



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Tears

Many years ago, when I was studying for my doctorate in psychology, we had a number of fairly strict requirements in addition to our courses in psychology. For example, we were expected to possess a reading knowledge of two foreign languages, and Hebrew was then not one of them. We were also required to study statistics and to take several courses in what was called “the biological bases of behavior.” These courses were designed to provide us would-be experts on the “mind” with some understanding of the workings of the “body.”

The instructor was a specialist in human

physiology who only lectured sporadically. Instead, he had each of us choose a topic of interest to us, research it thoroughly, and present our findings to the class. I still remember some of the topics I selected. One was the physiology of sleep, and another, the effects of physical exercise on emotions. Perhaps I’ll find a way to weave one of those topics into a future column on the *parasha*. But this week, I’ll refer instead to a third topic I selected; a talk I gave about tears. If I recall correctly, I entitled the talk “Shedding Tears: A Uniquely Human Behavior.”

It amazed me at how little was known about tears back then. In preparation for this column, I had a brief “consultation” with Google and discovered that not much more is known about the subject today than was known back in my graduate school days.

What we do know is summarized in the simple dictionary definition: “A tear is a drop of the clear salty liquid that is secreted by the lachrymal gland of the eye to lubricate the surface between the eyeball and the eyelid to wash away irritants.” We still know little about the physiological explanations for the correlation between tears and mood improvement, and questions as to why women shed tears more easily than men are still largely unresolved.

We are on solid ground when we explain why onions stimulate tears, or why our noses run when we cry. We remain in

ברוך דיין האמת

We mourn the passing of our mother,
grandmother, great-grandmother

Lori Levmore ע"ה

passed away at 95

wife of Bernard W. Levmore ז"ל

Shiva being held until

Monday morning, November 15

Son, David Levmore - Efrat

050-3088355

Daughter, Shoshana Rackovsky

Jewish Quarter - 02-6285346

יהי זכרה ברוך

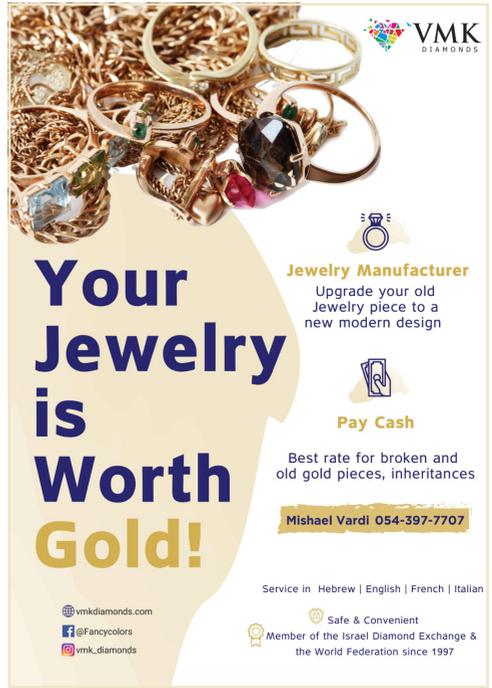
the dark when we attempt to understand the significance of the fact that crying for emotional reasons seems to be unique to humans. Crocodiles shed tears, but not because they are emotionally upset or aesthetically inspired.

At this point, I am sure that the reader has begun to wonder about the connection of my abiding and consuming interest in the phenomenon of human tears to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetzeh* (*Genesis 28:10-32:3*). Let me assure you, dear reader, that there is a connection, and it is to these remarkable verses: "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; and Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance."

Many find it curious that the Bible accentuates Rachel's physical beauty. There is, however, ample precedent for that. Her predecessors Rebecca and Sarah are both described as exceedingly beautiful.

But why is Leah's physical appearance denigrated? Why do we need to be told that her eyes were weak, soft, and tender? Is this facial feature of Leah's a virtue or a blemish? And if it is the latter, why mention it?

Rashi helps us answer these questions. He comments, "Leah supposed that she was destined to marry Esau, hence she shed tears. She heard people say that Rebecca had two sons and Laban two daughters. Surely, the older daughter will marry the older son, and the younger daughter the younger son." This prediction, this assumption that she was destined to spend her life with the wicked Esau, troubled her greatly, and she cried and cried until her tears



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disfigured her beautiful face.

Chassidic masters have interpreted this seemingly superficial difference between Rachel's pristine beauty and Leah's imperfect appearance as symbolic of two types of moral heroines. Rachel represents the perfect *tzaddeket* who encounters no challenges to her moral perfection. Leah, on the other hand, exemplifies the person who overcomes obstacles and experiences setbacks in her struggle to achieve the status of *tzaddeket*. Leah's tears are the tears of a *ba'alat teshuvah*, one who has known disappointment and failure in her progress toward perfection and whose tears are an essential component of her moral triumph.

This view of tears as part and parcel of the struggle of the searching soul is found time and time again in King David's *Book of Psalms*. Thus, in psalm 42, we read: "Like a hind crying for water, my soul cries for You, O God...my tears have been my food day and night; I am ever taunted with, 'Where is your God?'"

And in psalm 56, we learn that not only do tears comprise the experience of the spiritual seeker, but that the Almighty keeps track of tears, cherishing them and preserving them: "You keep count of my wanderings; You put my tears into Your flask; into Your record."

Finally, the *Book of Psalms* teaches us that tears shed in the interest of drawing closer to God not only are eventually effective, but that those tears are transformed into songs of joy. Thus, we have become familiar with the phrase in the *Shir HaMaalot*, or *Song of Ascents*, psalm 126, which reads: "They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy."

Leah's weak eyes are not a physical defect. Her tears are emblems of her moral strivings. Her tears are not signs of weakness or cowardice; quite the contrary, they encompass her strength of character, and we would be well advised to learn from Leah how and when to cry.

It was about the time that I presented that paper on the physiology of tears in graduate school that I first read and appreciated what has since become one of my favorite novels, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. I favor it for many reasons, one being that in this novel, Dickens portrays a Jew as a kind, compassionate, and heroic figure. But I also admire the following quotation from the novel, one that I have copied down for reference in my work as both a psychotherapist and spiritual guide:

"Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears...I was better after I had cried, than before—more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle."

I could easily conclude this essay with the above quotation from this great British novelist, one of the keenest observers of the human condition. But I choose instead to conclude with this Talmudic teaching, found in Tractate *Berachot* 32b:

"Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked, as it is said: 'Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer.' (*Lamentations* 3:80) Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked, the gates of tears were never locked, as it is stated: 'Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears.' (*Psalms* 39:13)" ■