

Yom Kippur Sermon 5786: The Sacred Power of Emotion

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

On this holiest day of the year, we search for **words**: words to speak to Gd, words to speak to ourselves, words to speak to one another. But *sometimes*, words are just *not* enough. Sometimes, what is *most* true, *most* real, cannot be spoken at all. Sometimes the *heart* insists on speaking a *different* language—the language of **emotions**: of laughter, of a hug, of a kiss, or of a tear.

Personally, my heart took over *at least* twice during *Rosh Hashanah*: The first time, was in a *usual* place in the service for me, as I mentioned on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, when the ark is opened to take out the Torah and we sing three times, “V’ani Tefilati”, which translates as “And I offer my prayer to you, O God, in my time of *great* need, Gd *please* in your abundant kindness Answer me, Answer me with your faithful deliverance”. I *begin* to sing the words, whose meaning is so resonant at that moment for me, standing in front of the Torah scrolls, under the eternal light, with you, the congregation - my community these past 21 years, singing in full behind me - and I get choked up - no words come out, just a feeling of a burst of emotion in my heart and sometimes a tear or two that drops from my eye. I feel so full in that moment, so in touch: with myself, the entire community and my sense of Gd’s presence. It is a moment of great spirituality when my emotions speak for my soul, when words alone cannot.

And then it happened *again* when our wonderful young community member Ela Weininger, sang the *halleluyah* in the Musaf service in such a beautiful plaintive voice. While trying to sing the words *with* her, I felt something stir in me pointing beyond my own life to something greater. I felt an uplift and a special connection with all of

you and with Gd. Again, the words would not come out but the feeling was there, powerful and so tangible. These spiritual moments were captured in the *midst* of our service and were made *meaningful* through the expression of deep emotions.

This connection between spirituality and emotion is not a modern concept but is reflected often in our tradition's *ancient* wisdom. Our Sages teach in the Talmud, *Sha'arei d'maot lo ninalu*—"the gates of **tears** are *never* locked." When other gates of prayer may be closed, as the *Neilah* service at the end of Yom Kippur hints, when words *fall short*, the gates of **tears** remain *wide* open. And this is not simply a poetic flourish or a creative image. It is a profound *theological* claim: our emotions **themselves** can indeed be a form of prayer. God "*hears*" them with urgency and *relates* to them with compassion. Just as this is true of tears, it is also true of *all* sincere emotions. Expressions of love, gratitude, awe, joy, longing, sorrow—these *too* are sacred gateways to God. Judaism does not *confine* spirituality to words on a page or melodies in a liturgy. It insists that our *deepest* feelings, expressed honestly, are themselves a form of worship that exist alongside *and intertwined* with our prayers, just as it was for me on Rosh Hashanah.

To illustrate: from the very beginning, the Torah highlights the power of tears. Think about some of our Biblical stories. As related during Rosh Hashanah's Torah reading, Hagar *weeps* in the wilderness for her child, and **God responds**, by opening her eyes to a well. Joseph, one of the most powerful figures in the Torah, cries *seven* times—when he meets his brothers, when he reveals himself, when his father dies. His tears do not weaken him—they humanize him, give expression to his emotions, which allow for the reconciliation that he and his father each prayed for. The great biblical figure, **Hannah**, as recounted during Rosh Hashanah's *Haftarah* reading, prays with *tears so raw* that Eli the High Priest mistakes her for drunk. Yet **Gd hears** the desires of *her* heart in her *cry* and grants her a son, who becomes

the great prophet *Shmuel*. The Torah could have told these stories without emphasizing the tears. *Many* details of Biblical stories are left out. But the Torah *insists* on them. Because the Torah wants us to understand that tears, like other powerful expressions of emotion, often reveal the soul in ways that *cannot* be adequately expressed in words.

But it is not only *tears* that our tradition sanctifies. The Torah also records *beautiful* moments of laughter and joy, like when Isaac was born. After his birth, Sarah reframed her original laughter of disbelief as spiritual joy (quote): “**God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.**” And the emotional expression of *suffering* is also sanctified as prayer during the *Exodus* story as the Torah tells us, “The Israelites *groaned* under their bondage and *cried out*, and their cry for help rose up to God.” Whether through tears or laughter, suffering or thanksgiving, the Torah reminds us that our emotions are not *distractions* from holiness—they are foundational expressions of what is sacred.

I think we would all agree that on Yom Kippur, our prayers are indeed intense. The liturgy is *long* and solemn, the melodies haunting. We confront our mortality in *Unetaneh Tokef* (who shall live and who shall die), we confess our *deepest* transgressions in the *Vidui* (*Ashamnu*), and we plead for *forgiveness* in the *Al Chet* while beating our chests. Often the *words* of these prayers stir something deep. But let’s be honest, while the service *is* indeed meaningful, which is why it has been resonant for *millenia*, sometimes we can’t *all* follow the Hebrew, sometimes we get *distracted* from the service and daydream, or chat with our neighbor. Sometimes the words feel *far* from our lived experience, referencing a society with kings and servants. And frankly some of us are not *present* for various parts of the liturgy because the prayer service is *all day* long and not everyone can be here from beginning to end.

And *yet*—even when the words do *not* land—*emotions* often surface during our time here, like they did for me on Rosh Hashanah. For example, in regard to tears, **here in our Sanctuary** (Perhaps during a service) a tear may fall during *Unetaneh Tokef* as we think of the unknown year ahead and the fate of our loved ones, or during *Yizkor* as we remember those we still miss so dearly. Perhaps we experience a pang of guilt or shame when we think about the ways we've hurt those closest to us or a feeling of worry during silent moments of reflection when we are overwhelmed by the challenges we, and our society, face in this difficult world.

Or equally so, perhaps you have felt a surge of *gratitude* for family or community when you look around. Perhaps a welling of *love* for the very people sitting beside you. Perhaps great *joy* when you hear a familiar melody or see someone you haven't seen in a long time. Or *relief* when you lay down your burdens during the confessional, or receive the forgiveness of a friend. Or *pride* in belonging to a people who have carried these words and these traditions for millennia to this very moment that we are all sharing. In the structure of this sacred environment our emotions can surface great spiritual meaning.

And each of us expresses emotion differently. Some of us are cryers, who tear freely. Some of us not so much. Some of us show love with big hugs, some with lovely words and some, almost exclusively, through *acts* of care. But we are *all* emotional creatures; meaning, how we *feel* has an impact on how we act and who we are. And therefore our emotions *are* deeply connected to our spirituality and to the way we find meaning in living life.

These expressions of emotions, internally or externally, therefore are **not** *interruptions* to the service. They are *not* footnotes or unintended consequences. They are part of its core. *Especially* in the context of a holiday, or in shul, our emotional expressions are often prayers more powerful and personal than words, sparked by the *resonance* of this service taking *place* during one of the *holiest* days of the year.

Whether expressed as tears, joy, awe, or yearning, our emotions connect us directly to God.

The Hasidic masters teach, for example, that when we cry during prayer, it is our “soul itself” speaking, *bypassing* the mind, *bypassing* the liturgy, going *straight* to heaven. In fact, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, one of the greatest Hasidic masters, once told *this* story:

On Yom Kippur, the rabbi noticed a simple man standing at the back of the shul. He did not *know* the prayers. He could not read Hebrew. He held his prayer book upside down. But as the congregation prayed, the man began to **cry**. Tears streamed down his face as he whispered: “*Ribbono Shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, I don’t know the words. I don’t know how to pray. All I can offer You are my tears. Please, please accept them.” Others around him thought him strange, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak turned to his congregation and said: “**Know this:** *that* man’s tears opened the gates of heaven for all of us today.” For Rabbi Levi Yitzhak understood that sincerity in prayer is often linked to our awareness and connection to our emotions. *That* man’s tears connected what was in *his* heart to the words he did not know but which were proclaimed by the *rest* of the congregation in *their* communal prayer. Thus, the story reminds us: our tears *are* precious, and they *belong* in the synagogue and in our spiritual lives. They can be spiritual *springboards* for us and those around us. And the same is true of *all* authentic emotions—when expressed sincerely and directed spiritually, they can carry our prayers higher than words alone.

And further we learn from this story that *one* person’s sincere expression of emotion can help *others* be in touch with their *own* internal truths. And *this* type of awareness is *critical* for spirituality and for the work of the High Holidays which *demand*s of us: introspection, honesty and renewal. Sometimes a sincere expression of emotion can inspire prayer and spiritual connection for *anyone* who witnesses it.

I want to share an illustration of this from right here in our own community. A few years ago, I was standing on the bimah during *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur. As I looked out, I noticed one person in the crowd—someone who had lost a spouse that very year. As the words of the prayer began, tears streamed down their face. And then something extraordinary happened: a person sitting beside them quietly reached out, placed a hand on their shoulder, and began to cry as well. Within moments, several others nearby were wiping *their* eyes, holding hands, and leaning into the spiritual moment.

It was as if one person's tears gave the entire row permission to feel what they had been holding inside. No words were exchanged, but the tears spoke *for* them. That moment of shared weeping during a sacred service became a moment of communal prayer, perhaps deeper than anything I could have preached or that we could have sung that day. And it could *never* have happened outside the context of this holiday and this prayer service. **But the medium was tears and emotions**, instead of words. I carry that image with me every Yom Kippur: the way one person's tears unlocked not just their *own* heart, but the hearts of *others*. This is the gift of emotions: they not only connect us to God, they connect us to one another.

And it is not only in *synagogue* that emotions are sacred. In daily life, too, they sanctify our struggles, our aspirations and what means most to us. Understanding and honoring our emotional lives is therefore incredibly important. *I can tell you that this past year I have personally been shedding more tears than I have in a long time.* For example, my wife and I took our first born, Ari, to West Point this summer to begin his college career. Indeed, we were so proud. But we were also sad, not for *him*, but for *us*, because we wouldn't have him *around* in the same way. He is our first to leave the house and our tears gave voice to the swell of emotions that were truly in our heart. And those tears were **prayerful**, even without words, for our expression of emotions drew us closer to life, to what was in our

souls, and therefore to Gd. And that can be true for any parent who weeps when their child goes off to college. Or a mourner whose tears at a funeral reveal the pain of their loss and the nature of their bond. Or alternatively the beaming smile of family members watching their child become Bnei Mitzvah or the pure love of the gaze of a bride and groom under the Huppah. Tears are holy; emotions sacred. And the meaningful expression of our emotions is part of the *fabric* of our spiritual lives and of our relationship with Gd.

Judaism expresses this value when it explicitly tells us not to hide the tears that we shed as we live our lives. It tells us they are holy. The Midrash even teaches that God *collects* our tears in a jar, storing them in heaven. God considers these expressions of our spiritual/emotional lives to be precious. **And so should we.** Every tear matters. None are wasted. Our emotions serve a sacred purpose.

And don't simply take *my* word for it or even those of the great ancient rabbis. Study after study in the *scientific* community says the very same thing in a different language. In 2018 Dr. Mehdi Akbari authored a study for the National Institute of Health that concluded that quote, "Spiritual life deepens when emotions are expressed and managed—*unexpressed* feelings may block the path to meaning and flourishing". Dr. Patty Van Cappellen further wrote in a study published by the NIH that (quote) "Research shows that emotions like awe, gratitude, and compassion broaden perception, foster humility, and create feelings of connection beyond the self." Therefore, "Expressing and cultivating these emotions is central to spiritual life, deepening a sense of sacredness and transcendence." (end quote) Thus, modern scientific research *also* demonstrates that spiritual depth is found in expressing, contextualizing and honoring emotions, which in turn bridges the individual to transcendence and deeper connection with the community around us.

And *as* a *community* this year, perhaps more than most, we *certainly* know tears and the expression of deep emotion and how they connect

us to our people and our traditions. I know that whether it be *actual* tears, or emotions that we carry inside, I feel that in the past two years our community has been presented with more situations in which to be moved to tears than during any other time in my life. Tears for the rise of antisemitism, for the anxiety of being Jewish in a world that sometimes feels hostile. Tears for war and violence that scar not only Israel but so many corners of the globe. Tears for disunity, misunderstanding, incivility and hatred that divide neighbors and nations. Along with tears for those struggling with typical life challenges: illness, financial hardship, and broken relationships, as well as tears for our own loneliness, fear, or regret.

I read about a mother in Israel who once described how she wept each night while her son was serving in the army. She **prayed with tears** because she did not know what else to do. When her son returned safely, thank Gd, she said: “My tears were *not* wasted. They *were* my prayers. And even if he hadn’t come back, those tears kept me connected to him and to God.”

And there was an article during the pandemic that I still remember, which related that a physician confessed that after months of holding it together, one day she sat in her car after a shift and just wept, uncontrollably. She tried to stop herself but could not. Afterwards, she expressed *surprise* that her tears did not *diminish* her strength or push her further into distress. Rather, they *renewed* her strength and gave her release. They allowed her to return the next day, able to keep caring. She said that her ability to cry was like “a prayer answered”.

And we must also remember: not all tears are tears of sorrow. Some are tears of relief and of course joy. I remember my own wedding. My wife wept openly at each significant moment (and I would like to believe they were tears of joy and not dread): seeing me for the first time in a week when we signed the *ketubah*, standing under the *Huppah*, and dancing with her father at the reception. These are the

kinds of tears that sustain us. They mark our greatest moments as sacred and saturated with meaning.

While such tears may be signs of vulnerability they are *not* signs of weakness. They, and our other strong emotions, are signs of life. They mean we still feel, still care, still hope. Tears and other strong emotions are the signposts and northstar pointing out to us what matters most to us in life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that the true task of religion is to “*teach us how to cry*”. Because if we can still cry—at injustice, at suffering, at beauty—then we can still be *moved*. And if we can be moved, then we can be changed. And that is a perfect High Holiday message!

My friends, on this Yom Kippur, let us not be ashamed of our tears, not try to hold them back. Let them fall if that is what you feel. And so too with love and gratitude and our other critical emotions. Let them flow: squeeze the hands of your friends and your family around you, give that hug. Let these emotions carry your prayers here in our Sanctuary when your words cannot. Let our tears and our emotions connect us to our ancestors who wept and celebrated before us. To our families who weep and celebrate *with* us. To our communities who hold us during each emotional moment. And to God, who promises *never* to close the gates of tears and to always honor our emotions when we offer them. May the tears we shed today and throughout the year soften our hearts, cleanse our souls, and carry our prayers to heaven. And may Gd, who hears the sound of our tears, and the emotions in our hearts inscribe us all for a year of compassion, goodness, renewal and peace. And let us say, Amen.