

Parashat Va'Etchanan August 1, 2015

Nachamu, Nachamu ami, yomar Eloheichem - Comfort, oh comfort My people, says your God. The Haftarah for this week opens with these words of comfort, spoken by the prophet Isaiah. He is speaking of the destruction of the first Temple - but it has been a deeply troubling summer, and in some ways we are as much in need of comfort now as we were then.

It has been an especially terrible week in the Holy Land. On Thursday in Jerusalem - the **very** city for which Isaiah seeks comfort - a Charedi fanatic stabbed six people at the city's Pride parade. This man - who had been arrested in 2005 for the very same crime - celebrated his release from prison three weeks prior by terrorizing the peaceful event. On Tu b'Av - often called the "Jewish Valentine's Day" - he turned a joyous celebration into an occasion for terror.

On the same day, Jewish settlers allegedly firebombed two houses in the Arab village of Douma, in the West Bank. One house was thankfully empty; the other contained a family of four. The Arab couple inside managed to escape with their four-year-old son, although all three were badly burned; but they could not save their baby boy, just 18 months old, who burned to death. The criminals - murderers - who perpetrated this heinous act in the name of the *tag mechir* ("price tag") movement have still not been caught.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Ami Adler, gave voice to the reaction so many of us had:

What have we learned from Hashem, if we take to murdering innocents in His name?!

What have we taken away from Torah if we abandon civility and the rule of law to lash out with violence against those with whom we disagree -- and do so *davka* at the time of our year when we should be flush with the memory of our past failures, and eager for the hope of atonement and our upcoming chance to commit ourselves to better lives, when we should be rejoicing in love and companionship?!

This must stop. This kind of violent fanaticism is *avodah zarah*, it is idolatry in the name of Hashem, and far worse than any kind of bowing to a statue or worshipping a dead person. It is a betrayal of every moral principle in Torah, the taking of *divrei kodesh* [holy matters] and turning them into a *chillul ha-Shem* [desecration of God's Holy name]. It is the perversion of everything we are supposed to be, a hideous doppelganger of real Judaism, real Torah.

There is a discussion in the Talmud, in Masechet Yoma, asking why the Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed.

Why was the first Temple destroyed? the Talmud asks. Because of three things that prevailed there: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder.

But why was the second Temple destroyed? During this time, the Jews were instead occupying themselves with Torah, *mitzvot*, and charity - surely that was enough to save the Temple. No - because *sin'at chinam* - hatred without cause - was prevalent during that time. Piousness and observance is not enough - one must be free of baseless hatred, which is considered as serious as idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder - all put together.

It seems that Hashem felt our People hadn't changed enough from the destruction of the first *Beit HaMigdash* - we had changed our public actions, perhaps, but not our hearts. And what has truly changed since then, when individuals who claim to be the most pious among us count assault, arson, terrorism, and murder among their actions perpetrated in the name of God? I can't help but wonder: if we had a chance to rebuild the Temple today, would God want us to?

We as a People have some deep soul-searching to do - all of us, not just those in Israel. A teacher of mine from Brandeis, Rabbi Todd Berman, now lives over the Green Line in a settlement in Israel. He posted the following reflection yesterday.

I'm a religious Jew, but ideologically opposed to fundamentalist Haredi Judaism; and I am a settler, but opposed to right wing anarchist Zionism. Yet I do feel that we of the more centrist varieties have not done enough in words or actions to claim innocence. When my children's school took our kids to Hevron and we heard racist propaganda from the mouths of well known figures we should have protested. And when we hear the racism and homophobia coming from more right wing sources even in centrist religious institutions we should have protested.

I will try to be silent no more. Enough.

Rabbi Hamilton wrote in his e-dvar, "Condemnation without action is worse than hollow. This is because empty condemnations are insidiously self-congratulatory. Unless and until there are comprehensive and convincing programs and systems put in place to cut down predatory wickedness, to punish hate, and to jail incitement, condemnation is lonely and frankly, too polite."

Every Jew owns a piece of these heinous crimes - not because we were involved, but precisely because we were not. Together, as a community, we own not only the murder but the climate in which the murderers' thoughts and actions were bred. We have allowed the religious situation in Israel to deteriorate to a point where murder is seen as a viable act of civil disobedience, and it is our responsibility to change that climate and to speak up when we hear God's Torah being perverted.

This behavior - this culture - this *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred - is all too similar to the behavior that the Talmud tells us caused the destruction of the second Temple. Just one week removed from listening to Jeremiah's lamentation of that downfall in *Eicha*, we must take his words to heart in order to prevent history from repeating itself.

Tisha B'Av - the day itself - is predominantly a day of thoughts and words, rather than actions - as with Yom Kippur, we fast primarily to take the focus away from actions such as eating. For this month, it is the actions taken during the 3 weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av that do much of the emotional heavy lifting.

As such, a fascinating comparison can be drawn between the actions we take leading up to Tisha B'Av and the rituals of Passover. Both holidays commemorate dramatic events that radically shaped Judaism as we know it. At the Passover seder, we are taught that we were all slaves in Egypt and now we are free. We re-enact a ritual, as if we were there in body and in spirit. On Tisha B'av, however, we are not re-enacting the destruction of the Temple, nor the ensuing mourning; rather, we are experiencing the long-term residual effects.

The 17th of Tammuz is the anniversary of when the walls of Jerusalem were breached - it was on that day that the daily *tamid* offering ceased to be brought in the Temple, and an idol was erected in the Holy Temple. For three weeks, beginning with that day, we exist as a people in mourning, as if we ourselves had experienced the fear and uncertainty of seeing our beloved city under siege. We

refrain from joyous activities; weddings are forbidden. The especially devout fast from morning to evening during this time, while many others fast at the beginning - on the 17th of Tammuz - and at the end, on Tisha B'av.

As the days grow closer to Tisha B'av, the restrictions get stronger. During the last 9 days - from Rosh Hodesh Av through the 9th - many people stop eating meat, stop laundering their clothes, and refrain from warm, refreshing baths (including swimming).

But then it's over - as quickly and suddenly as it began. As soon as the worst is over, we return to everyday life, with the only remnant of our grief the next 7 Haftarot - each of which focuses on consolation.

If Tisha B'Av were commemorated like Passover, if we had been re-enacting and re-experiencing the loss of the Temples, we would now be in shiva. We would start with the event itself - the destruction of the Temple - beginning our mourning practices on the day our world changed. Instead, it seems that we are commemorating the yartzheit. The rituals leading up to Tisha B'av mimic anticipatory grief - grief that builds as the anniversary approaches and subsides quickly once the date has passed.

In his book *Jewish Pastoral Care*, Simcha Paull Raphael adapts a model of grief by William Worden, Michelle Goodman, and Howard Clinebell. He takes their four phases of grief and assigns them to Jewish experiences.

In “Phase One: The Initial Shock and Denial,” he puts *Aninut*, the initial time between death and burial. This includes the funeral itself, as well as *shiva* and *shloshim* - the first 7 and 30 days of mourning.

“Facing the Painful Truth” is phase two, and includes *Shiva* and *Shloshim* again, as well as saying Kaddish.

Phase three, which is called “putting the pieces together,” is a slow march that includes continuing to say Kaddish as well as approaching the first *yarzheit*.

And finally, the fourth stage is called “Affirming life and legacy,” and typically includes honoring the yearly *yarzheit* and saying *yizkor*.

We spend Tisha B’av day living in the depths of despair, beating our breasts and feeling the inconsolable emotions that come with losing our center. At the same time, though, we are affirming our own lives and the legacy built by our ancestors after each of the Temples fell. Since we are not reliving the mourning of the Temple - but rather, commemorating its life and legacy - we are actually in Phase Four of this model - we remember, commemorate, teach, and honor.

But what happens when we are perpetually in Phase One? What do we do when we wake up each morning to news of another brutal attack, another senseless murder?

We have hardly had time to process one before another rips us from our recovery and puts us back to square one.

Rather than living in the first stage of denial, it is our responsibility to move swiftly into stages 2 and 3, facing the painful truths and putting the pieces together. This past week, Jews committed murder in the name of God. A police officer senselessly murdered a driver during a routine traffic stop. These are our painful truths. It is our responsibility to dwell in the third stage and put the broken pieces of our society back together.

The more commonly known model of grief is the Kubler-Ross model, better known as the “Five Stages of Grief.” This model acknowledges that grief is experienced more often than just around the death of a loved one, and includes any form of personal loss, such as job or income loss, rejection, the end of a significant relationship, addiction, incarceration, or the onset or diagnosis of a disease, chronic illness, or infertility, among other events.

Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. In one form or another, it is a cycle that we all have experienced

We see the stages of grief in the parasha that we read this morning. Moses deeply desires to enter the Promised Land. Devarim Rabba tells us that he begged God five hundred and fifteen times to let him enter the land.

Five hundred and fifteen times.

Having lost his anchor, his purpose, and his dream, Moses experiences the grief of losing something precious. “Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan,” he begs of God.

As Moses goes through all of the stages of grief, we watch painfully, unable to help.

Not so with our brothers and sisters suffering in the world.

Nachamu, Nachamu ami - Go out and comfort my people, God says. The word “Nachamu” is plural, which is a bit puzzling. Some interpreters assume that this command is being addressed to the angels assigned to be God’s emissaries to the world.

At a time when our world is hurting, when we need senseless love instead of acts of hatred, I prefer to think God is commanding us, His people, to do hard work. Nachamu, Nachamu ami, God says. My people are hurting. Go and comfort them.

Shabbat Shalom.