

The Shabbat after Tisha B'Av is called Shabbat Nachamu, because the haftarah, the selected reading from the book of Prophets, is from Isaiah, Chapter 40, and begins with the proclamation: Nachamu, nachamu ami: Comfort, take comfort, my people. After weeks of rebuke, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, which we commemorated with mourning on Tisha B'Av, now our liturgical cycle turns us to comfort.

This has always seemed a little. . . *much* to me. Less than a week ago, we had a service in this sanctuary, seated on the floor as we cried out in Lamentations. We deliberately descended into the depths of our people's pain, of the world's pain. For some of us, we used this as a catharsis for our personal pain. To be reading comfort now is an awfully quick turnaround! If we were indeed deserving of the punishment of destruction and exile, how can God be reconciled to us so quickly? Or perhaps more troubling - if we are *not* deserving of pain and trauma, how can we accept God's comfort; how can we be reconciled with *God* - with such a quick turnaround?

This week, as I was pondering this question, I noticed that the parasha of Va'etchanan is always read on shabbat Nachamu, this shabbat of Comfort. Va'etchanan is the second parasha in the book of Deuteronomy. Now, the whole book of Deuteronomy is mostly Moses's restatement of the preceding books of the Torah, reminding the Israelites of where they have been, what they have done, and what they have learned. So, for example, in this parasha, we have a restatement of Ten Commandments, originally proclaimed in the book of Exodus.

But there are flashes of completely original brilliance in Deuteronomy, including a line in this parasha that is so important, so universally understood as important, that I almost thought I didn't need to speak about it. In Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, we read, most simply translated, "Hear, Israel, Hashem, our God, Hashem, one." In other words, the Shema, which we say in our morning services and evening services.

Or, if you would like the archaic translation: "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord, Our God, the Lord is One."

Or, if you'd like a theologically looser translation: "Hear, Godwrestlers: the transcendence that animates the universe, that which we are immanently connected to, that transcendence; it's all One."

. . .And I could go on.

The text in the Torah does go on, without pause, into Ve-ahavata: "And you: love Hashem your God, with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your muchness."

There is so much to say about this text, even just these two verses.

This sentence, Shema, often referred to as the most important Jewish prayer, is in fact no prayer at all. Prayers are generally praise, supplication, laments or thanks. This sentence is a Biblical quote and a statement of faith, and it contains no formulaic words of blessing. And yet, this is one of the most immediately recognizable lines of Jewish liturgy. Traditionally, Jews say it actually four times a day: right after awakening, during morning prayers, during evening prayers and right before bed.

In our liturgy, shema is preceded, both morning and evening, by two blessings: the first is blessing over light in the morning - *Yotzer or* - which gives thanks for the power that animates the universe: the sun and the vastness of space.

In the evening that first blessing's emphasis is on the cycles of time, light rolling into darkness, darkness into light, creating an ordered cosmos. Both morning and evening, the message of the first blessing is: Wow. The order in the universe is so vast, and we are so small.

And yet, then there is the second blessing, Ahavat Olam, We are loved by an Unending Love, and the message is: we are infinitely beloved, infinitely significant. These two blessings precede Shema, so when we make the statement of unity, we are holding this paradox: Hear Israel: that Source that is so vast, in whose presence we are so small, that is also the one who loved us intimately, to whom each of us matters - that is one. That is the paradox we hold.

Jews have said this statement of unity on their deathbeds and right before being martyred. One of the most famous passages about it is the story of Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Talmudic sages, related in the Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Berakhot 61b: Rabbi Akiva was arrested by the Romans for teaching Torah, and sentenced to death. The Talmud teaches,

When they brought R. 'Akiba out to execution, it was the time for reading the Shema'; and though they were combing his flesh with iron combs, he kept saying the words. His disciples said to him, "Our teacher, even now?!" He answered them, "Throughout my life I have been troubled about this verse, '[And you shall love Hashem your God...] and with all your soul' which means: Even if God takes your life. For I wondered, 'How can I fulfil it?' But now that I have the chance, shall I not fulfil it?" He prolonged the word ehad until his soul departed with the word ehad [on his lips]. A Bat Kol - a heavenly voice - issued forth and announced, "Happy are you, R. 'Akiba, that your soul went out with the word ehad!"

This story makes me uncomfortable. I suppose any story about a person's flesh being torn with iron combs would. But that kind of martyrous joy at being able to give up one's life in order to prove the love of God feels very inaccessible to me. There is a midrash, in Masechet Menachot 29b, that back when Moses received the Torah, he was shown Rabbi Akiva - both his brilliance at teaching, and his martyrdom. When the vision was revealed to him, the midrash says, "Moses cried out to God: "Master of the Universe: For this Torah, can this be the reward?" And God basically answered: "Too bad, this is just how I roll."

This Talmudic story speaks to my discomfort, in the voice of Moses, appalled to see the outcome of Rabbi Akiva's brilliant teaching. The divine answer; "This is my decree." does not resolve the discomfort; rather it's an affirmation, not a justification, of Divine unpredictability.

So perhaps when we say Shema, we are also saying this: "That source of all blessing, and the source of horror, that too, is One."

So to get back to my original struggle, it helps that Parashat Va'Etchanan falls on Shabbat Nachamu. We read the words of Shema before we read the haftarah of Comfort, and those words remind us that yes, the source of destruction and source of comfort are one. It is appropriate - even necessary - to pour out our lament and to receive comfort from the same source. Because, as our liturgy remind us, the Divine is about the cycles of time and space, so much more than our personal or even communal concerns. So things will not always go well, or even justly for us. And yet there is also a truth that we are loved. And unifying that paradox, too great for us to make sense of, is what we can demand of God..