

**EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5780 SERMON  
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2019  
BY RABBI AVIVA GOLDBERG**

Several years ago I gave a sermon in which I came out – no, not regarding my orientation, which I think is quite openly known by this time, but rather about my passion for sports cars – from Bugatti's and BMW's to Maserati's and McLarens, I love sports cars –

This evening, I'm not going to talk about sports cars but I do intend to come out once again, to reveal an integral part of me that I usually try to hide, for it is the basis of this evening's sermon and will I am more than sure be demonstrated throughout these high holy days – but before I come out I should like to share with you a vivid memory from my past. When I was a little girl, I remember going with my parents on the high holy days to what was then a very small Orthodox synagogue about a ten-minute walk from our home on Almore Avenue in North York – Clanton Park. And I vividly remember watching, the what I thought at the time were very old women not only beat their chests with their fists during the Al Cheyt confessionals but loudly weep as they recited this litany of sins they had collectively committed. It was at once both primitive and peculiar, fascinating and frightening. To witness grownups, cry in shul publicly was unbelievable to me.

And yet now I know adults do cry – and in fact that is my coming out to you this evening - I tear up, I actually cry - a lot – and I figure that I should right now as we begin these high holy days, my last year leading these services, let you know this fact about me for I shall absolutely be most emotional and yes more likely than not, cry openly. And I am sure of this because as I wrote my various scripts for these services, and put together the supplements, and wrote this speech – I cried.

But, being the closet crier that I am, I have decided to use my intellectual logical left brain to override my emotional right brain – and tonight I would like to give you some facts about tears and the Jewish attitudes to this expression of emotion and more.

Firstly, to be clear – there are three types of tears – basal, reflex and emotional – basal tears are needed to protect your eyes from debris and keep them lubricated and nourished – reflex tears form when your eyes are exposed to irritants like smoke or allergens. It is however, the third category of tears, emotional, those that are the product of intense emotions that I wish to discuss this evening.

I shall now continue by explaining further what I found on this, my very brief research on tears.

Did you know that humans are the only animals in this world that cry emotionally? And though it may be true that crocodiles, alligators and caimans who are related to crocodiles do shed tears when they are eating – it would appear that it is not because they are unhappy with the leg of man they have just consumed but rather the tears are a physiological aspect of their eating; one that scientists still do not fully understand.

And yes in case you were wondering, according to Professor Ad Vinderhoets from the Netherlands who wrote a book about ‘our capacity to burst into tears’, all mammals do make distress calls that sound like crying especially when their offspring are separated from them, but again it is only humans who emotionally cry.

Dr. Thomas Dixon who is the director of, are you ready, The History of Emotions at Queen Mary university in London is of the opinion that “tears are a social phenomenon – something we do in public showing people what’s going through our heads.”

Now no offense to Dr. Dixon who has obviously dedicated his life to the history of tears, I humbly wish to disagree with this perspective.

For me, tears are an expression of so much more and are exceedingly complex. In fact, in contrast to Dixon's thesis I am the kind of person who would prefer that people do not see my tears and do not know what is going through my head or more importantly my heart.

Like most of you I have cried at hearing about the illness or death of someone I have known and cared about. Like most of you I have cried at sad scenes in movies or when the character in the book I am reading, the character I identify with most faces a life and death crisis in their fictive life.

In many ways I understand how that emotion works. The tears come forth from great sadness, compassion, empathy I think and love.

But then too, I have found that a sense of awe at the magnitude of the beauty that this world has to offer through to human creativity and endeavour has elicited in me tears.

When I first saw a whale breaching the ocean so close to the boat, I was on I could have touched it, I cried!

When I first saw the Northern Lights and came out of my tent to dance in their current, I cried.

When I heard the incredible voice of a woman singing Andrew Lloyd Weber's 'Memories', one of my favourite songs, I cried.

When I saw my grandson as he was being born turn his still wet head and face me, I cried.

And just a couple of weeks ago, when I stood in front of the panels at the Torah stitch by stitch exhibit at the Textile Museum I was overwhelmed not just by the work but more by the fact that women, who so long have been

denied even to touch a Torah, created this idea and made this work a reality, I cried.

And I will admit to you that when I stand with a crowd of people and hear Hatikvah all my ambivalent conflicted feelings regarding the politics of Israel disappear and I feel how we as a people rose from the ashes of the gas chamber and built new lives, I cry.

There are many words and stories written in our tradition about tears, from the sages who wrote that prayer alone cannot open the gates of heaven only tears can unlock the doors. To the Psalmist who cried out to the Divine “You have stored my tears in your bottle and counted each of them.” To the great Hasidic teacher and storyteller of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reb Nachman of Bratslaver who understood how significant tears are when he said, “when you peel back all the layers of a person you lay bare all that is left, tears.”

As I conclude this speech, I would like to share with you one more thing, a revised story based on an old Hassidic tale about two rabbis. There was once a Rabbi, Menahem Morgensztern a most righteous man whose best friend Rabbi Kalish died. Rabbi Menahem decided he needed somehow to contact his friend and so in the Hassidic tradition he focused his dreams after his friend’s death on meeting him once again – and hearing from him, albeit in a dream state, about what Kalish’s soul experienced as it went on its spiritual journey to the very seat of the Divine.

Every night for weeks he focused his dreams on locating his friend until finally one night he discovered him not at the celestial palace as he had expected but rather standing leaning wearily on his cane in front of a huge roiling ocean whose waves made an awful sound. “What are you doing here,” asked Rabbi Menahem of his friend. “Why are you stopping on this your final journey?” And rabbi Kalish turned to him and asked, “Don’t you know what

this is? This is the ocean of tears of pain, and wonder, and anguish and beauty, and despair and hope and longing of humanity. I have stopped here because I must help those whose tears need to be expressed for that is the true meaning of my life and my death.” And with those words Rabbi Menahem awoke from his dream, with tears falling from his eyes.

I too would suggest that it is through tears that we can fully express our true humanity. And so, on these High Holy days may we be able to express all aspects of this incredible demonstration of our emotions, the tears we have been given.