

The Voice of the Prophet

BRINGING THE WEEKLY HAFTARAH TO LIFE



First Haftarah of Consolation

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director, Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS

This special haftarah, which begins *nahamu nahamu ami*—“comfort, oh comfort, My people,” is the first of seven special haftarot of comfort (drawn from Isaiah 40–63). During these seven weeks, the relationship between the people and God—strained almost to breaking on Tishah Be’av—is slowly rebuilt, allowing us to stand before God once again on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Unlike more common understandings of what is “comforting,” here the comfort offered by the prophet depends upon a stark confrontation with our own mortality; not only every individual but every society is temporary, and human power (however seemingly impressive) is no more lasting than straw in the wind. This finitude is then contrasted with God’s eternity, immeasurable power, and unfathomable wisdom. The message seems clear: comforts grounded in denial of our mortality and our limits are false comforts indeed.

Food for thought:

- Which “comforts” are temporary and shallow, and which offer lasting and deep reassurance?
- Focusing on matters of transcendent and ultimate meaning can be unsettling and challenging; how can it also offer comfort?
- What are the consequences of seeking false comfort by trying to deny our mortality?

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Va’et-hannan 5778
Shabbat Nahamu

ואתחנן תשע"ח
שבת נחמו



Holding Fast

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This week we emerge from the destruction of Tisha Be’av, the fast day that commemorates the destruction of the Temples, and receive the gift of Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of our being comforted. **נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ עַמִּי** יְאֹמַר אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם, “Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God” (Isaiah 40:1). What is comfort? One way of understanding the essence of comfort is by engaging with Moshe Rabbenu (our teacher, Moses) in this week’s parashah.

All of Torah is shaped by the knowledge of where the story ends—not with the people of Israel entering the Land, but with them situated on the other side of the Jordan. They will enter the Land in the book of Joshua, but that is not part of the Torah. The Torah ends with the not yet, with the longing, with an experience of incompleteness. There are profound theological implications to this ending. We don’t focus on triumph, on everything being right. We make space for brokenness. And perhaps the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, being redeemed from Egypt, is told in this way to keep us connected to the personal story of Moshe Rabbenu. It is Moshe Rabbenu who is most acutely affected by not being able to enter the Land. In this week’s parashah we encounter Moshe’s anguish in a powerful way. The parashah begins with his plea:

וְאֶתְחַנֵּן אֶל-ה' בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:

I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, “O Lord GOD, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.” (Deut. 3:23–25)

Moses pleaded with God. *Va'et-hannan*. What's the meaning of *Va'et-hannan*? Midrash Tanhuma (*Va'et-hannan* 3:1) acknowledges that prayer is called by many names and asks why Moshe prayed in the language of "*tahanunim*"—consolation/comfort. This is because God doesn't owe God's creatures anything, "rather I give it to them as a free gift." We learn this from Exodus 33, when Moses pleads to see God's presence, God responds by saying: "I will offer grace when I offer grace (*hanoti*) and have compassion when I have compassion." The word for pleading—*et-hannan*—and the word for consolation—*tahanunim*—and the word for grace—*hen*—share root letters, helping us to understand that the choice of verb conveys that Moshe is hoping his pleading will evoke God's grace, and that will be the source of Moshe's comfort. Moshe uses the word *va'et-hannan* to say: *ten li hinam, please give me a free gift*.

Moshe has a strong idea about what that gift needs to be: being allowed to go into the Land. But God tells Moshe not to speak of this again. "But the LORD was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The LORD said to me, '*Rav lakh*, Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!" (Deut. 3:26).

The Bekhor Shor, the French Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac, understands God's admonition as follows: "I've done enough miracles for you. Leave space for others to feel that they have been distinguished by me. Because there won't be an end to what you want me to do for you. After you enter the Land, you will then ask to see the Temple." This is a reverse *Dayyenu*, the song that proclaims, "it would have been enough" that we sing at the Passover seder. Here, God warns, *there will never be enough. The only way for there to be enough is if you see that this, even in it not being enough, is enough*.

God is instructing Moshe to see the abundance. God is helping Moshe to cultivate a sense of gratitude in the face of brokenness. The comfort comes in seeing the gifts that exist even in the brokenness. The *hen*, the grace, the free gift, does not depend on reaching the Land. It is already possessed by you. When God tells Moshe that he can see the Land from where he is, God teaches him that the gift, the abundance, doesn't need to look like what he thought—and hoped—it would look like. If we can find a way to cultivate gratitude, to find ways to affirm *rav lakh*, enough, then we can experience the *hen/grace* in our lives. And this is where we can find comfort.

In this week's haftarah, the prophetic reading, we find another layer of teaching about comfort, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice rings out: 'Proclaim!' Another asks, 'What shall I proclaim?' 'All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field: grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of the LORD blows on them. Indeed, man is but grass: grass withers, flowers fade—but the word of our God is always fulfilled!" (Isaiah 40:6–8). These words are offered as comfort, so the question is, what is comforting about them? For me, it's the honest acknowledgement of the fragility of life, along with the faith that God's word—and God's self—is eternal. There's an invitation to depend on the largeness and permanence of the divine to help us experience the abundance. Each individual life withers and fades, but we are all held in the divine abundance which endures forever.

A verse in our parshah captures this beautifully: 'וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בַּה' אֲ-לֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כְּלַכְּמֵ הַיּוֹם, "while you, who held fast to the LORD your God, are all alive today" (Deut. 4:4). I love the image of holding fast to God. There's an urgency here. And the promise that life—abundant life—is tied not to achievement, to reaching the Land, but to being in relationship with that which is eternal. We say this verse each time we are about to read from the sefer Torah, the Torah scroll, in community. As a community we can help one another to hold fast. Coming together as a community, for the sake of holding fast, fosters deep possibilities for comfort.

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