

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
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Al tashlicheinu, l'eit zikna, "Do not cast us away in our old age." Kichlot kocheinu, al ta'azveinu, "As our strength ebbs, do not abandon us." What's your reaction to this line from the Yom Kippur liturgy?

I've seen people in tears as they say this line. Sometimes it's the oldest—feeling their old age, begging God, their community, their family, not to forget them.

This plea, "do not cast us away," can be intense for those who are younger too. Some of us are praying for older people in our family who are reaching an age of physical or cognitive decline. Some of us are praying for the capacity to hold loved ones close even as their aging presents challenges. And some of us can't help but imagine – what will it be like for us when we are losing our strength? When we have become the ones whose bodies and minds are in decline, when the idea of being abandoned in our old age feels like a real and terrifying possibility?

We don't want to be forgotten, and we wonder, or doubt, whether we will be able to find joy, purpose, meaning, and a sense of being settled in this new phase of life as we did in the last, as we did in the past.

This past summer was my son Caleb's last one as a camper at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Even at sixteen years old, he and his friends were aware that an era was ending. And they were frequently and collectively contemplating how they as an edah, as a group, "Nivonim 2023," would be remembered, and what their legacy would be. They were not sure what would come next for them individually, but they knew that there would never be a "together" like there had been, when they felt settled, secure, confident, competent. Feeling at the top of their world.

I've been listening to a lot of Taylor Swift music since the spring. I think I was the first in our family to listen to her music intensively, but Hallel and Avra (and Tammy) find it mostly annoying that I sing along while barely knowing any of the words, while they somehow just know all the words.

Swift's anthem, "Long Live," which she often uses to end concerts, captures the feeling of realizing that a great era is ending, and of wanting to hold on to it, to its memory:

*Long live the walls we crashed through
How the kingdom lights shined just for me and you
I was screaming, "Long live all the magic we made"
And bring on all the pretenders, I'm not afraid
Long live all the mountains we moved
I had the time of my life fighting dragons with you
I was screaming, "Long live the look on your face"
And bring on all the pretenders
One day we will be remembered*

The irony of course, is that we are saying, "long live" to a moment that is already vanishing. As we sense we are moving to another phase of life, no matter our age, we look at

what has passed and if it was good, think of it as the most precious thing that has been irretrievably lost. We so well know that feeling, that wishing to hold on to those moments, and that feeling of wondering if, of hoping we will, be remembered.

This impulse is not just about the young, or the old. It's about us all—we all experience time's passage; aging and loss unites us, no matter how many years we have already lived or how many years, God willing, we have ahead of us. When we experience a transition from a time, a setting, where we are settled and confident, to a new uncertain, wobbly, existence, we so often look back longingly for those good old days, those good old ways.

We might feel this if we cannot drive a car anymore. Or when we realize that we're older and cannot host people in our homes, or for meals, as easily. This drama and sadness may envelop a student who thrived in high school but is now struggling in college; or new parents who wonder if they will ever get a good night's sleep again. Those who have been through an un-looked-for breakup, or divorce. Or people who have an illness they know will be with them for the rest of their lives. And they can no longer imagine having lives filled with the joys they knew, with being able and competent at all that they do.

Experiencing a loss is especially un-settling, and destabilizing. We may feel at sea, unmoored, longing for an irretrievable past.

At times like this, we need consolation.

"The essential element of consolation is hope," writes Michael Ignatieff in his beautiful book, *On Consolation*. Ignatieff is a historian, a scholar of and activist for human rights, and the former head of the Liberal Party in Canada. We need to be reminded, to remember, to believe, he says, "that we can recover from loss, defeat, and disappointment, and that the time that remains to us, however short, offers us possibilities to start again."¹

"Consolation is what we do, or try to do, when we share each other's suffering or seek to bear our own," he explains. "What we are searching for is how to go on, how to keep going, how to recover the belief that life is worth living."²

Consolation is different from comfort. Says Ignatieff, "Comfort is transitory; consolation is enduring. Comfort is physical; consolation is propositional. Consolation is an argument about why life is the way it is and why we must keep going."³

The Hebrew word for consolation is the root *nun-chet-mem*, נ.ח.מ, from which we get the words *nichum*, in *nichum aveilim* (comforting or consoling mourners), *nechama*, *nachamu*. These are all about comforting, consoling.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker was, I think, the first person to ever suggest that I should think about being a rabbi. In a class he taught for rabbis this summer, which inspired much of this sermon, he reminded us that we also see the same root, נחם, in the context of changing one's mind. For example, God, when deciding to bring the flood, says, כִּי נִחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתִים—for I have changed my mind about what I made (Gen. 6:7).

And Noah, Noach, is named such because יִנְחַמֵנו—"this one will comfort us" (Gen. 5:29), as it's usually translated. But maybe we should read it as "this one will console us," "this

¹ Michael Ignatieff, *On Consolation* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2021), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

one will help us change our minds to reconcile to our new reality, that life will still be worth living, even after a flood.”

When our reality changes, when we are unsure if we’ll ever again find joy, purpose, a sense of being settled, we can find consolation in (at least) two ways. First, we remember that we are not alone in this yearning. The Psalms are all about people feeling unsettled, uncertain, and yearning, as in the familiar verses of Psalms 23 and 27: to dwell, to live, really, to be settled in the house of God for all of our days.

And second, says Ignatieff, “Consolation is always a gift, a form of grace we do not always deserve, but which, when we receive it, even for a fleeting instant, makes our lives worth living.” And then he quotes a poem by the Polish-American poet Czeslaw Milosz: (Chezz-lahf Mi-wash)

A day so happy.

Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.

Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.

There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.

I knew no one worth my envying them.⁴

I knew no one worth my envying them. This person, while gardening, found consolation in the delight of a hummingbird.

Consolation can come in the form of nature: a bird, a glimpse of a deer, a flower. Consolation can come from a child, or an elder, or a cause, a need.

We each can console.

You can be a consolation, just by being you, by hearing and holding someone’s pain, by walking with them through that shadowed valley, until just maybe a ray of sunlight breaks through the clouds.

Yizkor, which we will begin shortly, is of course about remembering, remembering our loved ones who have died. But it’s not about remembering death. It’s about remembering life, lives. It’s about saying “long live” about everyone we are remembering today. We remember the times when, with them, we would be singing, “long live the magic we made.” We remember all the times our loved ones had to find consolation themselves, had to find the hope to keep on living.

May their memories console us to do the same.

⁴ Ibid. 261.