

I think it's particularly ironic that today, Shabbat Nachamu, also known as the "Sabbath of comfort," falls on my 49th birthday. Talk about needing comfort!! Actually, the older I get, the more grateful I am, so I'm not in need of any comfort when it comes to growing another year older. In my mind, however, this Sabbath of Comfort can just as easily be called The Sabbath of Relief. It follows the somber "Three Weeks" that began with the 17th of Tammuz, when the walls of Jerusalem were breached so many years ago, and culminates in the observance of Tisha B'Av, the saddest day in the Jewish Calendar, marking many catastrophic events in Jewish History, including the destruction of both the 1st and 2nd Temples.

And for the first time in CBS's history, we participated in a meaningful joint Tisha B'Av service with Congregation Beth Shalom. Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and I led a discussion on the meaning of "Divine Punishment" and its relevance today, followed by a Maariv Service and the mournful chanting of parts of Megillat Eicha, the Book of Lamentations. It was truly a special evening, and I was touched to see so many of our congregants in attendance.

And now, after a 3 week semi-mourning period in which traditionally we refrain from participating in any joyous celebrations, eating meat, drinking wine, or even cutting our hair, and after enduring a long 25 hour fast in 108 degree heat, we are all in need of some comfort! Shabbat Nachamu this begins the 7 week countdown to Rosh Hashanah, as we turn from the Haftarot of Rebuke, read over the last 3 Shabbatot, to the 7 Haftarot of Consolation, in which Isaiah relays a positive message of hope and Teshuvah, repentance.

Today is the first of those Shabbatot. And today's Parashah, VaEtchanan, also holds a special place in my heart for several reasons. First of all, it's just a really special Parashah! In it, we find the words of the Shema and V'Ahavta, the reiteration of the Aseret HaDibrot, as well as the 10 Utterances/Commandments/Words.

Certain verses have been plucked straight from our Parashah and placed in our siddur, such as 4:4: V'atem HaD'veikeem, which is a response to the Gabbai's introductory words before the Torah is read; and 4:35: Atah Hareita La DaAt, the first verse recited before the scrolls are taken from the ark on Simchat Torah; and perhaps the verse that is familiar to most of you: "V'yadata Hayom, v'haSheivota El L'VaVecha, Ki Adomai Hu ha Elokeim, baShamayim MiMa'al, v'Al HaAretz Mitachat, Ein Od." Sounds familiar? It's from the Aleinu, a prayer that we chant three times a day that closes each of our services. (Sing it). Not to mention the fact that 6:21, "Avadim Hayeinu L'Pharoah B'Mitzraim, va'yotzeinu HaShem Mimizrayim b'Yad Chazakah," can also be found in our Pesach Haggadot, as a reminder to all of us, and especially our children, that so much of our collective memory, history, and behavior is based on our own experience back in Egypt.

The fact that our Rabbis felt the need to pepper our Siddurim with multiple passages from today's Parashah attests to its importance. Coupled with the fact that this is also the anniversary of Rebekah's Bat Mitzvah, to me personally, this is one significant read! The editors of our own Eitz Chaim Chumash call Chapter 4 "The Theological Heart of Deuteronomy, containing its most fundamental precepts: monotheism and the prohibition of idolatry."

I would even go a step further. I contend that VaEtchanan is the theological heart of the entire Torah. And I believe that the Shema, the commandment to listen, and the V'Ahavata, the commandment to Love G-d, actually embody every one of the 613 commandments within the

Torah. It is also reflected in every moment of our history, from the beginning of creation, through our historical and spiritual journey through the wilderness leading up to this moment when the Israelites are on the precipice of finally entering the Promised Land.

That said, the Shema and V'Ahavata present some interesting theological challenges right off the bat. First of all, technically, the Shema isn't a prayer. The standard prayer formula addresses G-d directly: "Baruch Atah Adomai...Blessed are You, Adomai." The Shema is an issued command to us: "Shema Yisrael, Adomai Elokeinu, Adomai Echad: Listen/hear people of Israel, Adomai is our G-d, Adomai is One/Adomai alone." Think of it as our pledge of allegiance to G-d. What is curious about its construction, however, is that the command to listen, "Shema Yisrael" is in the singular form, addressed to each one of us as individuals. Professor Arnold Eisen, the chancellor of the JTS, translates this as, "Listen, Jewish human being." I really like that! It demands that each one of us has the responsibility to reflect on what our personal relationship with G-d will look like.

And yet, we are also commanded to view Adomai not at "Elokecha - your G-d - which would grammatically make sense given the context, but as "Elokeinu": written in the plural form, "*Our* G-d." Why this mix of pronouns in the same sentence? Perhaps to teach us that only when each of us is in a personal relationship with G-d is it possible to unite as a community to witness our belief in one Eternal Creator. Professor Eisen comments, "It speaks in the singular and demands that we learn to act in community that way, as a unity, when it comes to G-d; not surrendering our differences or losing our variety, but using that very diversity to accomplish what one mind (or one sort of mind or heart or soul or ability), acting alone, could not."

The very first word of this commandment/statement, which Rabbi Oren Hayon believes is actually the most important word in the sentence, demands that we pay attention, listen, hear; which begs the question, “Listen to what?” What’s the message that we are supposed to be hearing? Simply that, in contrast to our soon-to-be-new-neighbors, we believe in only one G-d; that Adomai, our Master, is our guide and the sole creator of the Universe. And we must hear this message so that our eyes don’t wander and see the temptations around us in our new home.

Rabbi Horen calls this, “Attentive religious listening,” saying, “(Moses) teaches Israel to depend less on what it can see than on what it can hear. Religious hearing must always trump the inspiration of visual marvels. G-d demands faith in the invisible, the not-yet-conceived. G-d’s words can make real, things that look impossible to our eyes.”

Listening is really hard work. It’s also one of the most important tasks that we can undertake. How often do we, when engaged in conversation, really tune out everything else around and truly focus on what the other person is saying? I used to pride myself on being able to carry on a phone-conversation while folding laundry, making dinner, or even perusing the headlines in the paper. In truth, I was hearing words on the other end of the line, but after hanging up, I would often ask myself, “what was that all about?” In our busy multi-tasking lives, it can be a real challenge to put aside everything else and really focus on hearing what our friend, or spouse, or child is trying to tell us. And I suspect that many have fooled ourselves into believing, like I did, that we are truly giving that person our undivided attention as we text someone else, or think about that appointment the next day, or make a mental to-do list. How many of us pretend to listen, but don’t really hear?

Dr. Michael P. Nichols, author of “The Lost Art of Listening,” contends, “How we lost the art of listening is certainly a matter for debate. What isn’t debatable is that the loss leaves us with an ever-widening hole in our lives. The need to be heard, which is something we ordinarily take for granted, turns out to be one of the most powerful motives in human nature. We hurt each other unnecessarily by failing to acknowledge what the other one has to say.”

Every day, three times a day, as we chant the 18th blessing of the Amidah, we plead, “Shema Koleinu, Adomai Elokeinu: Adomai our G-d, hear our voice.....” Just as G-d commands us to listen, we command G-d to listen. We need to know that G-d hears us, hears our praises, and our laments. The blessing concludes, “Baruch Atah Adomai, Shomei T’Fillah: Blessed are you Adomai, the One who hears prayer.” It doesn’t ask G-d to answer our prayers, but simply to hear them. Even if we don’t get the response that we were hoping for, I believe that we can find comfort in just knowing that G-d is there, present for us to walk us through whatever lies ahead.

Perhaps even more difficult than fulfilling the commandment to listen, is fulfilling the commandment to love. The V’ahavta exhorts us to “Love Adomai with all your heart, with all your soul, and with everything that you have.” Herein lies the challenge. The commentator Mizrachi asks, “How can the command to love G-d apply to something a man has not seen or never recognized?” I further ask, how can anyone be commanded to *feel* something? We can be told what to do, but how can we be told what to feel? The answer lies in the verses that follow. The V’Ahavata is a blueprint that tells us what we must do in order to be able to eventually feel that love. How do we get to know, and thus feel love for G-d? By doing those things that bring us closer to G-d. Teaching, studying, learning Torah, and thus knowing how G-d expects us to treat each other and the world we live in. And then putting what we’ve learned into action by following those mitzvot that lead us

toward Tikkun Olam, repair of the world; Tzedekah, giving of ourselves to help others in need; Holiness, finding meaning in every moment of life; and empathy, feeling the pain and joy that comes with the experience of being truly present in each other's lives. The V'ahavata also talks about visual reminders of the need to make mitzvot central in our lives: the mezuzah and tefillin, both of which contain the Shema and the V'ahavta. Listening, learning, doing, can lead to love; love of G-d, and of all that G-d has created.

As we recite the Shema and V'ahavata, may we all be blessed with the overwhelming power of this love each day. And may this Shabbat Nachamu bring us comfort as we turn our thoughts and concentration to renewing our lives again in the upcoming New Year.

Shabbat Shalom