

Joseph Cries

Vayigash 5782/2021

Joseph finds himself emotional on more than one occasion. In Parashat Mikeitz he is overcome with emotion after seeing his brother, Benjamin. He hears about his missed opportunities as his brother shares the names of his ten children – all named after the fact that Joseph was not around. In this week's Parasha we once again see Joseph crying – this time as he readies himself to reveal to his brothers that he is in fact Joseph¹.

He was obviously cognisant of this fact, and reading the verses, one might think that there was a level of embarrassment associated with his emotional state, after all why would he send all the Egyptians in the room away, and more so, why would the Torah advise us that all of Egypt ended up hearing him cry, to which our commentators advise us that the rumours spread like wildfire, and reached even Pharaoh's own house².

The Ben Ish Chai actually learns a halacha from this, that when we set our mind to doing something we must utilise our entire body in the process³. It was this thought that got me thinking that Joseph's tears were not just an emotional reaction, but rather something much more calculated.

The midrash tells us, as recorded by the Shnei Luchot haBrit, that there was a rabbinic debate as to the intelligence of Joseph's actions of sending his guards and the Egyptians from the room, because the brothers, who were being held prisoners could have easily overpowered him. However, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman states that the brothers were righteous and despite their previous shortcomings, they wouldn't want to kill Joseph⁴.

Joseph, as we see later, explains to his brothers that he was obviously sent down earlier to prepare Egypt for the ultimate arrival of Jacob and his extended family. This had been part of the promises made to Abraham and would have been familial lore. No doubt this promise between God and Abraham wasn't a secret, and Abraham having had dealings with a previous Pharaoh (one assumes, it was not the same one), could have led Joseph to believe that had he revealed all of this to his brothers in the presence of the Egyptians they could have all been accused of treason or espionage.

So what does this have to do with Joseph's tears?

Scientists explain that the physiological response of tears to an emotional situation are one of the most common physiological responses we have as human beings⁵. However, there has also been research that when someone sees another person crying, they are more likely to believe them and find them trustworthy⁶.

Joseph had just thrown his brothers through the wringer, and they had not recognised him until this point. While Joseph believed, as stated by Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman, that they were righteous, had repented and would do him no harm; he needed to make them urgently realise that he was telling the truth, needed them to react in a way that would not be cause for suspicion, and needed for them to fundamentally trust him.

When the Ben Ish Chai learns that Joseph's tears teach us to throw our whole body into an action, we realise that Joseph suddenly understood the divine plan – he finally saw the completed puzzle – and utilised his entire body to bring his brothers onto the same page in a way that scientists would only corroborate some 3500 years later.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**