

THURSDAY, JULY 21, 1994

Sedra of the week

By Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda
North Avondale Synagogue

Vaetchanan

This Shabbat, the first one that follows the Jewish national mourning day, Tisha B'Av, is known in Jewish life as the Sabbath of Comfort. Its Hebrew name, *Shabbat Nahamu*, refers to the opening phrase of the special Haftarah for this Shabbat, from Isaiah (40:1), Nahamu, Nahamu, Ami!

This is the divine call, addressed to the prophets and to all who are attuned to the divine calling, to bring *nehamah*, to offer comfort, consolation and encouragement to the people in distress. Ridden with guilt, crushed by despair, the people must be awakened to faith and self-confidence, to vision and action:

Bring comfort, bring comfort to My people.

Says your God:

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem And proclaim her,

That her term of suffering is excessively completed.

Her guilt is fully absolved,

For she has sustained from the Lord's hand

Twice as much as she deserves



for her failures.

How does one offer comfort to a person (a family or a people) in distress? The prophet uses the idiom of "speaking to the heart" (*daberu al lev*), which implies human sensitivity and tenderness. To "speak to the heart" is to "touch" one's existential core to appeal to a person's feelings and emotions. The key to proper appeal is respect and appreciation.

You must respect the person's feelings—the sufferer's or mourner's—and not try to impose your own. You must listen before you talk, feel with the person you wish to comfort before you lecture to this person words of comfort.

No one should have the audacity to explain misery to oth-

ers as retributive, as "divine punishment" for one's alleged sins. What is remarkable in Isaiah's Nahamu is the divine admission that the people have indeed suffered much more ("twice as much") than they conceivably could "deserve" for their presumed failures ("sins").

Divine comfort is conveyed to the people through prophecy, and reaches the individual through one's own insight. Human comfort, which people offer to each other, is treated in Jewish law, as a significant aspect of a person's social duties.

The duty to assist one another includes offering kind and supportive words, and the prohibition to harm each other includes refraining from harsh and distressing words. We can help or hurt by words alone. Words possess power.

From Divine comfort we learn how to apply human comfort, tenderly and kindly. When you comfort, do not preach or moralize. Communicate with the heart. Be open and sensitive, sympathetic and responsive, to the thoughts and feelings of the person who needs and seeks comfort. "Words who come out from the heart reach and penetrate the heart."

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SINAI REVELATION conveys its eternal lessons not only by what it contains but also by what it does not. Unlike other "divine" revelations in other religions, the Revelation of Judaism claims no physical appearance or incarnation of God. God reveals Himself not "in person" but in His Message (Torah). Moses makes this point sharp and clear (Deut. 4:15-16): "Be most careful about your own lives; for you saw no figure at all on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from amidst the fire, lest you get corrupted and make for yourselves a graven image, a figure of any shape, in the form of a male or female..." This forceful warning against idolatrous inclinations is introduced with the general duty incumbent upon all of us to diligently guard our very lives, our physical as well as spiritual survival: "Be most careful about your own lives." This implies that for the Jew to succumb to this pagan temptation, imposed on him by forcefully or seductively by Christianity for the last two millenia, to venerate an incarnate deity, is no less than to forfeit his life - to commit suicide. The Jew's refusal to accept any human being as a god nor any god in human form is the vital source of Jewish survival.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: The seven Sabbaths between the Ninth of Av and Rosh Hashana are dedicated to the idea of "Nehama," consolation during Galut, (Exile,) and anticipation of Geula, (Redemption.) The haftarah readings for these seven Sabbaths are from Isaiah's consolatory prophecies. The first, Shabbat Nahamu, introduces the call of Nehama: "Console my people, console them; talk to the heart of Jerusalem, and call unto her. . ." (40:1-2). More than just soothing and comforting, prophecies of consolation are awakening and demanding. Pointing to human potentiality, their fulfillment is entrusted to the people. The Divine Promise calls not for man's passive anticipation but for his active participation. Kindling hope and aspiration for a better world is Prophecy's mission; making the world actually better is man's obligation.

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..NEHAMA IS THE THEME of the seven Sabbaths between the Ninth of Av and Rosh Hashana. It means both consolation during "Galut," (Exile) and anticipation of "Ge'ula" (Redemption). The haftara readings for these seven Sabbaths are from Isaiah's consolatory prophecies. The first, on Shabbat Nahamu: "Console my people, console them; talk to the heart of Jerusalem, and call unto her...."(40:1-2). More than just soothing and comforting, prophecies of consolation are awakening and demanding. Pointing to human potentiality, their fulfillment is entrusted to the people. The Divine Promise calls for man's active participation rather than his passive anticipation. Kindling hope and aspiration for a better world is Prophecy's mission: making the world actually better is man's obligation.

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JEWISH OPTIMISM throughout the ages has been nourished by the enduring power of biblical consolation (*nehama*). In face of utter disaster the prophets comforted the people with exhilarating words of hope and promise. After Jerusalem's Destruction (586 BCE) the city remained a living symbol: a lonely, wailing widow, it personified the people in exile. To comfort her became the sacred mission of the prophets (Isaiah 40:2): "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, call to her, that her term of sufferings is over, her guilt expiated; for she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her faults." The phrase "speak to the heart" is idiomatic, meaning: Appeal to the people, persuade them; affectionately and gently reach out to them and touch their hearts, their feelings and thoughts. True hope is built not on escapism, resignation or denial of reality, but rather on a deeper and more profound understanding of reality. True encouragement stems from reason and conviction. The people do *not* deserve to suffer any more; they must look forward to a better future. This is the core of Jewish optimism.

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By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

ENTREATY is the theme as well as the meaning of "Va-etchanan" dealing with Moses' appeal to God to keep him alive and allow him to enter and see the promised land. The passage starts with Moses' own account (Deuteronomy 3:23): "Then I besought the Lord." The Hebrew for beseeching is "chithanen" from the root-word "chanan" in the sense of grace ("chen") and gift ("chaninah"). The verb thus implies the idea of asking, appealing for a gracious gift. But, interestingly, the mood of the verb is reflexive, indicating an action in which one is both the active and the passive party; in other words an action done to oneself. This verb-form is used also for praying, "hitpalel," implying the introspection and self-judgment. Entraty, as its Hebrew equivalent indicates, is not merely begging, asking and waiting for something happening to you; it is a positive act one does to oneself. To beseech, (in Hebrew "le-hitchanen") is thus to bring grace and blessing upon oneself by one's efforts and deeds. We cannot expect to be passive recipients of Divine gracious giving unless we are also active investors in this process. Even as we are dependent on God we remain His partners.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE SECRET OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATION is unveiled in Rabbi Moshe Alshech's commentary on the Shema (Deut. 6:6-7): "When these words which I bequeath you today will be on your heart, (then) you will teach them to your children . . ." First you yourself must take the words to heart; only then will you be able to impress them upon your children. Only "words that come from the heart can enter the heart." When religion is transmitted to children as something good only (or primarily) for children, "religious education" fails. A teacher must himself be convinced, before attempting to convince his students. This is the secret of effective education.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SH'MA YISRAEL ("Hear, O Israel!" Deut. 6:4) is a call for understanding. "Sh'ma" in Hebrew indicates more than hearing or adhering, listening or obeying; it signifies inner conviction and persuasion. The same "sh'ma" figures in "na'ase v'nishma" (Ex. 24:7); it means: "We will do with understanding." In Judaism, true faith, "emuna," is nurtured by reason and knowledge, enriched by intellectual search and exploration, and affirmed through man's open mind and eyes. Marveling at the splendor of creation, the prophet points to the stars: "Raise your eyes to the sky and see; who brought them into being? He who reveals and counts their multitudes, each of them by its name He calls; mustering full strength and power, not one of them is absent." (Isaiah 40:26) Attuned to his natural surroundings, their forces and regulations, man opens himself to the Divine.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

SHÉMA ISRAEL—“Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!” (Deuteronomy 6:4)—is the Jew’s affirmation and pledge of his loyalty to Judaism. The recitation of the Shema (6:4-9; 11:13-21) is perceived by our Sages as “the acceptance of God’s authority and His precepts”—confirmed twice daily—which implies complete adherence to Judaism and readiness to submit to martyrdom. Theologically, the Shema proclaims Judaism’s pure monotheism. Liturgically, the Shema promotes the sense of Jewish devotion and Jewish national unity. Historically, the Shema emerged as the watchword of Judaism. With the phrase, *Shema Yisrael* Jews identify themselves; from this phrase they draw courage and faith to live as Jews, and often, to die as martyrs *al kiddush Hashem*—sanctifying God’s Name.

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THE MEZUZAH, a rolled, enclosed piece of parchment with the inscription of two paragraphs of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21), is affixed to doorposts of Jewish homes as a constant, visible reminder of the essence of Judaism: pure monotheism and earnest worship. Besides these verses, which deal with man's cleaving to the One God, nothing may be added on the Mezuzah. Maimonides admonished those, in his time, who added to it divine or holy names, deeming it a protective charm (Code, Mez. 5:4): "These fools not only fail to fulfill the law, but they also mistreat this profound mitzvah – expressing God's Oneness as well as the love and worship of Him – as if it were an amulet that caters to their own needs; as they stupidly suppose that it is something useful in their mundane pursuits." The custom of inscribing "Shaddai" on the back of the Mezuzah is, however, tolerated (*ibid*): "Since it is written on the outside, there is no harm." Shaddai, a pre-Mosaic Divine name, suggests by its initials the title: "Guardian of the Homes of Israel." This, however, refers not to the Mezuzah but to God. The Mezuzah is an educational precept, not a magical device; its aim is to motivate man, not to invoke God. It is a symbol of worship, not a gadget of security – a sign of man's adherence to the Divine will, not a means of self-protection. The true benefit of the Mezuzah is in what it symbolizes: the teachings of Torah.

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

THE WHOLE AND THE BROKEN: Two sets of Tablets were kept in the Ark: the new together with the old, the latter shattered into pieces by Moses. This teaches us to respect a scholar who in adversity has forgotten his learning. Even as he is "broken," he represents the dignity of his "whole" life experience (Talmud).

From this we may also learn to enshrine within ourselves both a "whole heart" and a "broken heart" (Is. 38:3; 57:15): The "whole" in our commission of duty; the "broken" in our prayers. We seek to serve God with complete devotion, "*be-lev shalem*" -- wholeheartedly. But we turn to Him in our crushed and contrite spirit, our "*lev nishbar*" ("broken heart") -- our truest sacrifice which God never despises (Ps. 51:19).

August 18, 1978

SINAI REVELATION conveys its eternal lessons not only by what it contains but also by what it does not. Unlike other "divine" revelations in other religions, the Revelation of Judaism claims no physical appearance of God, no incarnation of divinity. God reveals Himself not "in person" but in His Message (Torah). Moses makes this point sharp and clear (Deut. 4:15-16): "Be most careful about your own lives; for you saw no figure at all on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from amidst the fire, lest you get corrupted and make for yourselves a graven image, a figure of any shape, in the form of a male or female..." This forceful warning against idolatrous inclinations is introduced with the general duty incumbent upon all of us to diligently guard our very lives, our physical as well as spiritual survival: "Be most careful about your own lives." This implies that for the Jew to succumb to this pagan temptation, harshly and fanatically imposed on him by ~~another~~ Christianity for the last two millenia, to venerate an incarnate deity, is no less than to forfeit his life -- to commit suicide. The Jew's refusal to accept any human being as a god nor any god in human form is the vital source of Jewish survival. This hallowed heroism -- clinging to One God, Hashem Ehad, eternal and incorporeal, even at the cost of one's mortal life, stems from Sinai.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

CLEVELAND JEWISH NEWS / JULY 26, 1996

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

JUSTICE AND COMPASSION: The two blend and interact in the administration of Jewish law (Deut. 6:18): "Do what is right (*ha-yashar*) and what is good (*ha-tov*)!" These two qualities, *yashar* and *tov*, are perceived in rabbinic tradition as complementary: What is right, straight, honest (*yashar*) must be enhanced by what is good, beneficial, valid (*tov*). Also, the reverse: what is good must be rooted in what is right. Strict legalism is tempered with humanism, formal justice is enriched through equity, and strict law is propelled by ethical dynamism.

The Talmud (BK99b) insists that in seeking fairness, helpfulness and reconciliation, we must go beyond the letter of the law, *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* (literally, "inside the line of

duty"). This means that we must live by the core and spirit, the *penimiyut* (quintessence) of the law.

The secret of effective education is disclosed in Rabbi Moshe Alshech's commentary on the *Shema* (Deut. 6:6-7): When these words which I bequeath you today will be on your heart, (then) you will teach them to your children." First you must take the words to heart; only then will you be able to impress them upon your children. Only "words that come from the heart can enter the heart." When religion is transmitted to children as something good only (or primarily) for children, "religious education" fails. A teacher must be convinced before attempting to convince the students. This is the secret of effective education.

Friday, July 26, 1991

EEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

LAW AND COMPASSION blend and interact in the administration of justice in Jewish law (Deuteronomy 6:18): "Do what is right (*yashar*) and what is good (*tov*)!" These two qualities – *right*, proper, correct, just, formally *straight* and *direct* (*yashar*); and *good*, beneficial, charitable, benevolent, existentially *valid* and *sound* (*tov*) – are perceived in rabbinic tradition as complementary: What is *right* must be enhanced by what is *good*; and what is *good* must be rooted in what is *right*. Thus, strict legalism is superseded by humanism, formal justice is enriched with equity and rigid law is charged with ethical dynamism.

The Talmud insists that we must go beyond the letter of the law (*Bava Kama 99b*). This means that in seeking fairness, helpfulness and reconciliation, we must follow and live by the inner core of the law; acting "*lifnim mishurat hadin*" – which truly means by the quintessence, the inward essence (*penimiyut*) of the law.

Friday, August 11, 1989 C

~~OF THE WEEK~~

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

AHAVA AND YIRAH -- love and fear of God -- are two complementary aspects of the human religious experience: Love expresses a quest for closeness to God, and fear a sense of inevitable distance. Thus we (paradoxically) approach God both as "Parent" (*Avinu*); and as "Ruler" (*Malkeinu*; "our King"). The extent of *ahava* is outlined in *Shema* (6:5), "You will come to love the Lord your God with the wholeness of your mind, your being, and your might."

"Love of God" is more than an inward emotion. It involves behavior, devotion and commitment expressed in ethical and religious conduct. "Fear of God" (6:13) is more than dread of punishment. It means reverence, awareness of divine majesty; adherence to the will of God in awe and humility. In prayer we start by addressing God as "You" (*ata*), then we startle and revert to "He" (*hu*) -- blending our *ahava* (love) with *yirah* (fear).

Thought of the Week

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

“AHAVA” AND “YIRAH” – the “love” and “fear” of God -- are two complementary aspects of the human experience of God. “Love” expresses a quest for closeness, and “fear” a sense of distance – approaching God both as “Parent” (“Avinu;” “our Father”) and as “Master” (“Malkeinu;” “our King”). The extent of “ahava” is articulated in Shema (Dt. 6:5), “You will come to love the Lord your God with the wholeness of your mind, your being, and your might.”

More than an inward emotion, love of God implies complete devotion and total commitment, expressed in ethical and religious conduct. Likewise is the true fear of God (6:13): Rather than dread of divine punishment, it implies reverence, awareness of divine majesty – adhering to the will of God in awe and humility.

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

COMFORT—the bringing of relief and consolation to others—has two facets: divine and human. Divine comfort is conveyed to the people through prophecy, and reaches the individual through his own insight. Human comfort, which people offer each other, is treated in Jewish law. The duty to assist one another includes offering kind and supportive words, and the prohibition to harm another includes refraining from harsh and distressing words. We can hurt or help by words alone. Words possess power. From the way of divine comfort we may learn how to apply human comfort. The prophets who were sent to comfort the people in the name of God were told to do it tenderly and kindly (Isaiah 40:2): “Speak to the heart of (the people of) Jerusalem.” When you comfort, do not preach or moralize. Communicate with the heart to the thoughts and feelings of the person who seeks comfort.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

NEHAMAH - COMFORT: Bringing relief and consolation to others has two facets: Divine and human. Divine comfort is conveyed to the people through prophecy reaching the individual through his own insight. Human comfort, which people offer to each other, is treated in Jewish law as a significant aspect of a person's social duties, *bein adam la-havero*. The duty to assist one another includes offering kind and supportive words, and the prohibition to harm each other includes refraining from harsh and distressing words. We can help or hurt by words alone; words possess power.

From the method of Divine comfort we may learn how to apply human comfort. The prophets who were sent to comfort the people in the name of God were told to do it tenderly and kindly (Isaiah 40:2): "Speak to the heart of (the people of) Jerusalem."

When you comfort, do not preach or moralize. Communicate with the heart – the *lev*. Be open and sensitive as well as sympathetic and responsive to the thoughts and feelings of the person who needs comfort. The Sages say: "Words that come out from the heart reach the heart."

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THE CONCEPT OF "NEHAMA" (Divine consolation) stems from the Jews' positive, non-mythical conception of their dramatic and traumatic history. A fall is perceived as failure, not defeat; as controllable, not inevitable. It is encountered with agony, but not despair; with determination, not resignation. Any destruction, prolonged and devastating as it may be, is always a temporary calamity, never a final tragedy. The very idea of tragedy is non-Jewish. It stems from a pagan culture dominated by the fear and veneration of Fate, and imbued with a human sense of utter helplessness before the capricious decree of amoral forces. Judaism, to the contrary, is sustained by faith in God and the conviction of human freedom and responsibility. It is not blind fate that determines the people's destiny. It is the will of God that the people assume mastery above their destiny. It is within man's ability and duty to endeavor to improve his lot and thus dynamically progress towards his desired and attainable goals. It is somewhat paradoxical that the Jews, who suffered immensely and endured unbearable tragedies, have ever refused to submit to the concept of inevitable tragedy. Every period of sorrow and lamentation concludes with "nehama" – with a sense of comfort and hopefulness in a positive future of return and recovery.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK
Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

Vaethanan Shabbat Nahamu
July 22, 1994

NEHAMAH -- COMFORT: The bringing of relief and consolation to others has two facets: Divine and human. Divine comfort is conveyed to the people through prophecy, and reaches the individual through his own insight. Human comfort, which people offer to each other, is treated in Jewish law, as a significant aspect of a person's social duties, *bein adam la-havero*. The duty to assist one another includes offering kind and supportive words, and the prohibition to harm each other includes refraining from harsh and distressing words. We can help or hurt by words alone. Words possess power.

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