

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, it is a moment of great emotion. Here are the verses that describe what happened and the sobbing that ensues (Gen. 45:1-3a):

**וְלֹא יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהַתְּאַפֵּק לְלִלְגָּנְבִּים עַלְיוֹ וַיַּקְרָא הַזָּקִיאוֹ בֶּן אִישׁ  
 גָּמְלֵלִי וְלֹא עָמַד אִישׁ אֶתְנוֹ בְּהַתְּזֵעַ יוֹסֵף אֶל אֲחֵיּוֹ. וַיַּקְרַן אֶת קְלֹן  
 בְּכָבֵד וַיִּשְׁמַע מִצְרִים וַיִּשְׁמַע בֵּית פְּרָעָה. וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֲחֵיּוֹ אָנֹנוֹ  
 יוֹסֵף הַעֲזָד אָבִי חִי ...**

**Joseph could no longer restrain himself in the presence of all who were stationed around him; he called out: Have everyone leave me! So no one stood [in attendance upon] him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He put forth his voice in weeping: the Egyptians heard, and Pharaoh's household heard. Then Joseph said to his brothers: I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?**

It is often just one thing that causes the emotional dam to burst. We know this in ourselves or by witnessing it in others. But often the ensuing torrent of emotion is not made up of just one thing, **it is a confluence of many tributaries**. When Joseph cried, what was he crying about?

**1. Identity.** Joseph has been hiding his identity from his brothers since their very first encounter. But he has also been hiding his identity from himself. He has a new name, a new language, a new family, a new adoptive father. Once he was elevated to power, he was no longer burdened by his past identity. That is, until his brothers visited.

**2. The Brothers.** Seeing the brothers and overhearing what they said on their first visit already triggered his sobs. But at right now he must be wondering, **Can I trust them? They are conciliatory and deferential. Honest even. But why is it that I suddenly feel as if I am 17 again? I am one of them, but I am also not one of them.** In a moment like this, even the most confident and self-reliant individual might be excused for regressing to his earlier role in the family system.

**3. The Memory of Cruelty and its Aftermath.** Considering that the brothers beat him, stripped him, threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, he would have had quite a memory of trauma. Add to that the Potiphar

episode, humiliation, jail, and betrayal by the wine-steward, and it is a lot of emotional freight to carry. As he sobbed, those two horrible years must have flashed in his mind.

**4. Jacob.** Judah uses combinations of **אֲבָ-father** no less than 14 times<sup>1</sup> in his 218-word speech to Joseph. We are located in an emotional minefield in which each mention of **אֲבָ-father** can detonate a torrent of tears. What would he have been thinking when he heard **father**? His father loved him yet didn't look for him. His father favored him yet sent him right into the lion's den. Was he that blind to their enmity?

**5. Benjamin.** This is either the first time in about 20 years - or the very first time - that Joseph sees Benjamin. Reunion of long-lost or estranged siblings is a tremendous part of the modern Jewish experience and not hard to imagine. Almost every family has a story of two siblings living apart for decades because of immigration or the war.<sup>2</sup> He has already cried for Benjamin on this round, but the emotion is still there in the big cry.

**6. The Divine Plan.** By this point, Joseph has had a long time to reflect on his life. He realizes that he is not only playing a huge role in the administration of a world power during a significant natural catastrophe, but that he is instrumental in the plan that God has ordained for the family of Israel. On several occasions he talks about God having sent him to Egypt and God having ordained all the events. We watch the story unfold with an eye on how Joseph has transitioned from being an arrogant, narcissistic

brat to a humble, mature leader, who knows that he is part of something larger than himself. That is overwhelming.

**7. Rachel.** With Benjamin present, Joseph's thoughts would naturally have turned to their mother, who has been dead for some time, that is, Benjamin's entire life.<sup>3</sup> The Torah never explores this part of the story for reasons that seem obvious from a literary perspective: it would take too much emotional focus away from the central drama of the brothers and add many chapters of text.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Judah's speech drops two hints that she is still a presence in the emotional life of the story.<sup>5</sup> She is there.

**AND NO MAN STOOD WITH HIM WHEN JOSEPH MADE HIMSELF KNOWN TO HIS BROTHERS, AND HE WEPT ALOUD AND THE EGYPTIANS HEARD...**



<sup>1</sup> אֲבָ-אָבִי; אֲבָ-אָבִי; אֲבָ-אָבִי; אֲבָ-אָבִי

<sup>2</sup> My grandfather, Saul Keeb, had a brother Avrum Kobulnik, who emigrated to Argentina from Pinsk. His first visit to Montreal was in 1977 for a wedding. They had not seen each other for close to 50 years. I still remember the tears.

<sup>3</sup> If Benjamin had been born after the sale of Joseph, this would be the first time he learned that his mother was dead. If Benjamin was born before the sale of Joseph, the reunion with Benjamin would have given them an opportunity to grieve together for her.

<sup>4</sup> Some classic TV shows exploit the trope of the deceased mother. **Andy Griffith, My Three Sons, The Courtship of Eddie's Father.** In all of these, the mother has died, enabling the show to unfold with less complexity. **One Day at a Time**, inverts that model with the trope of the absent (or divorced) father. **The Partridge Family, The Doris Day Show and Good Times** are other examples.

<sup>5</sup> For example: **וַיַּזְהֵר הָאָלֵן (Benjamin) is left of his mother** (44:20) and, **אֶתְם דְּעַתֶּם כִּי שְׁנָים יְלָדָה לִי**

**8. Homeland.** Jacob specifically instructs the brothers to bring gifts that are emblems of the land.<sup>6</sup> Home and exile are grand themes in the Torah. Joseph was born in Aram but spent his formative years in Canaan. By now Joseph has lived more of his life outside the land than in it. Home is where your story begins. And home is what you long for when you are the ultimate outsider. He is crying for home.

**9. Guilt.** Joseph pays an emotional price for the way he has behaved so far with his brothers. He has been unusually cruel to them. While this may be satisfying to him in the short run, he has been overly capricious, and he knows it. Add to this the question that almost everyone raises when reading this story: why didn't he try to reach out to his father once he had been installed as Pharaoh's vizier? Just as it was well within Jacob's power to search for Joseph, it was well within Joseph's power to reach out to Jacob. But he didn't. And he caused his father a lot of pain. There is plenty for him to cry about here, and we have only scratched the surface.

**But what triggered the emotional outpouring?** Here are two possibilities: **1. When Heard His Father's Words.** When Judah pleads for Benjamin and proposes to substitute himself as a slave in his stead, he quotes his father verbatim:

ויאמר עבדך אביכם אליעזר אַתָּה יְדַעַּת כִּי שְׁנָנִים יְלִדָּה לִי אֲשֶׁר. וְנִצְאָה  
הַאֲחָד מִאֶתְּנָא וְאָמַר אֲךָ שְׁרֵךְ טְרֵךְ וְלֹא רְאִיתִיו עַד הַהִנֵּה. וְלִקְרַבְתָּם גַּם אֶת  
זֹה מִעֵם פָּנֵינוּ וְקָרְבָּה אַסְוֹן וְהַרְזַבָּם אֶת שִׁיבְתֵּינוּ בְּרַעַת שָׁאָלָה.

*Now your servant, my father, said to us: You yourselves know that my wife bore two (sons) to me. One went away from me; I said: For sure he is torn, torn-to-pieces! And I have not seen him again thus far. Now should you take away this one as well from before my face, should harm befall him, you will bring down my gray hair in ill-fortune to Sheol! (Gen. 44:27-29)*

**This is the first time he hears his father's words directly!** Granted, this is through Judah, and Judah is slightly altering what Jacob actually said, but as far as Joseph is concerned, **this is the first time he hears what his father said and thought all those years ago when he disappeared! That he had been torn to shreds by a wild animal!** So that explains why Jacob never looked for him. When Jacob then says, **I have not seen him thus far** Joseph gets a glimpse into his father's longing. Like every bereaved parent in human history, Jacob only wants to see his son again. This realization could be the thing that caused the emotional dam to burst in Joseph.

**REMEMBERING RAN GVILI.  
THE LAST HOSTAGE.  
MAY HIS BODY BE RETURNED.**

**אֲשֶׁר-You yourselves know that my wife bore two to me**  
(Judah quoting Jacob's remarks to Joseph) (44:27).

**אִם כֵּן אָפָא זָהָת עֲשֵׂנוּ קָרוֹן מִזְמְרַת הָאָרֶץ בְּכָלֵיכֶם וְהַזְוִיְדוּ לְאַישׁ**  
**מִנְחָה מְעֵט אָרֵי וְנַעַט דְּבַשׂ נְכָאת וְלִטְבָנִים וְשְׁקָדִים**  
**If it must be so, then, do this: take some of the produce of the land in your vessels and bring them down to the man as a gift: a little balsam, a little honey, balm and ladanum, pistachio nuts and almonds.**

**2. Seeing the Brothers in Torn Clothing.** When Joseph's officers "discover" the silver goblet in Benjamin's sack, the brothers immediately **tear their garments.** (44:12-14)

וַיַּחֲפַשׁ בְּגָדוֹל הַחֶל וּבְקָטָן כֹּלה וַיַּגְּזַע הַאֲבִיעַ בְּאַמְתָּחָת בְּגִינְעָן. נִיקְרָא  
שְׁמַלְמָמָם וְעַמְלָס אִישׁ עַל חָמָרוֹ וַיַּשְׁבַּו כְּעִירָה. וַיָּבֹא הַוְדָה וְאַחֲיוּ בִּיהְהָה  
יְוֹסֵף וְהוּא עֲזָדוֹ שֵׁם וַיַּפְלוּ לִפְנֵיו אַרְצָה.

*And then he searched: with the eldest he started and with the youngest he finished—and the goblet was found in Benjamin's pack! They rent their clothes, and each one loaded up his donkey, and they returned to the city. Judah and his brothers came into Joseph's house—he was still there—and flung themselves down before him to the earth.*

They enter Joseph's house **while their clothes were still torn.**<sup>7</sup> The tearing of clothes is a big motif in the story.

37:23	At the pit near Dothan.	The brothers tear Joseph's tunic. <sup>8</sup>
37:29	Upon seeing the empty pit.	Reuben tears his clothes.
37:34	Upon seeing the bloodied (torn?) tunic.	Jacob tears his clothing, declares Joseph to be <i>ripped, torn to pieces.</i>
44:13	Upon Benjamin's arrest.	The brothers tear their clothing.

*Seeing the brothers in tattered clothing is what triggers Joseph's emotional outpouring. It is the inversion of the burst of hate that took place at the beginning of the story, when Joseph was surrounded by his fully clothed brothers and stripped of his clothing, and then thrown either naked or in tatters. Here they surround him again, only this time Joseph is in regal clothing, and the brothers are in tatters.* It's not what Judah says, as much as what Joseph sees that causes the emotional dam to burst. To this day, when mourners tear their garments, it is a moment of intense emotion. Unlike other moments in the mourning process, *keriah*, the tearing, is this precise moment that defines you as a mourner. Joseph sees the torn garments. He understands that they are preemptively mourning for their father - who will most certainly die if he learns that he has lost two sons - and also for their little brother. And also, quite possibly, for themselves. It is painful to see your brothers go from a proud fraternity to a fractured craven kinship. This could have been what broke the dam. Friends, maybe there were other things that did it. Who really knows? But in thinking about the emotional complexity of this moment, we do get some insight into the inner life of Joseph, and perhaps also into ourselves.

**SHABBAT SHALOM!**

<sup>7</sup> Compare: they changed Joseph's clothes when they brought him before Pharaoh. Here they appear in tatters.

<sup>8</sup> The text does not explicitly say that they **tore** his tunic. Rather, it says: **וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתָנָתוֹ**—**they stripped Joseph of his tunic**, (Gen. 37:23). **Stripping** is a violent act, that would most likely include **tearing**. It's not in the text, but it certainly is in our imagination. The tearing of garments, practiced to this day, is the symbolic manifestation of grief.