

A Pillar of Salt

Rabbi Daniel Reiser | Westchester Reform Temple | Scarsdale, NY
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My wife, Leah, was born without any tear ducts. It sounds strange, but it's true. When she was born, the gap in the corner of her eye was too constricted for tears to flow through and wash away dust and irritants. So within a few hours of her birth, doctors had to surgically open up her tear ducts. Now she jokes -- and this is her joke, not mine -- that maybe the doctors opened up her tear ducts a little bit too wide, because she went from lacking the ability to emit tears to sometimes lacking the ability to stop them from flowing.

We read in this week's Torah portion a story about tears. We read this week the story of Sodom and Gemorrah -- cities that God destroyed on account of their inhospitality. Recall that Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives in the city Sodom -- and when a pair of visitors come through town, Lot, unlike his neighbors, offers them a place to stay for the night. Seeing that Lot is the only righteous person in the entire city, God rescues Lot and his family from Sodom before raining fire upon it. As Lot and his family are fleeing from Sodom, God instructs them to make haste, to run for the hills, and most importantly, not to turn around and see the destruction that will soon befall their former home. And so they take off. But for Lot's wife, whose name the Torah does not record, the temptation to look back is too great. Despite God's instruction not to do so, she turns around and looks back at the city. Immediately, she is punished -- by being transformed into a pillar of salt.

Jewish sages throughout the generations have tried to understand why exactly God forbade Lot and his family from looking back -- and why the punishment for Lot's wife was, of all things, to be turned into a pillar of salt.

Some scholars take a largely pragmatic view -- noting that the area near where the city of Sodom is said to have been, in the Dead Sea Basin, the lowest place on earth, is a geography that contains many salt formations. In this view, the story of Lot's wife being transformed into a pillar of salt serves a pragmatic function: as an ancient way of explaining why the area near the former city of Sodom is so salty.

Other Jewish thinkers throughout the ages have had different understandings of Lot's wife's punishment. There's a midrashic -- an ancient Jewish legends -- that says that Lot's wife was a willing contributor to the inhospitality of her fellow citizens of Sodom. According to the midrash, when the pair of visitors arrived in Sodom and knocked on Lot's door looking for a place to stay, Lot's wife, no better than her neighbors, refused to let them in. But Lot insisted that they be allowed to stay, and asked his wife to help him prepare a meal for their visitors. So, according to the legend, she begrudgingly went to each of her neighbor's houses, asking if she could borrow some salt for her cooking. Her neighbors inquired: "Don't you have enough salt at home to cook for your family?" Whereupon Lot's wife told her neighbors about the strangers whom her husband was secretly harboring in their home. The neighbors, true to their reputation, grew angry at the thought of these strangers in their midst -- and went out on a hunt to find the

unwanted foreigners. So according to this midrashic legend -- just like the city of Sodom was punished for its inhospitality, so too was Lot's wife punished. She betrayed her guests with salt, and so with salt was she punished.

But a third set of Jewish thinkers provides a much more generous reading of Lot's wife. This final set of thinkers picks up on an easily overlooked detail of the story. We know that, just before destruction rains down on the city, Lot, his wife, and two of his daughters flee together to the hills. But we might easily overlook that Lot and his wife have more than just two daughters. In fact, they have four. According to the Torah narrative, their elder two daughters are married to men who live in Sodom. And when the family is forced to flee, these older two daughters are forced to make a decision: do we stay behind with our husbands, committing ourselves to the new families we have built -- or do we flee to the hills with our parents, committing ourselves to the family in which we were raised? We might imagine a similar dilemma in any scene of impending destruction -- when citizens are about to become refugees, when decisions must be made about who should stay and who should go, who can flee and who must stay put. The decision is almost too painful to consider. For whatever reason, the older two daughters decide to stay in Sodom -- and their fate, along with their husbands, their children, and their neighbors, is swift annihilation.

Picture now Lot's wife running away from the city. She has only a few things on her back, only what she could carry. Her husband and her two youngest children are at her side. And although she feels a certain sense of relief at having escaped the impending catastrophe, nevertheless her heart is broken. Although God has instructed her not to, in her mind, she is already looking back at the city she once called home. She thinks of all the friends she has left behind -- the home she and her husband built, the memories they made there, the streets where her children first learned to walk. Soon it will all be gone. And at the black center of her pain, the two children, now grown, whom she has left behind -- awaiting certain destruction. She thinks she hears a voice calling to her from over her shoulder. Can it be? Have they decided to come along? She turns around to see. And in that very moment, she sees not her adult children chasing after her, but rather sees a blinding light flash from out of the sky. In an instant, the city -- and her two elder daughters inside of it -- is evaporated. Her knees buckle. Her entire being becomes one uncontrollable sob. And where there once stood a human being, there now stands only the never-ending, salty tears of a bereaved parent. Forever she will be a pillar of salt.

When you think about it -- tears are sort of a strange phenomenon, aren't they? Why, of all possible bodily responses, do strong feelings cause our eyes to produce a salty fluid? Among all the animals on earth, only humans cry tears of emotion. Other animals do have tear ducts, but they serve only two limited purposes: to lubricate the eye, and to protect the eye from irritants. And while other animals do express emotion, they don't do so with tears. Other animals demonstrate distress through vocal crying. Perhaps you can imagine a dog whimpering or whining -- but never shedding a tear.

From the most ancient of civilizations, humans have recognized the mysterious and powerful quality of tears. Ancient Egyptians believed that human beings were created from the tears of

the god Atum. The ancient Greeks believed all rivers were formed from the tears of their gods. Pre-modern philosophers wondered about where our tears come from. In their pseudoscientific way, some suggested that tears come from the heart: that, when our passions rise, our hearts grow warm -- causing the run-off of fluid, which comes out of the body in the form of tears. Others suggested that tears come from a weak brain: that people who are weak-willed don't have firm, supple brains, but rather, have moist and damp brains -- and that tears are the draining of that moisture.

Judaism has no such negative associations with crying. In fact, our tradition says that crying is helpful to our well-being. The Talmud reports (BT Brachot 32b) that God is not always receptive to our prayers -- but that when a human being sheds a tear, the gates of prayer swing wide open. Of course, this teaching does not mean that, if only we cry, God will certainly *answer* our prayer. Rather, it indicates our sages' belief that a prayer that is accompanied by a sincerely shed tear will, at the very least, be *heard* by God -- taken note of, and that God's compassion will be extended towards us.

In the past few decades, humanity's fascination with tears has coalesced into a whole field of social psychology devoted to the study of crying. One question that researchers set out to tackle is why do humans beings alone shed emotional tears, while other animals do not. Researchers have concluded that the uniqueness of human tears is the result of another unique human characteristic: our vulnerability. Newborn humans come into the world entirely unequipped to negotiate their surroundings. Baby giraffes, by contrast, can walk within thirty minutes of being born. Newborn baby humans behave much like they did in the womb for the first three months of their lives -- the so called "fourth trimester." Our advantage over giraffes, of course, is that the human brain continues to grow and develop for twenty or more years. We are learning machines: highly adaptable to any environment -- but, as a result, we are also highly dependent, for the first twenty years of our lives, on the help of others until our brains are more fully formed. This means that humans are particularly vulnerable. And this, researchers say, is likely the reason why humans alone shed emotional tears. Our tears help us to signal to another human being when we are in distress. And unlike, say, a dog's vocal crying, which can be heard equally by the dog's mother as by a predator, our tears can be shed silently, allowing us to signal our vulnerability to a targeted group, so that our distress is known only to those who would help us, not to those who would do us harm. Our tears are evolutionarily advantageous.

But our relatively slow brain development doesn't only cause us to be vulnerable. The fact that it takes our brain twenty or more years to fully develop also causes humans to be an exceedingly social species. Because of our slow brain development, we learn to rely on one another, to trust one another. We form intimate relationships -- not only relationships of necessity and protection, but also, over time, relationships of shared experiences and beliefs. And it this, our highly social nature, that is the key to understanding why only humans shed tears of emotion.

The researchers who study human tears have identified three different kinds of human crying. First, we might cry when we experience a loss or a separation -- tears of powerlessness. Picture mourners crying at a funeral, or young lovers crying over a break-up. Second, we might cry

when we experience physical pain -- tears of distress. Picture a toddler who bangs their head against the wall and then bursts into tears. And third, we might cry when we see the pain of others, or when we witness an act that is particularly stirring -- empathic, or moral tears. Picture the tear that's shed when hearing about a firefighter who put him or herself in harm's way in order to save a life, or the tear that's shed for a character in a book or a play, whose life and circumstances are entirely imaginary.

The interesting thing is that, over the human lifespan, the likelihood of our shedding any one of these three different kinds of tears changes. Throughout our lives, the likelihood that we will shed the first of these kinds of tears -- tears of loss or powerlessness, like at a funeral or a break-up -- remains steady and constant. We are always equally likely to cry in situations like these. But the likelihood of our shedding the other two kinds of tears varies and changes over the life-span. Tears of physical pain are more likely when we are young, and less likely when we are old. And conversely, empathetic or moral tears -- for a fighter-fighter or for a character in play -- these tears are unlikely when we are young, and grow more and more likely as we age. When we are young, we cry for ourselves; when we are old, we cry for others. When we're younger, we cry on account of our extreme vulnerability -- and when we're older, we cry on account of our sociability.

Unlike those pre-modern philosophers who thought that crying was a sign of weakness, of a damp brain, it turns out that crying is a sign of wisdom -- of having made far enough the world that we care not just about what happens to me, but also what happens to others. Crying is not only an evolutionary signal of our vulnerability -- it is equally a sign of our having developed meaningful social relationships. These two factors combined -- our vulnerability and our sociability -- are what it means to be human.

Lot's wife's tears so overwhelmed her that she turned into a pillar of salt. And indeed, we and others in our lives may experience times when our tears of loss, separation, and powerlessness are so great that they feel unbearable. Let us remember then the message that our tears are trying to send. As researchers would put it: our tears are there to remind us that we're all vulnerable, and we're also all connected to each other -- so reach out, and be a shoulder to cry on. Or, as our own Jewish tradition would put it: when tears are shed, the gates of prayer are wide open. Even when there's no shoulder cry on, God can hear our tears. God hears them. God sees them. And God's love for us is stirred.