

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Va'etchanan) Shabbat Nachamu

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny*

I can still remember the feeling of the weight lifting off my shoulders. It was the summer of '86, and I had just returned my gear after four and a half years in the Israeli army. I will never forget the incredible, almost spiritual high that lifted my spirits as I realized that for the first time in years, I could do whatever I wanted, without that nagging worry deep inside that I might get a call in the middle of the night.

No more patrols or forced marches, guard duty or inspections, no missions to coordinate or briefings to prepare, and no tanks to service and make ready, nor men to cover or train. After four long years I could finally get back to just being me.

My parents were in Israel that summer, and we had planned an outing for the next day; picnic, rented car and all. In short, I could finally let my guard down.

I still recall the moment of walking into my parents' apartment in Jerusalem, with the smell of dinner cooking in the oven, and the promise of a real vacation ahead. And I remember sinking down into the easy chair in the living room as my father turned on the news, realizing I could finally, really relax. I figured all that pain and tension was finally behind me. It was a mistake I would never make again.

As soon as the news on such a night begins, you realize right away something is wrong. The newscasters take on a more serious tone, and the music seems somehow more dramatic.

There had been a terrible ambush in the Jordan valley, and two soldiers had been killed. I could feel my gut contract when the image of the map came on the screen; this was the area of operations my battalion had just taken over a couple of days earlier. But as my tour of duty was ending, there was no point to my learning the area and sitting in on the briefings, so I had gotten out a few days earlier than scheduled.

A Jordanian soldier had sneaked over the border and ambushed a jeep patrol, cutting down two of our boys, and the second patrol that arrived on the scene was pinned down as well, until the deputy company commander finally arrived on the scene and took out the enemy soldier.

So the next day, instead of a picnic, we drove to the cemetery for Ronen Reichel's funeral. He had been a sergeant in our unit, and I had said goodbye to him along with everyone else just two days earlier, never imagining I would be standing over his grave only forty-eight hours later.

As long as I live, I will never forget the image of his mother, screaming, throwing herself on his coffin, begging him not to go.

Are there any words to say to a person under such circumstances? I remember her dulled, lifeless stare, full of pain and misery, washing over me after the burial, and I remember averting my eyes, not knowing what to say. Even now, more than twenty years later, if I ran into Ronen's mother on the street, I still wouldn't know what to say. Are there any words with which one can comfort someone after such a loss?

Most often, when we mourn the losses in our lives, the pain of mourning is the recognition of lost opportunities. We understand only too well what we have lost, and we wonder whether we really appreciated what we had.

Did we tell them we loved them enough? Did we take the time to appreciate their smiles, and the particular things we loved about them? Did we learn from them, and did we spend time with them? And if indeed these lost opportunities, imagined or real as they may be, are what we mourn, can there ever be a comforting response to such loss?

This Shabbat, the Shabbat after *Tisha B'av*, the day we lost both of our Temples (*Batei Mikdash*) is traditionally called *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of consolation, when we are comforted after our terrible loss. Indeed, the prophetic portion (the *Haftarah*) we will read from Isaiah begins with the phrase: "*Nachamu, Nachamu, Ami...*" "*Be comforted, be comforted, my people...*", hence the name *Shabbat Nachamu*.

But how can one be comforted after such a terrible loss? Two thousand years ago, in the year seventy, we watched our cities burned to the ground, hundreds of thousands of our people butchered, and many hundreds of thousands more sold as slaves, mercilessly torn from the arms of their beloved families. All of which was merely the prelude to two thousand years of suffering: the crusades and inquisitions, pogroms and blood libels, and that final unspeakable horror, the Holocaust; all of these we mourn as well on *Tisha B'Av*, the ninth of Av. So how can a people, which have known such suffering, ever be comforted? What is the meaning of this *nechama*, this consolation?

It is no coincidence that the portion we always read on this Shabbat, *Shabbat Nachamu*, is the portion of *Vaetchanan*, which literally means "And I beseeched", referring to Moshe's heart-rending prayer beseeching of G-d to allow him, mistakes notwithstanding, to enter the land of Israel with the children of Israel.

It is hard to decide which is more painful: Moshe's pleading to be let into the land of his dreams, or G-d's refusal to acquiesce. But most interesting is Moshe's response to this refusal: the Torah seems to just change the topic!

After describing how he had pleaded before G-d to enter the land, and how G-d finally admonished him to cease speaking of this request, and instead to install Yehoshua (Joshua) to take his place, Moshe immediately begins to exhort the Jewish people not to forget the Torah they have been given, and then launches into a repetition of the ten commandments, preceded by one of the most important sections of the Torah: the first chapter of the *Shema*.

All of which leaves us with a number of questions. First of all, if this desperate plea of Moshe's is so critical to the final speech he is about to give the Jewish people as they prepare to enter the land, one wonders why it is not mentioned at the beginning of the

speech (which comprises most of the book of *Devarim* (Deuteronomy), the fifth book of the Torah). Why isn't this request offered at the beginning of Devarim (last week's portion)? Why wait till *Va'Etchanan*, this week's portion?

And if this week's portion's theme is all about consolation, why is there no consolation mentioned for Moshe, immediately after he is denied his life-long wish to join the Jewish people as they enter the land? And what does all this have to do with the Shema and the Ten Commandments?

Perhaps in order to understand this, we need to take a closer look at the concept of *nechama*, consolation, as it appears in the Torah.

The first instance is the birth of *Noach*, at the end of the first portion of the Torah, *Bereishit*. His father, *Lemech*, names him *Noach* because:

“Zeh Ye'nachameinu Mi'ma'aseinu...”

“This one will comfort is from the actions of our hands....”

In other words, in the period preceding the flood, human behavior had reached an all time low and violence filled the world. Lemech's hope was that Noach would somehow turn things around, leading the world and humanity back onto the path of ethics and righteousness.

Now, if this was indeed Lemech's hope, what then is the nature of this comfort? How will a more righteous society comfort the world after its evil ways? If anything, a re-discovery of what life was really supposed to be, would make everyone realize the lost opportunities they had wasted in living lives of violence and lust, causing them to *mourn* their mistakes, not be comforted in their newfound righteousness?

How will a redirection be a comfort of past mistakes, rather than simply a change of course to a new mode of behavior?

Interestingly, **Rashi** suggests that the way Noach will be a 'comfort' to his generation is not by leading them down the path of ethical excellence, but rather by inventing the plow! Jewish tradition credits Noach with the invention of the plow, and this somehow is the vehicle for Noach's ability to comfort the world! Why is plowing the field the comfort here? Why not Noach's ability to be a role model of righteousness, as suggested by the verse at the beginning of the portion of Noach?

Even more confusing is the fact that '*Nechama*' does not always mean comfort; sometimes, it seems to have a completely different connotation, as, for example, when G-d, in response to Moshe's entreaties, decides not to destroy the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden calf:

*“**Vayinachem** Hashem al ha'ra'ah asher diber la'asot le'amo.”*

*“And Hashem (G-d) **relented**, concerning the evil He had said He would visit upon His people.”* (Exodus (*Shemot*) 32)

In this instance, G-d is not comforting the Jewish people, (although it must certainly have been a comfort to them to know they would not be destroyed!) but rather, He changed his course of action. This meaning of the word '*Nechama*' can be found in various places, including G-d's relenting of having created man, thus hastening the coming of the flood in order to destroy the world and build it all over again, through Noach. (See Genesis (Bereishit) 6:6)

And yet, just as often, we find *nechama* used in its more traditional format, such as when Yitzchak, still mourning the loss of his beloved mother Sarah, is finally comforted after her loss when he marries Rivkah. (See Genesis (Bereishit) 24:67) As well, when Yaakov is not comforted after the loss of his beloved Joseph, whom he believes to be dead at the hands of a wild ox, it says ("Va'yema'en *lehitnecham*" at the end of the portion of *Vayeshev*).

What is the relationship between G-d changing His mind, and our being comforted? Perhaps the message of Shabbat Nachamu, is that there really is no difference; our ability to be comforted really depends on our decision, as it were, to 'change our minds', or, more accurately, to change our perspective.

In a world gone mad, where violence was the rule, and wanton destruction of life and property the norm, Noach bursts onto the scene with the message that life is not about destruction, but about planting and building. Ultimately, if we are created then we must have a purpose, and every time we tap into that meaning and that purpose, we give meaning to creation all over again. So Noach invents the plow, which is a vehicle for planting and growth, and belief in a future down the road. And this stands in direct contradiction to the wanton destruction all around him.

Noach had the potential to be a comfort to the world, because he offered the world, even in a world gone mad, a new perspective, and a different way of looking at the world.

And this as well is what the Torah means when it suggests that only after he marries Rivkah, is Yitzchak comforted from the loss of his mother. It cannot mean that the loss diminishes any sense of pain, but rather that now as a married man, ready to build a family and plant a seed that would ultimately grow to become the Jewish people, an orchard that would one day feed the world with the fruits of life, Yitzchak's life takes on a whole new direction, a renewed sense of purpose.

It was precisely this different way of looking at the world that Yaakov could not grasp, not realizing that Joseph was still alive. Indeed on his deathbed, Yaakov points out that he never dreamed he would see Joseph alive again, thus implying this different outlook was not even within the realm of possibility for him, and thus he could not be comforted.

This might serve to explain G-d's apparent change of heart after the sin of the Golden calf. It goes without saying that G-d (Hashem) does not change. (If G-d is unlimited, there cannot be something G-d isn't today that He will be tomorrow, nor something He is today that He wasn't yesterday.) So the Torah cannot mean that G-d 'changes His mind'! Rather, we change, and with our change, the entire world changes along with us.

It was not G-d that changed, rather, Moshe, in refusing to accept the view of a Jewish people's imminent destruction, instead sees the world through completely different lenses. And, by changing the way he viewed the world, Moshe changed the way we looked at the world as well, thus changing our destiny as a people forever.

All of which leads us back to our portion this week. Moshe begs G-d to enter the land; because that is the way he has looked at the world till now. But when G-d refuses to allow Moshe to enter the land, Moshe's response is to see the world in a completely different way. And that is actually Moshe's '*nechama*', or comfort. If Hashem tells Moshe he is not meant to enter the land, then there must be a purpose to that decision. Somehow, there is meaning to the fact that Moshe will be the role model whose students must learn to apply his lessons even when he is no longer present; long after he is gone.

Indeed, this may explain why, after telling Moshe he cannot enter the land, Hashem nonetheless acquiesces to Moshe's request to see the land, taking him up on the mountain of Nevo' to see the land. (*Devarim*(Deuteronomy) 3:27)

And so, Moshe's immediate response to this decision is to understand that he must pass on the essence of Judaism and Torah to the next generation of Jews whose job it will be to build a homeland where that message can flourish, without its being dependent on any one leader. Hence, Moshe immediately begins preparing the Jewish people to see Yehoshua (Joshua) as their new leader.

This explains why so much of the essence of Judaism is in this week's portion, including the Shema, and the Ten Commandments. Our greatest comfort after losing the *Beit HaMikdash* (the Temple) was to find the strength to see a world without our holiest place, and even without a homeland at all, as a world still filled with meaning.

It is only after *Tisha B'Av*, after we have mourned our loss and appreciated what opportunities we have missed, that we are ready to look at the world with fresh eyes and rebuild it with a renewed sense of purpose.

I do not know how a mother who has lost her beloved son, can somehow look at a different world, seemingly empty without the sights and sounds of the son she loved so much, and still see a world filled with purpose and meaning. It is not our place, on this earth, to attempt to find answers to these painful questions, any more than we can attempt to offer words that will comfort a person in such pain.

And it remains a mystery to me, how a people, having lost so much, and after spending two thousand years seeing death and cruelty all around them, could still find the strength to see a world full of goodness and purpose, choosing to build a state of Israel out of the ashes of destruction that was the Holocaust. But it is certainly our *Nechama*, this little country that we love so much.

Perhaps this is what awaits us after *Tisha' B'Av*. We need to learn to change the way we look at each other, seeing the inside and not just the externals, and after commemorating a destruction that seemed to happen because Jews could not learn to see what was beautiful in each other, maybe at long last it is time for us to see each other for the beautiful souls we are, and not get stuck on the different opinions we share.

Perhaps this year, if we look hard enough we will finally see a land of peace, where Jews have learned to live together in harmony, appreciating each other's different opinions instead of debating them. Of course, to see that, we all first have a lot of work to do, and a lot of Noachide fields to plow!

Shabbat Shalom,

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