This is what the L-rd says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, Mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. Refusing to be comforted, Because her children are no more. This is what the L-rd says: Restrain your voice from weeping, And your eyes from tears, For your work will be rewarded, says the L-rd. They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future, declares the L-rd, Your children will return to their own Land.” (Yirmiyahu 31:14–16)

Tears and Teshuva

This beautiful prophecy of consolation is presented as a dialogue between G-d and Rachel. In response to the cries of Rachel (a voice weeping), G-d answers – “Restrain your voice from weeping,” and in response to “Because her children are no more,” G-d assures Rachel: “Your work will be rewarded... there is hope for your future.” The only source of consolation for Rachel is the assurance of survival and the return of her children to their Land.

But why does Yirmiyahu particularly depict Rachel as crying for her children at a time of exile to express the tearful longings of our national ancestors?

As we examine the verses carefully, we note numerous references to the story of Rachel’s son, Yosef, who was also exiled from his family and his homeland. Rachel refuses to be consoled for “her children (plural) who is (singular) no more,” which is reminiscent of the word מנחת (is no more), mentioned seven times in the Yosef narrative and referring consistently to Yosef and Binyamin, the children of Rachel.

Furthermore, the exact terminology of this prophecy resonates with Ya’akov’s response to the disappearance of Yosef: “Ya’akov rent his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned his son for a long time. His sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. He said, ‘I will go down to the grave mourning for my son’ (Bereishit 37:34–35).

Yirmiyahu intentionally weaves the loss of Yosef to his father with the loss of Yosef, the firstborn of Rachel, to his mother, both of whom may not be consoled! The Midrash connects these narratives and explains the refusal to be consoled: “One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living.” Ya’akov refused to be comforted because he had not yet given up hope that Yosef was still alive.

Yirmiyahu reminds us that just as the tears of Yosef’s father attested to his survival and ultimate reunion, so too, the tears of Yosef’s mother, refusing to be comforted, refusing to give up hope, will assure the return of Yosef’s descendants, the people of Israel.

Rachel’s tears remind us of Ya’akov’s tears of the past – a father’s loss over his beloved child, and direct us for the future. Rachel’s tears teach us never to be consoled, and never to give up hope for what is most precious to us. Rav Chanan Porat explains that Rachel’s tears are therefore described as a “פעולה – a creative and functional action, a constant, restless state for fathers and mothers seeking the return of their beloved children to their Land!

Just as Ya’akov was eventually reunited with Yosef, and Rachel’s children did return to Eretz Yisrael, we have returned too. However, our Father in Heaven is still crying (see Berachot 3a) for the loss of His children and banishment from His home, hopeful for return to the Beit HaMikdash. Yirmiyahu continues his prophecy, employing parallel terminology:

“I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself... return you me, and I shall be returned, for You are the L-rd my G-d... Surely after that, I was returned, I repented... I was ashamed, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth... Is Ephraim a darling son to Me? Is he a child that is dandled? For as often as I speak of him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him, I will surely have compassion upon him, said the L-rd” (Yirmiyahu 31:17-19).

Yirmiyahu teaches us that it is not enough to remember the cries of Rachel and Ya’akov, the merits of our patriarchs and matriarchs, their lack of consolation that will inspire and direct us to return to the Land. There is another return of children to parents – a repentance we must initiate... and only the two actions combined will assure the return to our Father’s Home.

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