

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

I Understand Exactly How You Feel

2013 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

In my line of work as a rabbi, I find myself involved in lots of lifecycle events. Since I am a chaplain for senior citizens, these events are, all too often, sad ones.

What does one say to a mourner who is sitting Shiva for a loved one? Something I was taught early in my career was to never, but never, say, “I know how you feel.”

Because you don’t. No one does. Even someone who has suffered a similar loss in the past can never truly relate to the exact feelings that a mourner is going through. And a statement like that, well-meaning though it may be, does not impart a feeling of sympathy to the mourner. In fact, it can be insulting. Yes, you may have experienced a similar loss, but you can never truly know what they are going through.

“Nachamu, Nachamu, Ami”. This Shabbos is referred to as *“Shabbos Nachamu”*, due to the first two words of the Haftara, the Prophetic Reading that follows this week’s Torah Portion. *“Nachamu, Nachamu – Be consoled, be consoled, My People”, says your G-d. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her time (of exile) has been fulfilled...* (Isaiah, 40:1-2)

Isaiah was called upon by G-d after the destruction of the First Temple to console His People, and to let them know that the time would come that the Temple would be rebuilt.

It is obviously no coincidence that this Haftara is read on the Shabbos after Tisha B’Av.

We have spent the last three weeks engaging in increasingly strict expressions of mourning. First we simply refrained from weddings, music, and haircuts. Then we refrained from bathing and the consumption of eat and wine. And then finally, on Tisha B’Av, the Ninth Day of the month of Av, the anniversary of the destructions of both Temples and a host of other calamities, we fasted and “sat Shiva.” We sat on low chairs, didn’t wash, didn’t greet each other, and refrained from the uplifting joy of Torah study. And we mourned. And we cried over a myriad of tragedies that have befallen our People from the time our ancestors in the Desert rejected the Land of Israel to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, to the Pogroms to the Holocaust to the Arab fiends who murder Israeli babies in their beds.

And G-d tells us, "*Nachamu, Nachamu -- Be consoled, be consoled, My People.*" Just as during the Second Temple, the pain of the Destruction of the First Temple was set aside, and Tisha B'Av was a holiday, G-d assures us now that there will be an end to our suffering.

It is interesting that G-d did not tell Isaiah to console the nation. Rather, He said, "Tell them '*Be consoled, be consoled, My People*', **says your G-d.**" It was not possible for Isaiah on his own to comfort the nation. On the night of Tisha B'Av we read Jeremiah's lament, "...*To what can I compare you, maiden daughter of Zion? Your ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal you?*" (Lamentations, 2:13)

No, Isaiah could not comfort the daughter of Zion, nor could Jeremiah heal her. That could only come from our Father in Heaven, Who decreed, "*Be consoled.*"

Shabbos Nachamu – this Shabbos – is the Shabbos of Consolation. It is the Shabbos when we pray that this past week's Fast of Tisha B'Av will be the last time that it is a fast day.

One of the residents in my retirement community passed away this week. On Tisha B'Av I made a Shiva call. I sat there speaking to the gentleman's sons, and I was struck by the similarity. They wore non-leather shoes; I wore non-leather shoes. They hadn't bathed in spite of the oppressive heat; neither had I. They weren't permitted to greet people; neither was I. They weren't permitted to study Torah; neither was I. They sat on low chairs; for most of the day, so did I.

I prepared to leave. I offered them the traditional farewell to a mourner: "HaMakom yeNACHEM ... May G-d CONSOLE you, among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Then I paused. "Today," I said, "we are ALL the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

When we go to comfort a mourner, it is with the knowledge that only "Hamakom yenachem..." It is only G-d, not we, who has the ability to truly console and comfort the bereaved. He comforts them "among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." He puts us all in one group. We, the downtrodden, the beaten and enslaved, the persecuted and the oppressed, the Inquisitioned and the Pogromed, the Holocausted and the terrorized, the hated, burned, drowned and tortured Mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. G-d promised to console us all.

As individuals, you and I can't possibly fathom the pain of a person who is currently sitting Shiva. But as a Nation, as the Mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, we know all too well what it means to mourn. And G-d, Who consoles all the mourners, He Who understands all of our pain, He alone knows how to provide that comfort.

G-d promised us through the Prophet Isaiah, "*Nachamu, Nachmu – Be consoled, be consoled, My People.*"

May He console us all, once and for all, and let us look forward to next year, when we can celebrate Tisha B'Av as the Yom Tov that it should be, in the Rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, and let us look back at our painful past and be able to say, "Remember how bad it used to be?"

Have a great Shabbos.

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