

The Tear Jar

A Jewish Story from Syria

Retold by Jim Brulé

The drought lasted for a very long time: the grasses were dry, the earth was hard, the streams were empty, and the crops were dying. The community came to the rabbi. Their spokesman, Yitzhak, said, "Rabbi, you must help us. This drought seems endless. What can we do?" The rabbi replied, "We must all pray; each of us must pray. Go to your homes and pray with all your souls."

So, each person went to their home, and they prayed for hours. The next day, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. They went back to the rabbi and demanded something more powerful. The rabbi thought and considered and said, "Everyone must fast for a day and then pray for a day." Each person went home and fasted and prayed, and the sun beat down on them even more, with even more heat than before.

When the rain failed to come, they returned to the rabbi. "Rabbi, we're dying! We need water. What must we do?" The rabbi went into his office. They could hear him turning the pages of books, unrolling and rolling ancient scrolls. Finally, he emerged, saying, "We must have an even more powerful prayer. For this, we must gather as a community—one people in one place, fasting and praying together. And we must begin right away—at sundown!"

The word went out, and soon the synagogue was full. To be sure that everyone was present, the *shammash*—the caretaker of the synagogue— started counting people, and a frown crossed his face. He whispered to the rabbi, "We're missing someone."

The rabbi raised his voice to everyone and said, "Look around! Who is not here? Who are we missing? We need everyone here!"

After a pause and rumblings of confused voices, someone called out, "I know. It's Chava, the widow! She lives outside the town; nobody's seen her for such a long time."

Of course, the rabbi thought, filled with remorse. *The widow Chava*. The community had merely tolerated her merchant husband; his prices always seemed to rise when people had the greatest need, but he always had what was needed. At his urging, the community fed her through the first week of mourning, but then...everyone forgot. *How many years ago had that been?*

The rabbi immediately sent the *shammash* out to fetch her while the congregation waited. Every moment was agony as they waited and waited for the doors of the synagogue to open. Finally, in walked old Chava, carrying a jar. Her clothes were simple and worn, but clean. She walked up slowly to the rabbi, then turned to the community, surveying those present, each of whom lowered their eyes when they met. Finally, she spoke, her words spilling pain.

"You want me here? You want me here now? You want me to help you? After you abandoned me all these years? You want me to help you when you abandoned me after my husband died? You left me on my own. Now, you want me to help you get rain? For all those years, I did not feel your tears, only my own."

She held up the jar, showing it to everyone, "This is my jar of tears. These are all the tears I have cried—on my own. I collected them as my only true possessions. They are all I have of my husband, my losses, and my sorrows. Since your God will not bring you rain, perhaps I should smash this jar of tears on the floor, for that will be the only rain you get."

At that very moment, thunder was heard, and soon, rain began to fall in a great torrent. The people got up and cheered and danced in great relief. Amidst their rejoicing, singing, and dancing, no one saw Chava leave. They danced and rejoiced all night.

The next morning, when the people were leaving the synagogue, they saw a tree that had not been there the day before. Only the *shammash* knew that it was growing in the place where Chava had poured her tears out on the ground. There, in that spot, grew a pomegranate tree, whose fruit resembles tears. More tears than the year has days; as many tears as the Law has commandments.