



Parashat Va-Etchanan 5772 - #243

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On the Haftarah... The Time of Comfort

[Ashkenazim/Sefardim: Yeshayahu 40:1-26
Yemenite Jews: Yeshayahu 40:1-26, 41:17]

The Shabbat after Tisha Be-Av, which recalls the destruction of the two Temples, is called "Shabbat Nachamu" – the Shabbat of Comfort. This expression (from the words of Yeshayahu) is used in the Haftarah, and announces to Jerusalem that her time of exile has expired. How appropriate it is for our day.

"Comfort, comfort My Nation – says your God" (Yeshayahu 40:1).

Throughout the course of all generations, one of the Sages of Israel's holiest tasks has been to rebuke the Nation of Israel for its sins. This rebuke obviously comes not out of hatred, but out of a deep concern for helping the Nation return to its proper path. Harsh words were delivered against the transgressions of the stiff-necked Nation and for its refusal to perform Hashem's will. Bitter tears and pained hearts often accompanied these rebukes - an indication of the Sages' great sorrow, even as they tried to help Israel repent. Their ultimate goal was of course to bring the Nation of Israel spiritual and physical joy in both this world and the World to Come.

Only Sages of the highest stature, spiritual giants, could offer comfort by mentioning the merits of the Nation of Israel and emphasizing its purity and holiness in order to lead them to the path of supreme Divine spirituality. Such Sages were few. Plenty of other Sages felt that words of comfort for the Nation of Israel, and too much patience, would merely anaesthetize their conscience and entice them away from proper ethical behavior.

Nonetheless, the time for comfort has arrived in our time: "Comfort, comfort My Nation – says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her time of exile has expired, that her iniquity has been forgiven, for she has received from the hand of Hashem double for all of her sins" (ibid. v. 1-2). The current obligation for all Sages, righteous and

holy individuals, is to comfort the Nation of Israel. Maran Ha-Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Cohain Kook taught us this in his article "Nechemat Yisrael" ("The Comfort of Israel" in Ma'amrei Ha-Re'eiyah, p. 279). If there is a great mitzvah to comfort mourners for their personal tragedies, how much more so is there a mitzvah to comfort mourners for national tragedies.

But what type of comfort are we talking about? "Her time of exile has expired, that her iniquity has been forgiven." The time of the Redemption has arrived, the springtime of our history has finally appeared after a difficult winter. "We were exiled from our Land on account of our sins" (from the davening on Yom Tov). This principle is mentioned in the Tanach numerous times. It is clear that the Exile is not simply a punishment, and certainly not an act of revenge, but an experience that served to purify us. The cessation of our national and political activities, coupled with indescribable suffering over the course of the generations, expunged our transgressions. We are now therefore capable of renewing our pure and noble national lives in our Land (Orot, Ha-Milchamah 3).

The appearance of the Nation of Israel in the world was a Divine revolution of cosmic importance. There were always righteous, holy and pure individuals in the world. The Nation of Israel was not created for this purpose, but, as was said to Avraham Avinu: "And I will make you a great Nation" (Bereshit 12:2), "A kingdom of priests and a holy Nation" (Shemot 19:6). And this refers not only to holiness on an individual level, but on the communal level as well. We are not talking about solitary individuals in an ivory tower who are capable of directing their lives toward the light of Hashem's word, but holiness on the National level, spanning all strata of society.

To our great distress, the Nation of Israel failed in its role. Our Kingdom was not a holy one, but rather a den of sinners. The ethics of communal life were fully and irreversibly corrupt. Despite all the efforts of our prophets to lead the Nation back to the straight path, the Kingship of Israel had to be dismantled completely.

According to Maran Ha-Rav Kook, the task of the Second Temple was to prepare the Nation of Israel to deal with its new life in Exile, i.e. as individualistic Judaism (Orot, Le-Mahalach Ha-Ede'ot Be-Yisrael 5).

Two thousand years have since passed, and today we are again capable of building a pure and upright Nation (Orot, Ha-Milchamah 3). This is the reason behind the deep aspiration for the Land of Israel which was awakened in the Nation of Israel, who in a miraculous manner, began to flow back into its Land from the four corners of the earth.

In contrast to all of our defamers from without and within, we live in a country with a high ethical level. An Israeli humorist once said that he does not understand why in the International Competition of "Ms. Ethics," we always end up in last place by consensus of the nations of the world – yet we are the only one who show up!

To our great joy, with a few exceptions who do not represent us, the Nation which dwells in Zion upholds a high ethical standard. This does not mean that we have reached the ideal level which Hashem expects from us and that we can rest on our laurels. But we have the potential

to create the ideal country, the foundation of the eternal, Divine throne (Orot, Orot Yisrael 6, 7).

Without a doubt, there are times when it is necessary to harshly rebuke individuals within our Nation whose behavior is most inappropriate, but the comfort of which we are speaking is in relation to the entire Nation (Ma'amrei Ha-Re'eiyah, p. 285). This comfort will be actualized by emphasizing the light within us and re-instilling faith in our future and ourselves.

The time of comfort has truly arrived: "A voice calls in the desert: Clear the way of Hashem, make a straight road in the plain, a highway for our G-d. Every valley will be raised, and every mountain and hill will be lowered, the crooked will become straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of Hashem will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together, for the mouth of Hashem has spoken" (ibid. v. 3-4).

Rav Aviner on... Tu Be-Av and Finding One's Match

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Ve-etchanan 5772 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Question: Is there any room for celebrating the 15th Day of the Hebrew Month of Av as some in Israel have called it, a "Love Day"?

Answer: Certainly not. This is importing neo-paganism into our country.

Whoever knows about the paganism of the ancient world knows that there were days on which all cultural restraints were removed and social licentiousness reigned. That characterizes the pagan approach to life: viewing a person's own pleasure as central, leaving no room for anyone else.

In opposition to that culture and that approach, Abraham emerged with a new idea: just as there is a place for my legitimate pleasure, so is there room for bringing pleasure to others, and for finding enjoyment in his pleasure. This is an approach that validates the other and shows him consideration, unlike that same "Love Day", which is nothing but an outburst of passions and pleasures. Today, when we talk about paganism, we don't mean physical idols, but a cultural worldview and an egotistical spirit that places at center only the personal pleasure of the individual himself.

It is true that the Mishnah itself notes 15 Av as a sort of day on which Jewish girls would dance in the vineyards and Jewish boys would arrive to select a bride for themselves.

Yet this is diametrically opposed to the idea behind "Love Day". To understand this, one has to take a look at the other day on which, according to several of our medieval Sages, this same type of event was held – Yom Kippur. It is obvious that on the day set aside for the purity and atonement of Israel, Jewish girls would not go out dancing if there was some problem with that. Rather, the point is that only unmarried boys and girls would go to that place, and only for one purpose – to establish a faithful Jewish home. And all in an atmosphere of gravity and seriousness. Proof of this is the fact that only the elders knew where these dances were held.

The elders and the great rabbis of the generation would instruct the young person in how to find the place only after they knew for sure that the young person's objective was matrimony. After the grievous incident of the concubine killed at Giva [Shoftim 19-21], the men of the tribe of Benjamin who had not yet found themselves a wife from among the women of Gilead received detailed instructions from the elders. This shows that the place was not known to all, and they needed the elders' instructions.

The contemporary alternative to 15 Av is singles' weekends or singles' evenings held under supervision, where the goal of every participant is to find a marriage partner.

Today there is no reason to celebrate 15 Av, because its modern replacement has to be held all year long. At one time there were few singles, so 15 Av and Yom Kippur were set aside for this purpose. Today, unfortunately, there are many more singles, so numerous evenings are needed throughout the year. The men and women who show up at these events don't come for "fun" but to find their spouse. Therefore, a selection process is performed to reject men who are not really looking for a wife. As far as the women, no such selection process is needed, because it is assumed that a woman wants to get married.

This seemingly rash assessment is actually based on research that indicates that in male-female relationships, 60% of the males view their girlfriends as a source of pleasure, 30% view them as friends, and only 10% view them as potential marriage partners. By contrast, females view things quite the opposite: 60% view their relationship as a means towards marriage, 30% view it as involving true friendship, and only 10% view the connection as solely a source of pleasure. Therefore, for in singles evenings, only the males have to be checked out for their serious intentions. The females are clearly there to get married. This filtering process resembles what our Sages did in the context of the incident at Shilo [Shoftim 21:16- 24]

The culture that stands behind the concept of a "Love Day" has led to a steep rise in the number of unmarried people in the world. It is an approach which places the individual's pleasure at the center, without regard for the other. It has permeated both the Jewish world and the world at large, and has created a huge problem throughout the western world. In Europe, for example, there is already a concept of people remaining "single by choice" – a decision which leads to the diminishment of nations because there is no natural growth. In addition, this exclusive focus on the sensory pleasures has led to gargantuan divorce figures. In New York State the divorce rate during the first five years of marriage stands at 75%. On the American West Coast, the percentage is 110%. That is to say, people get divorced more than once during the first five years. Society is being destroyed. It is interesting to note that Victor Hugo in his "Les Misérables" already described such a reality, in which the number of pregnancies out of wedlock creates enormous wretchedness among women. Yet we needn't rely on Victor Hugo to tell us this...

So, once again, there is no reason at all for marking 15 Av in our time, beyond the Jewish law of not reciting Tachanun on that day. This was, in our ancestors' time, a last chance for those who had not found themselves a bride. But even for those who do find their bride, we know this is not enough. It's not enough to get married - you've got to stay married, and keep up your love.

Unfortunately, there is a sad phenomenon of romantic love wearing down.

The initial love is not enough. You have to invest a great deal all along the way. The substantive difference between a romantic attachment alone and a stable attachment is commitment. Statistics have shown that much more love exists between devoted, serious people, because the connection is not only a romantic attachment but also a moral commitment. If a couple wants to build up their romance so that it is not lost, they certainly cannot do so through plain partying, one-time acts or one-time days. Rather, there must be daily investment and concern. In addition to saying, "You are betrothed to me by means of this ring", the groom also signs the "Ketubah" at the wedding. There it states that he undertakes to support and honor and respect and love his wife. The Ketubah is the daily investment that preserves romantic love.

True, there is another side to 15 Av. It is the day on which the tribes were permitted to wed one another (and not just each other). The Jewish People must become stronger on this point as well. A further expression of our egoism is tribal provincialism: insisting on marriages only between two Ashkenazim, two Sephardim, etc. This lack of openness to the rest of the Jewish People and its various communities is just another side of the "Love Day" mentality: what is important to me is only me and those that are similar to me, with no true respect and space for my fellow man.

Thank G-d, our country has a strong antidote against this divisiveness, and that antidote is army service. The camaraderie, and resulting intimacy, between fighters breaks down the

divisions and causes different factions within Israeli society to unite and become one. From this standpoint, army service, as well, is a continuation of the theme of 15 Av.

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Rambam and Drafting Yeshiva Students

Question: Doesn't the Rambam write at the end of Hilchot Shemitah Ve-Yovel that yeshiva students are exempt from army service?

Answer: Many authorities who rule that yeshiva students are exempt rely on these words of the Rambam (ibid. 13:12-13): "Why didn't the Tribe of Levi merit a portion in the Land of Israel?... Because they were set aside to serve G-d, to serve him and to teach His upright path and His righteous laws to the community... They are therefore kept separate from worldly matters. They do not wage war like the rest of Israel, they do not receive a heritage, and they do not have the benefits of a strong body – rather, they act as the army of G-d... And this applies not only to the tribe of Levi, but to every individual man in the world who volunteers and who understands on his own to separate himself and to stand before G-d, to serve Him and toil to understand G-d... and who relieves himself of the burden of the reckonings with which people are involved..."

Making halachic conclusions about exempting yeshiva students by comparing this matter with what the Rambam writes about the Levi'im and Torah scholars is a distortion of the true Torah. Our Rabbi Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah already pointed this out for various reasons (Li-Netivot Yisrael vol. 1, p. 125):

1. These are not Halachic statements but ethical and spiritual guidelines, and the Rambam often ends his books in this manner.
2. The Rambam details the various exemptions from war in Hilchot Melachim (The Halachot of Wars), and not in Hilchot Shemitah Ve-Yovel (The Halachot of the Shemitah Year and Jubilee Year). No exemption for those who learn Torah is mentioned in Hilchot Melachim.
3. In Hilchot Shemitah Ve-Yovel, the Rambam is not specially discussing Israel and those who learn Torah, but "every individual man in the world." This is not a halachic pronouncement, but a promise to provide for the needs of one who volunteers his spirit and elevates himself above worldly needs (Mishpatei Ha-Meluchah, p. 194).
4. Ha-Rav Tanenbaum, who was the secretary of the Va'ad Ha-Yeshivot in Israel, heard from Ha-Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer that it is a falsification to claim based on this Rambam that yeshiva students are exempt from military service.

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