

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

has sacrificed all he had, forsaking his home and position. And now he has nothing: his parents are gone; his beloved sister and brother have died, he is without friend or peer. He wants only one thing: To enjoy, if only for a little while, the fruits of his life's labor.

And yet, the pathos here is only an extreme instance of the human condition. Kohelet, that extended meditation on the absurdity of life, says this plainly: When one realizes that all one's toil will be at best for the benefit of others, and at worse for no one at all, one can come to despise life. Indeed, Devarim Rabba (2:2) tells us that one name for Moshe is simply "*ish*", human being. And God's "no" to Moshe is the same as God's "no" in the Garden of Eden, from which humanity was driven "lest they stretch forth their hand, and take from the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever."

It is an astounding irony, then, that the Shabbat on which we read Parashat Va'etchanan is known as Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of Consolation. Even the Prophet Isaiah, whose words we read this Shabbat, tells us that "all flesh is grass, all its goodness like the flowers of the field." How are we to find consolation in any of this?

R' Ovadia Sforno offers us a hint of how we can move from despair at the futility of life to consolation. He writes that when God instructed Moshe to climb Mt. Pisgah, it was so that Moshe would *bless* the land and the people who would live in it.

The final lesson that God has to teach Moshe is that the way we can rescue ourselves from the mood of disappointment and despair that mortality can provoke — is to bless. To behold the green vistas we will never enter, consider the grandchildren we will never know, imagine the joys we will never taste doesn't have to fill us with regret. It could do the opposite. We could smile upon it.

And, indeed, Moshe learns this lesson. It is with the text of Moshe's blessing (V'zot Habrachah) that the Torah ends.

Even for the greatest of us, it is not an easy thing to accept our death. And it is not an easy thing to bless. But if we can turn despair to blessing, if we can find a way not only to accept, but to embrace that the world will continue without us, there may be, in the end, a reward for our labors, and consolation.

Rabbi Joe Schwartz served for three years as Rabbi of the Conservative Synagogue of Fifth Avenue, a small, traditional-egalitarian synagogue in Greenwich Village. He is now working on the creation of IDRA, a house of culture, learning and coffee in Brooklyn that is a new-old model for the Jewish and Jewish-adjacent and Jewish-curious community.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Va'etchanan

Shabbat Nahamu

August 17, 2019 | 16 Av 5779

Annual (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11); Etz Hayim p. 1005-1031; Hertz p. 755-776

Triennial (Deuteronomy 5:1-7:11); Etz Hayim p. 1015-1031; Hertz p. 765-776

Haftarah (Isaiah 40:1-26); Etz Hayim p. 1032-1036; Hertz p. 776-779

D'var Torah: Finding Consolation

Rabbi Joe Schwartz, Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus (2010-11)

Moshe prays many times in the Torah — for God to forgive the people after the sin of the golden calf, to allow God's spirit to rest on others and devolve some of Moshe's authority; for the healing of his sister — and in every instance, his prayers are for the wellbeing of others. Only once in the Torah — in Parashat Va'etchanan — does Moshe pray for himself.

In point of fact, Moshe doesn't exactly pray. He begs. "At that time," Moshe tells the assembled Jewish people, all of them destined for the land of promise, "I begged God, saying. . . 'please, let me cross over and see this goodly land across the Jordan, this good hill country and the Lebanon.'" (3:23, 25)

But, for the first time in their long relationship, God refuses his faithful servant's plea: "*Rav lach*" God replies to Moshe, "you ask too much. Speak no more to me of this thing. Go up to the top of Mt. Pisgah, raise your eyes to the west, the north, the south, and the east and look with your eyes — but you shall not cross this Jordan River." (3:27) It is especially painful to hear God use the same words to chastise Moshe as did the rebel Korah, who also said *rav lachem*. After all, what did Moshe ever seek for himself? And still he's told it's too much.

Of all the Jews gathered in the plains of Moab, Moshe alone is barred from entering the land. This is almost unbearable, for the reader and for Moshe alike. His entire life has been devoted to the service of God and the Jewish people. He

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D'var Haftarah: The Source of Comfort*

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

With this week's haftarah, we begin a series of seven haftarot of consolation (Shiva D'nehamta) which follow Tisha b'Av and bring us to the Yamim Noraim (The Days of Awe) - Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These haftarot are drawn from the last part of the book of Isaiah which contains prophecies from the beginning of Shivat Zion, the return from the Babylonian exile. And many contain messages of reconciliation with God, inspired by the end of the exile from Eretz Yisrael.

The prophets emphasized that with the end of physical exile the people's relationship with God was also on the mend. This message comes through most clearly in the opening words of this week's haftarah, which famously begins: "*Nahamu nahamu ami yomar Eloheichem,*" which translates most simply as "Be comforted, be comforted, O My people, says your God." (40:1)

Commentators throughout the ages have sought to explain both the doubling of the word "*nahamu*" as well as the odd syntax. While it is likely "just" a literary device used by this particular prophet, Rabbi Mordechai Malkovitch, the teacher of the Netivot Shalom, Rabbi Shalom Berezovsky, takes more creative license. He reads the verse to say: "***Nahamu*** / Be comforted, ***ami*** / that you are My people, ***yomar*** / then your God will say, ***E-loheichem*** / I am your God." For Malkovitch our consolation lies first in knowing that we are God's people, because, as God's people, reconciliation is always possible.

For Malkovitch though, this isn't a reason to feel entitled. He elaborates: "Since you are children of the King, don't make yourselves loathsome through inappropriate behavior, since being the child of the King necessitates totally 'other' behavior." (Netivot Shalom, Devarim p. 41) For Malkovitch, as CHILDREN of the King, we are expected to live up to our elevated status. Though we will be given second and third chances, we live (or should live) with a healthy fear of causing God to be disappointed.

Jews view exile and redemption through this prism. National sin leads to periods of alienation where we are exiled from our home - the place where we feel closest to God. It is painful to come to grips with God's disappointment and feel exile's chill, but we are ultimately supposed to trust in our special bond with God and know that God will never refuse our return. Like a child who trusts their parent's love, even when we do wrong there is a core of self-esteem that motivates us and gives us the confidence to do the work of repenting and returning.

Rather than make us complacent and entitled, our people's unbreakable covenant and bond with God should inspire us to be our best selves, as individuals and as a nation.

* In memory of my beloved teacher, Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *zichrono levracha*.

Parashat Va'etchanan Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this parashah Moshe begins his epic speech about the Mitzvot, which we will follow for many parashot to come. Moshe will deliver commandments; some new and some renewed, as well as speak about them in general. Keep your eyes open for the 10 Commandments, as well as the first passage of Shema.

- 1) Moshe asks God again to enter the land: "let me cross and see the good land across the Jordan" (3:23-28). How can Moshe define the land as 'good' having never been there?
- 2) Moshe says to obey the laws that Moshe is teaching them so that they may live and possess the land (4:1-2). Why would this be a prerequisite for survival?
- 3) Moshe warns the people about the time when they will have been established in the land for many generations. They will "make sculptured images of all sorts, as well as do what is evil in the eyes of The LORD your God..." (4:25). Why is this warning given specifically to future generations? Why stress the 'doing of evil' after already mentioning the transgression of worshipping images?
- 4) At the revelation at Sinai the people turned to Moshe stating that they had heard God and lived, but fear that they will be consumed by the great fire if they continue to hear God's voice (5:20-22). What do the words of the people tell you about their experience of revelation?
- 5) The first section of the Shema is found in 6:4-9. After discussing our relationship with God, we are told to speak and teach the words we were commanded. We should also tie them on the arm and between our eyes (*tefillin*), as well as write them on the doorposts (*mezuzot*). Why do you think that physical reminders of the mitzvot were added to the instruction to study and teach mitzvot?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

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