

Vayigash 5778

There are many kinds of tears. We cry when a baby is born, in joy and relief. We weep when we say goodbye, for either a short time or forever. We tear up when we feel sentimental, remembering our past or looking to the future. An old song even suggests that there are “Tears of Rage.” And there are also times when tears and embraces mark the resolution of long unaddressed tensions or worries.

On at least three occasions, two of them in this week’s parshah, the Torah describes people falling on each other’s necks, weeping and kissing. It is a dramatic complex of actions describing a highly charged moment when an emotional collapse is symbolized by the physical collapse of an embrace and its accompanying tears and kisses. The first time is when Jacob and Esau see each other for the first time in twenty years. Their separation occurred in their youth, when Jacob fled Esau’s wrath over his younger brother’s theft of his birthright and blessing. The Torah describes it this way: “Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him, and they wept.” The next time we hear the phrase is here in Vayigash, after Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers in Egypt. Here Joseph initiates the hugging: “[H]e embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them...” The third appearance of the phrase is when Joseph reunites with his father Jacob.

Each of these weeping embraces shares certain traits, each tells us something about the particular circumstances, and each forms a part of a larger pattern. They all share the feature of crying being associated with the hug, and they all occur at a moment of reuniting, relief and forgiveness. But each one is also particular: We notice that it is Esau who embraces and kisses

Jacob, the latter remains impassive, perhaps not allowing himself to believe in his brother's sincerity, and then finally weeps together with him. When Joseph reveals himself, he hugs Benjamin, his only full brother, then kisses the others. The embrace reaffirms the intimacy of the two sons of Rachel, elevating their relationship above that of Joseph with the others. When Jacob arrives in Egypt, Joseph goes out in a chariot to meet his father, embraces him and weeps on his neck 'a good while' the text adds. Jacob then replies that he can die with the satisfaction of having seen his son alive.

Here's the pattern: Jacob and Esau; Joseph and Benjamin; Joseph and Jacob. The weeping embrace pattern begins and ends with Jacob, and so too the reunion, relief and forgiveness comes full circle. Esau could have killed Jacob, but forgave him; Joseph could have let his brothers starve, but forgave them; Joseph saves Jacob and the whole house of Israel.

There is one more occurrence of the embrace and weeping, at the moment of Jacob's death. Here too it is Joseph holding his father's now lifeless body and crying. The commentary notes that in that instance, which occurs in next week's parshah, the phrase is 'fell upon his face,' and that that makes more sense since Jacob is not standing to return the embrace. But I think it is also because this is not the same kind of holding and weeping; the Torah is telling us that the time of forgiveness is over; Joseph weeps not out of relief but out of sadness, and reflects that by subtly changing how it describes what happens.

The Torah is incredibly insightful here. It describes these reunion and relief scenes by using the three actions that are the most real and representative of the emotions being shared. When do we hug, kiss and cry? When sharing a moment of joyous relief at the way things have turned out and, as in the last instance in the Torah when it describes Jacob's death, when we are

terribly sad. There are no other instances of these three verbs being used together like this in the Torah; there are only three instances of reunions, and each uses these words.

The Torah's narratives are wonderfully descriptive of what it feels like to be a human being, and how human beings behave when they feel what they do. Torah is not only a sacred narrative of a people; it is also the story of people. We continue to feel its stories deeply, in part, because it so expertly gets to the heart of the human condition. As we at EBJC work our way through a year when we are talking a great deal about possible changes, I hope that we too can revisit some of the issues that have caused stress in the past and weep the tears of relief and reconciliation that Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and finally Joseph and Jacob, did. Coming back together, face to face with each other, I pray for moments of understanding, of relief from past conflicts, and friendly embraces among all our members. As we look ahead to the new year on the civil calendar, we all look forward to rigorous discussion, words of reconciliation, and the peace that comes from finally putting aside the struggles that have too long separated us from one another. In 2018, let's reunite in peace and in love, as one synagogue, one community.

Shabat shalom.