

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/14/18

Miketz 2018

I thought of this week's Torah portion, Miketz, as I listened to George W. Bush give his amazing, touching, and truly powerful eulogy for his father, our 41st president. It was a eulogy filled with humor and warmth, and above all profound respect. And at the very end of his eulogy, "W" broke into tears. They did not seem scripted to me. They were real, and they were very moving, especially coming from a former president of the United States. I suspect no candidate, male or female running for office, can cry in public and expect to win. But after the fact, tears can show character, humanity, sensitivity and indeed even strength. I thought it was among W's finest moments.

In this week's Torah portion, a man's tears play a central role as well. Joseph struggles with his tears, fighting them back, as he encounters his brothers again after so many years. Facing famine at home, Joseph's brothers have to come to Egypt. Unbeknownst to them, however, they must appeal to the very man they nearly murdered some years earlier. The brothers appear before Joseph, and although they don't know him, he recognizes them immediately. He is not, however, in a forgiving frame of mind. He needs to be strong, to look large and in charge. He makes them squirm. As the text tells us: "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them."

This isn't all that surprising response given the pain and suffering his brothers had inflicted upon him. But then his humanity comes through as he overhears his brothers speak about how they had treated him. The Torah says "They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. He turned away from them and wept." He's not ready to go public with his true emotions. But, we the reader empathize with, and respect him more for his tears. He's not weaker because he cries; his tears testify to his strength of character.

The second time Joseph sheds tears is when he finally meets up again with his full brother, Benjamin. But again, he does not cry in public. He does not want to show that to them. He does not want to seem weak. The Torah says he was overcome with emotion, but he goes into another room before he bursts into tears. Why is he crying? Is it for the years that he and his brother have lost? Is it because he misses his father? Is he crying because he felt abandoned by them, or is he crying because he realizes that he could have done things differently himself? He could have told his family he was alive and well, but he did not. Is he crying for the missed opportunities? It's complex, and the tears show this complexity of emotion more than any words ever could.

Joseph's transformation is complete in next week's portion when he finally reveals himself to his brothers and cries before them, and with them. At that moment, "his sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear...He embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them." Only then, when his true emotions are transparent, does full reconciliation and healing take place.

You cannot read this passage and not be moved by Joseph's tears. We don't read these passages and, as adult men and women say, "What a Wuss! What a weakling!" No, he is in fact the consummate leader. And yet he shows his strength by defying the typical script handed to men. Men need to be tough. Men need to suffer in secret. Men need to remain stoic and in control. Why does Joseph hide his tears until

he can do so no longer? Because he is afraid of being judged as weak. Real men hide their emotions. It's a script that is written for us and handed down from generation to generation. We need to look confident even when we are insecure. We need to pretend to feel strong even when we are weak. We need to tough it out, even when we are hurting.

But it seems to me that the Joseph story is here to teach us just the opposite. I cannot speak categorically for the emotional life of women, but the same may apply to women as well. I do believe that many women also feel the need to have a tough public persona. No one wants to seem weak. But as I read and reflect on these passages; as I see Joseph's strength celebrated in his show of emotion, I ask myself, and all of you, "Are you brave enough and strong enough to be vulnerable, to cry even if it makes you look weak?" Are we secure enough in our own leadership and strength of character to teach our kids that it's OK to show their true emotions? Are we willing to understand that genuine strength of spirit comes from living and showing the full spectrum of emotion? Are we willing to rewrite the script of gender norms and acknowledge that men and women can be both strong and emotionally true at the same time?

These are deep and foundational questions we need to ask ourselves if we want to be truly present, real and spiritually alive. Your emotions make you human and help you to see the humanity in others. The more sensitive we are to our own emotions the more likely we are to be sensitive to the emotions of others. That's what it means to have a giving soul, to live a life of compassion, and to be the model of leadership that your children and grandchildren, our next generation truly deserve.