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ROSH HASHANA



Three Tears on Rosh HaShana: Denial, Despair, and Defiant Hope

During our Rosh HaShana services, we reflect on the voices of three biblical women whose cries echo through the sacred days of judgment and renewal: the mother of Sisera, Hagar, and Rachel Imenu. Each cry, as Rabbi Norman Lamm¹ profoundly noted, reflects a distinct spiritual posture in the face of suffering. Their tears are not merely emotional outbursts, rather they are windows into the soul's confrontation with reality.

SISERA'S MOTHER – THE CRY OF DENIAL

On the first day of Rosh HaShana, the haftara recounts the story of Sisera's mother, who waits anxiously at the window for her son's return from battle. She peers into the distance, hoping for a glimpse of his chariot.² As time passes and he fails to appear, her friends offer hollow reassurances: "He is delayed because he is collecting the spoils." But deep down, the truth dawns—he is never coming back.

The Talmud Yerushalmi³ teaches that she cried one hundred cries upon realizing this bitter truth—one for each of the shofar

blasts we blow. Yet her tears stem not from a courageous engagement with reality, but from her refusal to accept it. She lived in a fantasy, an "immoral optimism," as Rabbi Lamm termed it—an arrogant illusion that the world will always remain as it was. When one builds their life upon denial, the shock of reality becomes devastating.

This is the first type of cry: a tear that resists truth. It is the refusal to see, to acknowledge, to engage. Such tears do not lead to growth, only to paralysis.

HAGAR – THE CRY OF DESPAIR

The Torah reading of the first day of Rosh HaShana introduces us to a second kind of cry—that of Hagar. Cast out from Avraham's home, Hagar wanders the desert with her son, Yishmael, until they are both at the brink of death. Recognizing her son's imminent demise, she distances herself, saying, "Let me not see the death of the child,"⁴ and breaks down weeping.

Unlike Sisera's mother, Hagar sees reality clearly. She does not hide from it. But she is crushed by it. Her tears are those of despair—resignation to fate, surrender to suffering. She weeps not in denial, but in hopelessness. She

1. Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Festivals of Faith* (New York: OU Press, 2011), 26.

2. Shoftim 5:28–30

3. Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh HaShana 4:8

4. Bereishit 21:14–16

believes there is nothing more to be done, no possibility of change.

This is the second cry: a tear that surrenders. Though more honest than denial, despair too is spiritually disabling. It strips us of agency and suffocates faith.

RACHEL IMENU – THE CRY OF DEFIANT HOPE

Then we reach the cry of Rachel Imenu. Her life was marked by profound sorrow: she forfeited her beloved to her sister, struggled for years with infertility, and died young on the road, far from home. Yet even after death, her tears endure. In the haftara of the second day of Rosh HaShana, we are told: **“Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be comforted.”** רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל בְּנֶיהָ.⁵ She watches as her descendants are led into exile—and she *refuses* to remain silent.

Rachel does not deny the pain, nor does she succumb to it. She confronts reality with open eyes—and yet, she demands more. She turns to God and insists on redemption. Her tears are not the end, but the beginning. As Rabbi Lamm states: “The Jewish soul beholds reality in all of its ugliness but sets out to transform it.”

Rachel’s cry is a model of courageous, faith-filled defiance. It is the cry of protest, of prayer, of possibility.

CONCLUSION: CHOOSING OUR CRY

Each of us will cry in life. Pain is inevitable. But the *nature* of our tears—what they say about us and where they lead us—is our choice.

Will we cry like Sisera’s mother, lost in denial and illusions? Will we cry like Hagar, paralyzed by despair and surrender? Or will we cry like Rachel Imenu—eyes open, heart broken, but with a soul burning with fierce hope?

On Rosh HaShana, we are called to respond like Rachel. To see the world’s brokenness

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— our personal struggles, our collective wounds — and yet to believe. To believe that transformation is possible. That exile is not the end. That our cries reach Heaven and awaken compassion.

Rachel’s cry did not fall on deaf ears. Hashem responds: *“Restrain your voice from weeping... there is hope for your future.”*⁶

So too with us. When we cry with faith, with *Emunah and Bitahon*, we do not weep in vain. Our tears become the seeds of redemption.

Let us choose to cry not in denial or despair, but in courageous hope—like Rachel Imenu. And may our heartfelt cries be answered with healing, return, and a future filled with light. With the proper tears we are told: הַזֵּרוּעִים יִקְצְרוּ. “Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.”⁷ ■

6. Ibid

7. Tehillim 126:5

5. Yirmiyahu 31:14–16