

Tam's tears

A Jewish story

Key Ideas: prayer, humility, community, caring for others

It was coming to the end of the Day of Atonement. All the villagers were in the synagogue, hoping that God would answer their prayers on this special day. The rabbi was praying hard when to his surprise, he had a vision. God had responded. In the vision, God told the rabbi that if Tam would pray on behalf of the community, all prayers would be accepted on high.

The rabbi could not believe it! Tam was one of the poorest members of the congregation. He did not know how to read or how to recite the proper prayers. Why him? The vision disappeared and the rabbi looked out at his congregation. He raised his arms and whispered, 'Bring Tam to the bimah.'

The congregation whispered to one another: 'Bring Tam to the bimah? Why Tam? What is going on here?' Tam was as shocked to hear his name called as everyone else, especially during the most sacred service of the year. Two men appeared by his side and led him to the rabbi. The rabbi put his hands on Tam's shoulders and said: 'God has asked that you pray on behalf of our whole community. We await your prayer.'

'But, but ...' stammered Tam, 'everyone knows that I do not know the words of prayer and I cannot read them, so how can I do what you have asked?' 'Tam,' said the rabbi kindly, 'God has called upon you. Respond to that call in your own way - that is all God asks.' Tam looked at the rabbi and found strength. He asked the rabbi to wait and then rushed from the synagogue.

After a while Tam returned carrying a plain clay pitcher. He ascended the bimah, held out his pitcher and spoke in a quivering voice. 'Ruler of the universe, I am not wise and I do not know the words of most of the prayers. But when I pray to you, the words I choose come straight from my heart. At this holiest of moments, I have brought you the most precious gift I own. Here in this pitcher are the tears that I have shed when I sit at night, thinking of my hungry wife and children. I think of how much I love them and how much I cannot give them, and I weep for hours on end. All I can do is pray that no one else in this community will ever have the reason to cry as I do.'

The rabbi turned to Tam and said, 'Never have I heard a better prayer. It is because of you that God has accepted our prayers and it is you who should bless this community now as the Day of Atonement ends, not I.'

Tam could not believe the honour but with arms outstretched he began to bless the congregation, remembering a prayer his wife always said when important things happened in their lives.

'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, source of all life, for you have given us the gift of life, given us our health, and granted us the happiness of sharing this wonderful moment together. Amen.'

The community did not forget what Tam had done for them and they made sure that he and his family never wanted for anything ever again.