

"I am Joseph." *Ani Yosef*. 2 words that change everything. 2 words that upend 20 years of hiding, of haunted memory. 2 words that bridge the impassable chasm between brothers. *Ani Yosef*. I can't do this anymore— it's time for you to know who I am and for me to see you anew. Let's begin again. No more games. No more manipulation. No more harm to one another. Joseph, the Viceroy of Egypt, the 2nd in command, the man with all the power who is threatening to make Benjamin his slave— it all comes to a halt. *Ani Yosef, achichem*. I am Joseph, your brother. Yes. Your brother.

How did we get here? To this dramatic climax of the longest single story in the Torah. How is it that Joseph, a man hardened by one life experience after the next: the death of his mother in his childhood, the violence of his brothers, the years in prison, the dislocation from everything familiar— how does this hardened man soften his heart?

The short answer: follow the tears. Joseph cries 8 times in the Torah. To no one's surprise, it's what I love about him most. Joseph, the chronic crier. The willing weeper. The serial sobber. Yes, I spent way too much time looking up alliterative synonyms.

But, I'm grateful for his tears. Grateful for how they changed him. As he wiped away the tears each time, his heart, a little softer. His vision, a little clearer.

You can't cry this many times in the Torah without inspiring a great deal of commentary and even more sermons on the topic. Much of what is written focuses on the progression of his tears— particularly, the 3-part crescendo leading up to Joseph revealing his true identity to his brothers.

The first account of Joseph's tears occurs midway through his first interaction with his estranged brothers. Joseph has all the power in the scene. He recognizes them, but they have no clue who he truly is. All they see is the powerful Egyptian accusing them of being spies, when in fact, they've simply come to Egypt to procure food to bring back to their father's house. Joseph, taking full advantage of this one-sided familiarity, demands that they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, back to Egypt to prove to him that they're not spies.

This, of course, is the worst case scenario for the brothers, who know how their father dotes on Benjamin and favors him, like he once did with Joseph. Faced with this devastating command, the brothers say to each other in Hebrew, in the language they assumed the Viceroy of Egypt

would surely not understand, “we are being punished on account of our brother and the ways we mistreated him, the harm we inflicted on him. Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

But Joseph fully understood. He understood, after two decades of wondering how his brothers remembered that pivotal trauma of his life, that in fact they carried some measure of guilt for their actions. *Va'yisov mei'aleihem v'yaivk*. He turned away from them and wept.

Joseph's hardened heart cracks open for the first time. He begins to see his brothers in a different light. He begins to form a new narrative for these familiar strangers standing before him. Perhaps they aren't the same men they once were. Perhaps they've changed. Joseph weeps, in the words of Rashi, because he heard— for the first time ever— that they regretted what they did to him.

But it's only the beginning— the process of healing takes time.

The second time Joseph cries is when he sees Benjamin. I imagine his tears are twofold. He is grateful that his brothers followed through with his command, for surely there was no guarantee that they would do as he instructed. The tenuous trust between brothers is slowly building. But moreso, Joseph weeps at the sight of his precious younger brother— the only sibling with whom he shared a common mother; the only sibling who did not participate in the heinous crime at the pit so many years ago. Joseph sees Benjamin, blesses him, and hurries out of the room. For he was overcome with emotion toward his brother and he wanted to cry.

וַיָּבֵא הַחֲדָרָה וַיִּבְרַךְ שָׁמָּה:

He went into a private room and wept there.

The third scene follows Judah's dramatic speech to Joseph, refusing to allow Benjamin to remain in Egypt. Judah cannot bear the thought of the fatal grief this would inflict on his elderly father. He tells Joseph that if one brother must remain in Egypt as a slave, it must be him and not Benjamin.

There it is: the final piece of the puzzle. Joseph sees in Judah a changed man. Able, at last, to stand up for his brother. Able, at last, to realize what irreparable harm he had caused his father. Able, at last, to empathize with Jacob, and resolve now to protect him from yet another heartbreaking loss.

Joseph could no longer control himself, and he sobbed. The wailing so loud that all the inhabitants of the city could hear it. *Ani Yosef*. The moment has arrived. Joseph reveals his true identity, and in a stunning speech forgives his brothers and orchestrates the full reunion of this estranged family.

This is the classic and compelling presentation of the three acts of Joseph and his tears. The crescendo towards forgiveness.

But, I want to suggest that it's an incomplete presentation. It leaves out a crucial element of Joseph's healing, of what makes it possible for Joseph to utter those two fateful words.

Let's revisit the second act— Joseph's reunion with Benjamin, which arguably is the outlier of the three scenes we discussed. Unlike the brothers' confession of guilt in the first scene and Judah's impassioned speech in the third, there is no conversation in the reunion with Benjamin. Joseph sees his brother, blesses him, and weeps.

Enter the [midrash](#) (Sotah 36b), which weaves into the seams of this moment a remarkably moving dialogue.

Upon seeing Benjamin, Joseph asked him, "Do you have a brother of the same mother as yourself?"

Benjamin replied, "I had a brother but I know not where he is."

Already the language, the tone is different. The brothers repeatedly say to Joseph that they have one brother who is no more, *v'ha'echad eineinu*. But Benjamin says something different. I had a brother, but I don't know where he is. **אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ הֵיכֵן הוּא**

He isn't erased. He isn't gone. He's somewhere— I just don't know where or what it would mean to find him.

"Do you have sons?" Joseph asked.

"I have ten."

"And what are their names?"

"Bela, Becher, and he named all 10" (Gen. 46:21).

Joseph then inquired, "What do these names mean?"

And Benjamin replied, "They are all for my brother and the troubles that have befallen him."

Bela (בלע) because he was swallowed up (נבלע) among the nations
 Becher (בכר) because he was the firstborn (בכור) of my mother
 Ashbe'el (אשבאל) because God sent him into captivity (שָׁבַא אֵל)
 Ard (ארד) because he went down (ירד) among the nations
 Gera (גרא) because he had to live (גר) in a foreign country
 Na'aman (נעמן) because he was exceedingly pleasant (נעים)
 Echi (אחי) and Rosh (ראש) because he was my brother (אח) and my superior (ראש) Muppim
 (מופּים) because he learned from the mouth (מפי) of my father
 And Huppim (חופים) because he did not witness my marriage (חופה), and I did not witness his.

When Joseph heard all of this, he was overcome with emotion.

For 20 years, Joseph is haunted by the fear that he's been forgotten. Lost to a cruel narrative; banished to the outskirts of memory. Was I even missed? Was I ever loved?

Benjamin looks him in the eye and says, I carry my brother everywhere I go. I named all 10 of my children after him. Names, to keep his memory persistent. Names, to affirm that I won't forget, that the world won't forget who he was, what he went through, how cherished he is to me. To name is to bring into the world what otherwise might be lost. I tell his story to everyone I meet. I've never stopped missing him. I've never stopped loving him.

When Joseph heard all of this, he was overcome with emotion.

It's both the totalizing force of Benjamin's response: all 10 sons, AND the names themselves—what they signify. I see in these 10 names 4 distinct messages that, in this extraordinary moment, Joseph learns were central to Benjamin's memory of him.

Bela and Ard, because he was swallowed up and went down among the nations. Gera, he had to live in a foreign country. Ashbe'el, he was sent into captivity. These names acknowledge the central trauma of Joseph's life. These names are Benjamin's pledge to tell the full story of what Joseph experienced— a promise to not let his suffering be forgotten. These names are a cautionary tale for future generations— let me tell you what happened to my brother so we can do everything in our power to ensure it doesn't happen to yours.

Becher and Rosh, he was the firstborn, the head of our family. Muppim, he learned from the mouth of my father. Na'aman, he was exceedingly pleasant. These are the spurned elements of Joseph's character— that which made him the object of scorn by his brothers. But Benjamin

casts these traits in a different light. I can celebrate who you were within our family, what made you different, misunderstood. I can tell your story differently from how the others might tell it.

Huppim, he did not stand under my chuppah to witness my marriage, and I didn't stand under his. This name is a testament to the intensity of his grief, the gravity of his loss. Joseph's disappearance wasn't a one-time loss, it's a lifetime of losses. It's being robbed of a shared future with someone and all the moments you'll never share.

And finally, Echi, because he was my brother, achi. To truly be brothers: it's what Joseph wanted but never had; it's what the brothers were never able to be. Benjamin affirms. He will always be my brother.

When Joseph heard all of this, he was overcome with emotion.

10 names and all the worlds of meaning, of missing, of memory they contain. The power of these names intensifies when we consider what Joseph named his firstborn.

וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה

Joseph named him Menasheh, meaning, "God has made me forget all my hardship and my parental home." Menasheh, the name that celebrates Joseph's forgetting both his pain and his family of origin, is countered by Benjamin's refusal to forget Joseph's pain and where he comes from. I will hold what you cannot until perhaps someday you can hold it anew.

Now, I believe, we can understand how it was possible for Joseph to heal. Yes, he needed to hear that his brothers regretted the past and would act differently in the present. He needed to see their growth. But, he needed more than that. Joseph needed Benjamin's words, his love. I missed you. I thought about you all the time. I'm always looking. I carry you everywhere I go.

I wonder who, in your life, comes to mind as I share these words this morning. I wonder who you'd want to say these words to, hear these words from. Will you tell me about them? Will you tell someone about them? Perhaps it's an estranged friend, the relationship ruptured from harm or neglect. Or a relative, once so close but now painfully distant. Or a loved one, no longer living but present within you always.

In our story, Joseph found healing in Benjamin's words. He discovered that reconciliation was still possible. We don't always yearn for this— some relationships must remain where they are. But when we do yearn for healing, to forgive and be forgiven, when all we want is for our loved

ones to know that they are missed, loved, remembered, Benjamin's words offer us a vision of what's possible. Of what you might say if and when you can. And then, God willing, the tears will flow and our hearts will begin to mend.