

## Va'etchanan: Change the Prophecy–Comfort in a Time of War Neesa Berezin-Bahr, Class of 2025

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I guess a lesser woman would've lost hope  
A greater woman wouldn't beg  
But I looked to the sky and said  
Please, I've been on my knees  
Change the prophecy....  
But I looked to the sky and said,  
Please.  
-Taylor Swift, "The Prophecy"

Let us take a moment to think about where we find ourselves today on the Jewish calendar. We are a few days post Tisha B'Av, a day of lamentation for the loss of the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple, and a day, for many of us, to sit with the pain of the harrowing months we have endured since October 7th.

This Shabbat, we begin to read the "*sheva d'nechemta*," the seven *haftarot* of comfort, with the words "*nachamu, nachamu ami*," "comfort, o comfort, My people" (Isaiah 40:1). Many of us are asking how we can possibly be comforted in times like these. Living in Israel, surrounded by loss and war, it feels especially difficult.

We are also just days away from the joyous Tu B'Av, the 15th of Av. The Gemara in Taanit 26b says:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the 15th of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes, which each woman borrowed from another. Why were they borrowed? They did this so as not to embarrass one who did not have her own white garments.

How did Tu B'Av become a joyous day in a season of such sadness? The Midrash relates:

R. Levi said: On every eve of the 9th of Av [during the 40 years when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness] Moses used to send a herald through the camp and announce: Go out to dig graves. They would go out and dig graves and sleep in them. In the morning he would send a herald and say: Separate the dead from the living. They would arise and find their number diminished. In the last of the forty years, they did this but found themselves undiminished. They said: we must have made a mistake in counting. They did the same thing on the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth, but still no one died. When the moon was full, they said: it seems that the Holy One has annulled the decree from all of us, so they made the fifteenth a holiday (Eicha Rabbah, Petichta 33).

So we are left with questions of “how”? How can we be comforted? How can we be joyous in a time of such sadness? How can we get from Tisha B’Av to Tu B’Av?

*Parshat Va’etchanan* is packed with iconic texts including the repetition of the Ten Commandments. I would like to go back first, for a moment, to the heartbreaking opening verses of our *parsha*. We find Moshe Rabbeinu pleading with Hashem to change the prophecy that barred him from entry and instead to grant him access to Eretz Yisrael.

I pleaded with Hashem 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 Lebanon” (Devarim 4:23-25).

God responds to Moshe, instructing him to climb the mountain, look out, and see what he will never get to experience. Moshe nursed a whole nation, his “children,” throughout their journey in the desert, but he will not accompany them into the Promised Land. It hits hard and it feels personal.

I think of those of us, like myself, who have had a parent who raised us, loved us, and cared for us, taken from us too quickly, too quickly to celebrate our milestones—our graduations, birthdays, marriages. Perhaps there lies some comfort for Moshe, and for those of us who have lost a parent, in the idea of the repetition of the Ten Commandments. Rabbeinu Bachya points out that the repetition was necessary as the generation who received the Torah at Mount Sinai had all died out. Moshe repeats the laws for the new generation. With *Sefer Devarim* as his final speech to this new generation set to enter the land of Canaan, Moshe has completed his mission.

Hashem is showing Moshe that his task to teach the people, to give over the values and laws of the Torah, has been fulfilled and Moshe can pass peacefully knowing that they are set up for success. Though he will not be there physically to take them to the Promised Land, he can be content knowing that his “children” will indeed get there. And Moshe’s teachings and spirit will carry on in the hearts of *Bnei Yisrael*. So too, we can hold the memory, teachings, and spirit of our parents in our joyous occasions.

Furthermore, in the repetition of the *Aseret HaDibrot* in our *parsha*, we are instructed to “keep” the Shabbat while in *parshat Yitro* we are commanded to “remember” the Shabbat. Our sages tell us, and we sing every Friday night, *shamor v’zachor bidibur echad*, the two words, “keep” and “remember,” were said as one. We simultaneously have to keep and to remember. When we keep something, we hold space for it in our hearts and minds. When we remember something, it may have slipped from the front of our minds but at this moment, we do the action of consciously

remembering it, bringing it back to the forefront. The interplay of keeping and remembering resonates with this time period of communal loss, as well as with personal loss. During *bein hametzarim* (the Three Weeks), on Tisha B'Av, and during the year of *aveilut*, of personal mourning, we are in a state of active remembrance. Come Tu B'Av, or other *s'machot*, joyous occasions, we keep the loss close to us, but we hold it in a different part of our hearts and minds, allowing us the possibility of real joy.

Returning now to the words of Isaiah in the *haftarah*, "*nachamu, nachamu ami*," perhaps we can hear in them not a demand that we be comforted, but rather a plea from God, God's own "*va'etchanan*." God is begging the nation to be comforted, or perhaps pleading with the nation to do the comforting—to comfort one another during these broken days.

Comfort, oh comfort My people, Says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her, that her term of service is over, that her iniquity is expiated; for she has received at God's hand double for all her sins (Isaiah 40:1-2).

On *Motzaei* Tisha B'Av, I witnessed a true response to this call. A young lone soldier had suddenly died and most of his immediate family could not get to Israel in time for the burial. A call was put out to anyone who could to attend the funeral to honor the soldier and bring some comfort to his parents. I attended, expecting an intimate gathering, but what I saw blew me away. Thousands of people had come out at 10:00 pm after a fast day because that is who this nation is. A real moment of "*nachamu ami*."

As the second *yahrzeit* for my father, Michael David ben Shaul v'Miriam z"l, nears, I am reminded of a line he would repeat each year. Though generally a man of humor, he would say this in all seriousness: "My summer never really begins until after Tisha B'Av." Let us pray for the respite of summer, for peace and *nechama*, and for the joy of Tu B'Av to be felt this year. And let Jeremiah's prophecy ring true, that we once again hear in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.

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