On Tearing Ribbons and Clothes

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I remember when my friend Jay died in December 1996. I traveled across the country for his funeral. Jay's coffin was lowered into the grave, *kaddish* was said, family and then friends were invited to put dirt on the coffin. I approached and the rabbi handed me – an athlete in the prime of my youth – a small spade with some dirt and explained that placing dirt in the grave is a way of "symbolically helping with the burial." I took the spade and meekly turned it over. A little dirt fell in.

A small car was waiting. I sat in the back right-hand seat; there were four of us, healthy young guys. We were quiet and the car idled while we waited for a line of cars to creep forward, away from the graves. I turned and looked through the rear-view window.

A few people milled around the tent where the family sat, while three men dressed in dark green uniforms casually shoveled earth into Jay's fresh, open grave. An impulse rose in me – one I remember to this day with regret, un-acted upon. I wanted to open the car door, walk over, and take a shovel, move the professionals aside, and do it all myself. I wanted Jay to be buried by people who knew and loved him, not people paid to do it.

Sitting the car, I realized I didn't want a symbol. I wanted the thing itself, not just a spade. I wanted to dig deep into the mound of earth, lift a full shovel, and strain to swing it over to the grave. I yearned to get out of the car, move the gravediggers aside and dirty my shoes, to breathe hard and sweat through my shirt. I wanted to dump earth onto his coffin and fill the space where he rests forever. That is what one does for a brother. That is what we do for those we love. But it was only a thought in my mind. The car crept forward, and the four of us drive away in silence across the winding streets of Northern Virginia.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "Harsh and bitter are the problems which religion comes to solve: ignorance, evil, malice, power, agony, despair. These problems cannot be solved through generalities, through philosophical symbols. Our problem is: Do we believe what we confess? Do we mean what we say? We do not suffer symbolically. We suffer literally, truly, deeply. Symbolic remedies are quackery. The will of God is either real or a delusion." Which brings me to something from this week's Torah portion that I want to talk with you about, though I confess it is tricky, and makes me a bit nervous to talk about with you.

In the Torah portion, Aaron's sons die, their bodies are removed from inside the holy area and then, in Chapter 10 verse 6, Moses says to Aaron and his two remaining sons, Elazar and Ithamar, "ראשכם אל תפרעו ובגדכם לא תפרומו" – the exact translation is not clear. The NJPS reads – "do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes." The OJPS reads – "Let not the hair of your heads go loose, neither rend your clothes." Jastrow lists the two verbs – tifrau and tifromu – as synonyms. Other scholars say they may descend from the same two letter root - peh reish – which has something to do with tearing, destroying, loosening or going wild or beyond boundaries.

From the first word – tifrau – Rashi, following rabbinic tradition, derives the prohibition of a person in mourning cutting one's hair during shloshim – the first 30 days following a burial. Robert Alter, in his translation, says "tifrau" means, "your heads you shall not dishevel" and I think he is pointing to the fact that Moshe is instructing his sons not about what they shouldn't do for the next 30 days, but rather about how not to react in *that very moment*. My sense is that the ancient mourning practice was probably something where, upon hearing devastating news, one bent over and ran one's hands through one's hair back and forth in an almost violent way saying, "no!!!" This practice surely left the hair disheveled. The disheveling of the hair paralleled the act of ripping one's clothing, which was

also a momentary reaction to death. Tifrau and tifromu – don't dishevel your hair or rip your clothing – these were not permitted to Aaron and his remaining sons, but they were two traditional responses to death. They were not ritualized practices as much as they were instinctual, guttural reactions to channel outward intense inner feelings.

Which brings me back to a tricky conversation about how, and what, we tear. I say "tricky" because I want to talk about the black ribbon with which we do kri'ah. I want to begin by acknowledging that at a technical level one can fulfill the mitzvah of tearing with a ribbon. At a deeper level, I think the use of a ribbon also has taken on great significance in our community. I was talking with someone earlier this week who said to me that when the ribbon was placed on her and she ripped it, it was an overwhelming feeling – that she had entered a club, the company of people who have a ribbon because they have lost someone close to them. Her ribbon is precious to her, a memory of her loved one, a memory of a time of grief and mourning.

At the same time, when you open up this week's Torah portion, what you read about is not a ribbon. It is one's clothes. In Genesis 37, when Jacob is told that Joseph is dead, he tears his clothes. In 2nd Samuel, when David finds out that Saul and Jonathan are dead, he tears his clothes. We both tear – a ribbon or clothes, but I wonder if the connection between our ribbon and the stories of our tradition is woven tightly enough together, or if a ribbon may be too much of a symbol to contain our suffering; if it is a symbolic spade rather than a shovel of dirt.

An interesting element of Jewish mourning practices is that they are meant to steer us towards tears. Rabbinic texts describe a hesped – a eulogy – as good if because of it, people cry more. The rabbis ask a devastating question: if a child, who is a minor and not obligated to mourn, has lost someone who, were she of age, she'd be obligated to mourn, does she perform kriah? They answer in Moed Katan, "makri'in lo mipnei agmat nefesh" – we tear the child's garment for the sake of grief, to focus us upon the loss this child suffered.

When do you have this conversation with a community? It is too hard to work through in the tender moments before a funeral, in the middle of it all, while one's loved one is yet unburied. How do you communicate respect for the black ribbon, real respect, and at the same time, raise the possibility that we should also consider tearing our clothes. Not expensive clothes – the rabbis said that one can exchange expensive clothes for plain ones so that people are not dissuaded from tearing their garments. But people of the ancient world did not have The Gap and department stores; they had just a few garments and when someone died, they tore one of those precious few. Surely we can let go of a shirt at the time of death to express the depth of our sorrow.

Disheveling the hair. Tearing the clothes. We mourned deeply, unapologetically, authentically, for those we lost. I want to finish not with a hope or plea that we necessarily move away from the ribbon – but that we wrestle with the question as to which way most deeply expresses our anguish and our connection with the Jewish tradition. Whether we tear a ribbon or a shirt, may we have the courage to mourn not symbolically, for symbols will not suffice, but truly. As Heschel taught, "We suffer literally, truly, deeply." May the customs we use to help us cope with our suffering be just as true and deep.