and when they are inserted in the right order they open the doors and allow our shofar blasts to reach God. But the tears you shed – those are an axe that can cut down even the sturdiest door and allow our prayers to reach directly to God's innermost chambers."

Now before we go any farther I will admit: I don't have any secret mystical kavanot I was able to give Dennis and Len before they blew shofar on Rosh ha-Shanah to make sure their piercing blasts penetrated the locked doors of heaven. And the truth is, I don't really think we can outsource the work we need to do at this season to someone else – counting on the shofar blower to unlock the doors for our prayers rather than doing it with our own sincerity and contrition. But I do think the teaching about the tears could not be more true. We know that tears tear at our hearts and have enormous power to move us when we see someone's pain laid bare. And so I want to speak with you this evening about tears.

Scientists will tell us that there are three distinct types of tears. There are the basal tears that keep the eyes lubricated and healthy, reflex tears which wash away smoke and dust and other irritants, and then there are the emotional tears which are triggered by intense feelings of pain, sadness, and despair. Scientists speculate that the emotional tears function to signal our distress and cause others to come see what the problem is, essentially a social-evolutionary function. They also suggest that crying

can release oxytocin and endorphins which can soothe distress as well as physical pain, which is why we literally might feel better after a good cry.

But I'm not a scientist, and I have trouble with this utilitarian analysis of tears and what evolutionary function they serve (for the record, Darwin said they didn't serve any). I'm a rabbi and, leaving aside the tears when something gets in your eye, I know that tears are a sign that the person in front of me is in pain. It might be the grief of a congregant who has lost someone, the distress of a person who has just received a frightening diagnosis for themselves or – more likely – a loved one and fears for what the future may hold. It may be the regret of someone who has made a choice that hurt another person and now feels sorrow and remorse. It may be relief and gratitude that some dire situation has passed and a feared outcome averted – so called tears of joy. All of these reasons for crying are slightly different – are you worried about something in the future or do you regret something in the past? are you crying because you hurt someone else or because someone else hurt you? – but at root they are fundamentally the same: they express strong emotion and they demand a response.

As a rabbi I'm keenly aware that a response is not the same as a solution. If someone is scared because a loved one has received a grim diagnosis I can't 'fix' this problem by making the sick person healthy (although I certainly can and do earnestly pray for it) or by telling the person they shouldn't be feeling however they are. I learned early on that I can't fix all – or perhaps even most – of the problems that bring people into my study; but I can help the person who is feeling sad or scared or regretful by being present to them in their pain, by hearing them, and supporting them and reassuring them that they are not alone.

That they are not alone: when we are experiencing hurt and pain we can feel so isolated and cut off, like no one understands what it is we are going through. But Jewish tradition assures us that even in our times of pain and perhaps *especially* in our times of pain we *aren't* alone: "*Ito anochi b'tzarah*" God promises in the 91st Psalm: "I am with him in his time of trouble." Note that this verse isn't a promise that God will fix the problem and make the pain go away, but rather that God will be present to us in the midst of it, perhaps even share in it by sitting in the pain along with the sufferer. And the 34th Psalm declares "*karov Adonai l'nish'berei lev*" – "God is near to the brokenhearted," suggesting not only a bond of Divine empathy with the one who cries but even a special closeness that makes God's presence more available at that time.

In a radical move, the rabbis of the Talmud go so far as to envision God crying as well at times of suffering for the Jewish people. God, we want to imagine, can magically fix any problem with a snap of the proverbial Divine fingers. But we know – know all too well – from our own experience that this is not how the world works. There is loss and pain and sadness. And these are not problems to be fixed, at least not in some supernatural way. Sadness is a key part of what it means to be human, and our sense of grief and heartache is a critical element of how we process difficult circumstances,

move forward for ourselves, and develop empathy for others. And so the Talmud describes God as so moved by human suffering that God goes to an inner chamber and weeps because God cannot spare us the same pain that even God experiences.

A related midrash describes God crying when Moses is about to die. The Torah describes the uniquely intimate relationship Moses had with God, saying, “When prophets... arise among you I make Myself known to them in a vision, I speak with them in a dream. *Lo chein b’avdi Moshe* – Not so with My servant Moses; *b’chol beiti ne’eman hu* – he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of Adonai.” (Num 12:6-8). The rabbis ascribe part of the intimacy of that relationship to Moses’ ability and willingness to intervene and confront God on behalf of the people when necessary. With Moses’ imminent death, the midrash imagines God crying and wondering: “Who will stand against Me on the day of anger? And who will speak up for Israel when they speak against Me?” God so badly wants to be restrained in moments of anger that God is moved to tears at the thought that Moses can no longer protect the people when they are deserving of punishment. Tears, perhaps, of regret for the world that it is only human tears that have the power to move God in this way.

We sit here on Kol Nidrei eve, at the beginning of our most solemn day of the year, the day we are called on to plumb the deepest depths of ourselves, to hold up a mirror to our truest selves and acknowledge the many places we have fallen short. It is a day that by rights *should* make us cry – in regret, in remorse, perhaps even in fear of the consequences of failing to do the right thing, the kind thing, the loving thing. Most of us, of course, will not cry: we are too well trained to keep our emotions in check at least in public; and to some maybe the idea of a God who sits on high in judgment sounds too much like a legend designed to keep us in line.

But my prayer for us on this Yom Kippur – for us and for myself – is that we can take this day and its enormity seriously enough to allow its power to penetrate some of the places in our hearts that have become rigid, callous, beset not by wickedness because I do not believe there are wicked people in this room; but by routine: by having accepted and made our peace with certain shortcomings and failures in ourselves to the point that we’ve given up on trying to do anything about them. My prayer is that we can have the courage to be vulnerable on this holiest of days, to allow ourselves to be touched and pierced and transformed in potentially surprising and unexpected ways. My prayer is that we will shed tears – perhaps figurative but maybe literal – that will spur us to real change, will soften *God’s* heart as it were, will perhaps move God in the language of our liturgy from the Throne of Judgement to the Throne of Mercy and will allow our prayers to be accepted, just as the Ba’al Shem Tov sought for his community and his congregation in our story.

Tears, the Ba’al Shem Tov teaches us, are an axe that can cut down the doorways that block the entrance to heaven. But I think their real power is that they cut

away the stiffness and habit that block the entrance to our own hearts, that they can move us from inertia to action, from stasis to response. When confronted with another person's tears, something stirs within us that makes us empathize with their pain and distress and reach out to them in compassion and support. Imagine if we could do the same for ourselves, to hear the true calls and longings and, yes, tears of our hearts and respond with action and conviction.

This Yom Kippur eve, all things are possible. On this night when we stand vulnerable and without pretense before the Source of All, we pray to have as much compassion for ourselves as we have for others, and to heed the sacred tears we need to shed.