

THE MECHANICS OF CONSOLATION

In their commentaries on today's special Haftorah, the Rabbis (in the Yalkut) tell us of the following imaginary yet very real conversation:

ר חנינא דר פפא אמר, אמרו ישראלים: ויש לנו רבינו, האמה שעל באת ענחם אלא לאוהו דבור שחבר בהמתק בימיו? אמר עהם, רכס דבורות באחי ענחם. "אמר אלוקיכם" אין פתיק פאן, אלא "אמר אלוקיכם".

Israel said to Isaiah: Isaiah, our Teacher, would you say that your consolations were directed only to that generation in whose days the Temple was destroyed?

Said Isaiah to them: No, I have come to console all the generations. For it is not written, "comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, said your God," but it says, "comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, sayeth (or: will say) your God."

Consolation, then, is not an act in isolation, ~~It~~ It is a process, and it applies not only to one specific time, but it is relevant to all times. It is therefore worth pondering: what does this subtle yet powerful psychological transformation consist of? What are the mechanics of this profound personal redemption which we call nechamah?

I ask this not only as an abstract or rhetorical question. There are practical consequences. People are caught up in the depths of despair and grief. What should or can consolation mean to them? Or, the menachamim, those who go to console the mourners: very often they are at a loss, they do not know how to translate their good wishes into acceptable words. That is why they often do the wrong thing, why the task of offering condolences is often so difficult, why otherwise intelligent people are frequently reduced to silly prattle.

Furthermore, in the history of our people we are the great Generation of Nechamah. We are the generation that has gone from the depths of Auschwitz to the heights of the State of Israel. We have experienced consolation. Therefore, it behooves us to understand it, so that we can better understand ourselves and the times in which we live.

The answer to our question, the key to the nature of this phenomenon called consolation, may be found in our Haftorah, that beginning with the immortal words, Nachamu, nachamu ami. Let us adumbrate several items that emerge from a deeper study of this Haftorah.

First, in order to console properly, you must never understate or underestimate the extent of the pain and the grief. To be the proper menachem, you must acknowledge the depths and singularity of suffering. At bottom, all suffering is highly individual.

When Isaiah and the Prophets are told to console Jerusalem, they are told: דבר ללב ירושלים, speak to the heart of Jerusalem, כי עקרה גוי זה כפי עונותיה -- for Jerusalem has received punishment from God, double the amount her sins warranted.

Often we try to show the mourner that others have suffered more or at least equally. In one sense, this is helpful, for it lets the mourner feel that he is not completely alone, that he is part of the community of the miserable. But never, never must this be overdone. For to try to show the sufferer that his suffering is not really that bad denies him the uniqueness of his loss. And ultimately it is futile too, because it makes a mockery of the particular misfortune that only

he knows so intimately and that no other can fully share.

Hence the first rule of consolation is to show that you identify with the sufferer insofar as possible, that you appreciate the sharp edge of grief, both its extent and its incommunicable singularity, and that you understand the sense of void and emptiness, the loss and the pain. That is what we usually mean by the word "empathy."

Second, successful consolation requires confidence or faith. In order to receive nechamah, you must believe that it will or at least can come. It is not at all necessary to understand how it will take place -- the true mourner usually believes that it can never take place through natural, rational means. Let it be so. But he must believe that it can happen, even if the means are irrational or supernatural.

Thus does Isaiah say to his disconsolate people: קול קורא

במדבר, a voice cries out in the desert, כל עמק יקרא וכל הר וכל

גבעה יישאל, every valley will be raised and every mountain and hill

will be leveled.

What is Isaiah trying to tell his people by these geographical lessons? It is, I believe, this: even as when they look at a mountainous region they cannot imagine it to be straight and level, so when they consider the peaks of their pain and the depths of their despair, they cannot believe that these can level out into normalcy. Yet they must believe! For the voice cries out in the desert of the heart and the wilderness of the soul, that if the Lord God wills it, it will happen.

In this sense, the source of nechamah is in the mourner himself.

The menachem, the one who offers his condolences, can only assist. The consoler is at most a midwife of restoration and consolation, one who presides at its emergence from the depths of the heart of the one who sits in grief.

Third, where grief is the result not of accident or nature, but of defeat in a struggle, in an ideological contest or in spiritual strife, there nechamah derives from the sense of vindication. If one has gone down for the sake of an ideal, then his survivors can be consoled only when those ideals are justified in the course of time.

Thus does the Prophet say to his people, having suffered defeat not only physically and politically, but spiritually as well: אלהים
וְהַגְּלוֹתָ אֶת-כָּל-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ-צָרָה, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh together will see that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. The martyrs of Israel will have been vindicated when their pagan antagonists will bow their heads and accept the truth of the Lord God of Israel who reveals Himself to all men, justifying the martyrdom and the sacrifice of the holy ones of Israel.

Today, our nechamah as a people will be incomplete as long as the enemies of Israel prosper, as long as anti-Semitism is rampant -- even if it be disguised as anti-Zionism, whether of the right or the left, especially the New Left, whether White or Black, whether by non-Jew or by Jew...

Finally, the fourth element we may detect in this Haftorah as to the mechanics of consolation is this: nechamah implies the replace-

ment of the loss to the extent that it is possible.

Indeed, there can never be complete restoration for a human being. This is so, because each human being, created in the Image of God, is unique, and that which is unique cannot, by definition, be replaced.

But if there can be no complete restoration, the void can be filled subjectively, at least partly. A parent or a mate has passed on; a home can be rebuilt and a measure of nachas can still come into life.

When our mother Sarah died, her son Isaac was grief-stricken. Not until he met and married Rebecca did the situation change. Then we read: *יִצְחָק מְלֵךְ וְיִצְחָק קָנָז' אַחֲרָי*, that Isaac was consoled after Sarah his mother. After the sense of desolation and loneliness and emptiness, Rebecca -- as our Rabbis tell us -- brought back light and a sense of family and companionship into the bereft home. Rebecca could never replace Sarah, any more than Sarah could replace anyone else. But she could fill the void in the heart and in the life of Isaac. That is consolation.

So our Haftorah tells us of consolation. Those who were destroyed cannot be brought back to life. No one can fully take their place. But in the life of our ongoing people, nechamah means the return to Zion, the upbuilding of the desolated land, the new dignity possessed by our people after the humiliation of defeat and exile.

We Jews today know that the six million martyrs of the Holocaust are irreplaceable. No Jewish State, no prosperity, no new-found respec-

tability, can ever, ever make up for the horrendous loss that we suffered. But to the extent that it is possible without Messiah (or even with him), the State of Israel is our nechamah. It is our only consolation, the only thing left we have to hang on to after we have reached the very bottom of the pit of despair.

Therefore, Israel is everything we have. Hence, any danger to the State of Israel is a threat to our only source of consolation and evokes from within the heart of every Jew an immediate response: that the demons of Auschwitz are coming to life again. Take away this consolation of ours, and we are back in the depths, the unplumbed depths of avelut such as the world has never known. If any Jew wants to know the source of Jews' loyalty to the State of Israel, he must know that our loyalty is powered by the past of having experienced Auschwitz. Zvi Kolitz was one-hundred per-cent correct when he stated in this Synagogue this past year, that the secret of the success of Israel's army is not that Israeli soldiers know what they are fighting for, but that they know what they are fighting against.

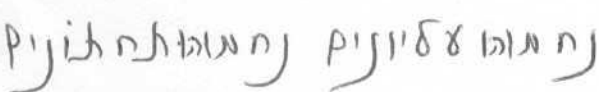
The current cease-fire, just begun by American initiative, is the only break in the escalating crisis that has gripped Israel since the 1967 victory. But, as we all know, it is not an unmixed blessing. It is as much danger as it is opportunity. It is something which holds the most serious consequences for all Israel and all world Jewry.

We must hope and pray that our Government will support Israel in the full measure it deserves. We should like to be proud as Americans

in knowing that Israel is being helped by America in ways that the world does not know yet. But whatever may happen, American Jews must support Israel in its resistance to Egyptian trickery and Russian treachery -- and what, Heaven forbid, may yet become American betrayal.

American Jews must not be found wanting. For this is our particular responsibility today.

Israel is our nechamah. Without it, chalilah, we are back in the pit of anguish. I do not believe the time has come to take with any immediate urgency the words of Menachem Begin in the Knesset, that American Jews must take to the streets to demonstrate. But we may yet be called upon to act politically and economically and socially. Then we shall have to take to the streets indeed, despite our bourgeois respectability and self-restraint, even if it means incurring the wrath of the Government and the population. We shall have to pay any price in order to stand at the side of Israel, our consolation.

In commenting on the double verb, nachamu nachamu, the Rabbis said:  , let the upper world console, let the lower world console.

Permit me to give my own contemporary interpretation of that Midrashic comment.. If we want Almighty God from His Olamot Ha-elyonim (His Upper Worlds) to offer us comfort, if we want to be able to look forward to an undisturbed life, to a peaceful existence for our children and children's children, to a continuation of our people and an opportunity for them to thrive without threat and anguish and danger -- then,

nachamuhu tachtonim, we who inhabit this lower world must first offer our comfort to the State of Israel, we must first preserve and enhance this sole source of nechamah that has been given to us at this juncture of history. Only if we are successful in offering nechamah to the State of Israel can we look forward to nechamah for us from the Higher Worlds of Almighty God.

It is our hope and prayer that true peace will emerge from the present critical state. But no matter what happens, we are bound to act fully, with Jewish honor and resolve, to preserve this sole consolation, which has filled the void in our lives after the Holocaust.

May we be successful in offering that nechamah, our support. And may we, in turn, receive nechamah from God on High, the kind of consolation that will bring peace to all of mankind.