Research for the Tear Jar

The Legend of the Tear Jar

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http://www.webhealing.com/articles/tearjar1.htm

In the dry climate of ancient Greece, water was prized above all. Giving up water from one's own body, when crying tears for the dead, was considered a sacrifice. They caught their precious tears in tiny pitchers or "tear jars" like the one shown here (life size). The tears became holy water and could be used to sprinkle on doorways to keep out evil, or to cool the brow of a sick child.

The tear jars were kept unpainted until the owner had experienced the death of a parent, sibling, child, or spouse. After that, the grieving person decorated the tear jar with intricate designs, and examples of these can still be seen throughout modern Greece.

This ancient custom symbolizes the transformation that takes place in people who have grieved deeply. They are not threatened by the grief of people in pain. They have been in the depths of pain themselves, and returned. Like the tear jar, they can now be with others who grieve and catch their tears.
Rabbi Elazar said: "From the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been closed, as it says, "And when I shout and plead, He shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). But even though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of tears are opened, as it says, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my appeal; do not disregard my tears" (Psalms 39:13). (Babylonian Talmud 32b)

Once there was a great drought, and the rabbi called all the people of the city to the synagogue. They prayed day and night, but still no rain fell. Then the rabbi declared a fast, and asked God to answer their prayers.

A voice came from heaven, saying, "God will send rain only if Rahamim, who always sits in the corner of the synagogue, prays for it."

The rabbi called the *shamash* [sexton] and told him to bring Rahamim to the synagogue.

"What do you want from him?" asked the astonished *shamash*.

"He must come up to the *bimah* (reader's platform) and pray for rain," answered the rabbi.

"But he's an ignoramus," protested the *shamash*.

"Call him," ordered the rabbi.

When the *shamash* brought Rahamim back to the synagogue, Rahamim asked the rabbi, "What do you want from me?"

"Go to the *bimah* and pray for rain," said the rabbi.

"But I do not know how to pray," said Rahamim. "There are so many others who know
more than I."

"Nevertheless," said the rabbi, "it is you who must pray."

The next day the rabbi called all the people together to pray. The synagogue was filled to bursting. All eyes were on the bimah, where everyone expected to see the rabbi leading them in prayer. How great was their amazement to see poor Rahamim standing up there before the Holy Ark.

Before he began the service, Rahamim said, "Please wait a few minutes. There is something I must get." He ran out of the synagogue and returned a few moments later, carrying a clay jar with two spouts. "Now I ask that you pray with all your heart," he told the congregation.

So they opened the Ark and the people poured out their hearts to heaven, wailing bitterly and beating their breasts. Then Rahamim lifted up his jar, first placing the one spout to his eye and then the other to his ear. Instantly there was a rumble of thunder and then the sky opened up, drenching the earth with rain.

The rabbi asked Rahamim, "Why did you bring that jar here? What did you do with it?"

"Rabbi, I'm only a poor man," Rahamim replied. "What I earn as a cobbler barely feeds my many children. Every day they cry for bread and I have none to give them. When I hear their cries my heart breaks, and I too cry. I collect my tears in this jar. I have asked my wife to bury the jar with me when I die. When you asked me to come here to pray, I looked into the jar and said, 'Master of the Universe, if you do not send rain, I will break this jar in front of all these people.' Then I listened in the other spout and heard a voice that said, 'Do not break it' and then it began to rain.

The rabbi said, "How true the words of our sages: 'The gates of tears are never closed.'"

This story seems to echo a legend/tradition based on the verse in Psalms 56:9 ("Place my tears in your waterskin"). According to this tradition, the tears shed by the Jewish people during the destruction of the Temple and during the sorrowful years of exile are gathered in a waterskin (or waterflask); when the waterskin will be filled, redemption will take place.
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