

THE EMOTIONS OF TISHA B'AV



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - TISHA B'AV
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Barbara Cain, MSW, authored a wonderful children's book called *Double-Dip Feelings*. The book describes common situations where a child may feel two contrasting feelings at the same time in order to help children understand the concept of mixed feelings. One example is the arrival of a new brother or sister, which could simultaneously invoke both happiness and sadness for a young child. Nostalgia, where we miss the good times we had in the past, is another common example of a mixture of happiness and sadness. Emotional theorists Gregory Jones and Maryanne Martin refer to this concept as the conjunctive theory of emotion, meaning that basic, even "opposite," emotions can be experienced in parallel.

Upon hearing that G-d took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, Yitro rejoiced – "Vayichad Yitro" (Shemot 18:9). Rashi comments that while the simple meaning of the word "Vayichad" means rejoice, the midrashic reading suggests it emanates from the word "chad," meaning prickly. The intent of the verse is to say that Yitro was aggrieved over the destruction of Egypt. If one combines the simple and midrashic meanings together, what emerges is Yitro's simultaneous, double-dip feelings of happiness and sadness at the news of the Bnei Yisrael's victory over Egypt.

In an essay entitled "Theory of Emotions" (Out of the Whirlwind pp. 179-214), Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik argues that Judaism endorses a conjunctive approach to emotions and develops a concept he calls the antithetic experience awareness. This means that the "whole range of the emotional table is present in each emotional experience" and that "each emotional experience is provided with an implicit reference to its opposite." For example, while one's primary, center-directed, emotion during a wedding is happiness; in the periphery of that happiness is also an element of sadness, which serves to enhance the feeling of happiness. Rabbi Soloveitchik contends that the "drive for matrimonial companionship is, among

many other factors, enhanced also by the human experience of our tragic destiny, which ends in death.” Meaning that part of the impetus for marriage, companionship and procreation is the “desire for perpetuation of our own finite existence.” This is in consonance with the Gemara in Berachot (30b-31a), which elucidates the concept from Tehillim to “rejoice with trembling” with two examples of rabbis who tempered the joy at a wedding by breaking an expensive glass and by singing “Woe to us, for we are to die.”

Using this paradigm, Rabbi Soloveitchik advances another example of conflicting emotions in the antithetic experience awareness, specifically dealing in the realm of avelut, mourning. The grief of mourning “contains its own proper negation - solace and hope. Avelut in Halakhah is interwoven with nehamah, consolation. They are inseparable. The latter is not a frame of mind which displaces grief; there is an interpenetration of grief and solace, of forlornness and hope, of mourning and faith.”

While Rabbi Soloveitchik was referring to personal mourning, the same is true of the communal mourning on Tisha B’Av. Tisha B’Av is a day where sadness is our primary, center-directed emotion. We spend the day fasting, reciting Kinnot, and reflecting on destruction. But sadness should never be allowed to completely color our emotional existence, even on Tisha B’Av. In the periphery there is hope, comfort, and even happiness. The verse in Eicha (4:11) states that God poured out His anger and kindled a fire in Zion that destroyed its foundations. There are few verses as graphic and heart-wrenching in their description of destruction. Yet, the Midrash hears this verse of sadness and sprinkles in some happiness. After all, Hashem’s poured out his wrath on “sticks and stones,” on Zion and its foundations, and not on the Jewish people.

We all have many experiences and memories that invoke various emotions. Emotions are more meaningful when they conflict, double-dip, and join together to color our lives in a deeper fashion. As we prepare for Tisha B’Av, may we merit successfully integrating joy, sadness, and all our emotions into our religious experience.

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