



Seeking Comfort for Ourselves & for God

Parshat Va'etchanan/ Shabbat Nachamu

Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11 / Isaiah 40:1 – 26

*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Sometime toward the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. an anonymous prophet began to proclaim God's message to the Jewish community of Babylonia. After years of exile and the destruction of the Holy Temple, God would embrace his children once again. God had forgiven the nation's sinfulness and proclaimed an end to their years of suffering and exile.

Although there is no obvious division in the book of Isaiah, Bible scholars from the time of Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) have suggested that the second half of Isaiah might be the product of a different author than the first half. Isaiah, whose words we read in the first half of the book, lived in eighth century Judah during the reigns of Kings Uzzah, Ahaz and Hezekiah. The second half of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40, takes place just before or around the year 538 B.C. E. takes place when Cyrus, the Persian emperor, allowed the Jewish community to return to Judah. As a result, the second half of this book is often referred to as second Isaiah.

The next seven *Haftorot* which we read between Tisha B'av and Rosh Hashanah are called *Haftorot* of consolation. They are taken from the second half of Isaiah. These *Haftorot* contain a message of renewal, forgiveness and reconciliation. After reaching the low point of the year, these chapters help to lift us up and prepare us for the upcoming High Holy Day season. Unlike most *Haftorot*, they do not contain a message or theme related to the weekly Torah portion. Because today's *Haftorah* begins with the word *Nachamu* (comfort) this Sabbath is referred to as Shabbat *Nachamu*.

Isaiah 40:1 – 2

Comfort ye, O comfort ye My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her: because her term of service is over; because her iniquity is expiated; because she has received at the hand of the Lord double for her sins.

Ibn Ezra, 40:1

The word *nachamu* (comfort) is spoken by God to his prophet or to the elders of the nation. The reason it is repeated twice is to instruct the people to comfort the nation quickly or repeatedly.

Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 16:8

In this Midrash each of the prophets tries to comfort Jerusalem and fails... Thereupon the Prophets came before the Holy One, Saying to Him: Master of the Universe, Jerusalem refuses to be comforted by us. The Holy One replied: Comfort ye, comfort ye *with Me* (Isaiah 40:1. Comfort Jerusalem, comfort her with Me. Comfort her you who are regions above; comfort her you who are regions below. You who are alive comfort her; you who are dead comfort her. Comfort her in this world; comfort her in the world to come. Comfort her for the ten tribes; comfort her for the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It is by all these I mean ye when I say, "Comfort ye, comfort ye." - comfort Jerusalem, comfort her together with me. The word *ami* (my nation) can also be vocalized *imi* (with me).

Pesikta Rabbati 29/30

The words "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people" (Isa. 40:1) are, according to R. Berekhiah the Priest, to be read, "Comfort Me, comfort Me, O My people." In the world's use, if a man owns a vineyard and robbers come and cut it down, who is to be comforted, the vineyard or the owner of the vineyard? And so, too, if a man owns a house and robbers come and burn it down, who is to be comforted, the house or the owner of the

house? You are My vineyard. But Nebuchadnezzar came and, having destroyed it, exiled you and burned My Temple; it is I that need to be comforted. Hence, "Comfort *Me*, comfort *Me*, O My people."

S. Y. Agnon, 1947. Translation by Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Knopf, 1998)

When a king of flesh and blood goes to war against his enemies, he sends his soldiers to kill and to be killed... When he is cut down and slain by an arrow or a sword or any of the instruments of destruction, another man is put in his place. The king does not feel that someone is missing. After all, the nations are many and their troops are many. If one of them is killed, the king has many replacements.

But our king, the King of Kings, the Holy one, Blessed Be He, wants life and loves peace and pursues peace and loves His people Israel. He chose us, and not because we are a large nation, for we are one of the smallest of nations. We are few, and owing to the love with which He loves us, each one of us is, for Him, an entire legion. He does not have many replacements for us. If one of us is missing, heaven forefend, then the king's forces are diminished, with the consequence that His kingdom is weakened, as it were. One of His legions is gone and His greatness is lessened. For this reason, it is our custom to recite the *Kaddish* when a Jew dies. God's Name will be magnified and sanctified in its power, so that there will be no loss of strength before Him...and sanctified so that we need not fear for ourselves, but only for the splendor and the pride of His Holiness.

If this is what we pray and what we say for every individual who dies, how much more shall we pray it and say it for our brothers and our sisters, the lovely and pleasant and dear children of Zion who were slain for the land of Israel, whose blood was spilled for the honor of His blessed name, for His people and His land of Israel and for His heritage! Indeed everyone who dwells in the land of Israel is one of the legions of the King of Kings, the Holy one, Blessed Be He, whom the King has appointed a watchman over His palace. When one of them is killed, He is bereft of others to put in his place.

And so my brothers in the house of Israel, all of you who mourn in this mourning, let us direct our hearts to our Father in Heaven, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, and pray for ourselves and for His, as it were: "Magnified and sanctified may His great Name be..."

Questions to Ponder

1. What are the three reasons that the prophet gives for comforting the people of Israel? How are they different from one another? What role does repentance play in the prophet's concept of reconciliation with God?
 2. What does the prophet mean when he says that Israel has received "double" at the hands of the Lord? How do you think this explanation is tied into the opening words of comfort in this passage? Do you think this is meant to be an accusation?
 3. Ibn Ezra offers a literal interpretation of the expression "Nachamu, nachamu ami." How are the two Pesikta passages different from him in their understanding of this expression? On what basis do they offer these interpretations? In each of these interpretations who is the comforter and who is being comforted? Is it clear from the passage in Isaiah who these two characters are?
 4. Why is God in need of comforting according to Pesikta D'Rav Kahana? Why do we need to comfort God according to S.Y. Agnon? How might it help a mourner to understand his role in reciting the Kaddish to be offering comfort and not simply to be seeking comfort? What do you think about when we recite the Mourner's Kaddish?
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