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Haftarat Vaetchanan (and Shabbat Nachamu): A Double Consolation

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֵר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
(ישעיהו פרק מ פסוק א)

With *Parashat Vaetchanan* we begin the “*Shevah De-Nechemta*” – “the Seven Weeks of Comfort” following the three week period of mourning over the *Churban* culminating with *Tishah Be-Av*. The second half of *Sefer Yeshayahu* introduces the prophet’s role to comfort and console the Jewish people¹ and begins with “*Nachamu, nachamu ami,*” a double expression of comfort. What is the meaning behind this double expression of *nechamah*?

The *gemara* (*Makkot* 24b) tells the famous story of R. Akiva and three other great Sages, who, while walking past a destroyed *Har Ha-Bayit*, saw an animal walking in the area of the *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*. The Sages began to cry, whereas R. Akiva was *metzachek*, loosely translated as “laughing.” In wonderment, the Sages turned to R. Akiva and asked how he could be joyful in this time of desecration and destruction. R. Akiva responded that only now that the prophecy of Uriah has been literally fulfilled concerning the horrible state of *churban Ha-Bayit*, is he quite certain that the prophecy of Zechariah is to also find its literal fulfillment, that “there shall yet be old men and old women sitting in the broad places of Jerusalem.” At that point the Sages turned to R. Akiva and proclaimed, “Akiva you have comforted us; Akiva you have comforted us!”

The Maharsha offers an explanation as to why the Sages answered R. Akiva in a repetitive statement of comfort and concludes, “*kol ha-nechamot be-lashon kaful*” – “all of the consolations are written in double language,” similar to that of Yeshayahu’s expression – “*Nachamu, nachamu.*”

In order to better understand why all consolations are doubled we must first examine and define the term *nechamah*. The first time the root of the word is used in the Torah can be found at the very end of *Parashat Bereishit*:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק אֱמַחָה אֶת הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד בְּהֵמָה עַד רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
כִּי נַחֲמָתִי כִּי עָשִׂיתֶם: (בראשית ז:ז)

And *Hashem* said “I will blot out Man whom I created from the face of the earth, from man to animal, to creeping crawlers and birds of the sky, for I have *reconsidered* My having made them.”

The process of *nechamah* is to review the facts of the past and to reflect towards the future. In *Parashat Bereishit*, the context is the creation of man and God’s decision as to whether it would be better had He not created man in the first place. In the context of the destruction of the *Beit Ha-*

¹. Amos Chacham, *Da’at Mikra Sefer Yeshayahu* (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1989), 408.

Mikdash, the role of *nechamah* is to reflect upon the *Churban* and to project that experience and channel it towards the eventual redemption itself.

This is not the only encounter reported by *Chazal* in which R. Akiva demonstrated a keen ability to see past the present moment of destruction. In fact, R. Akiva was known for maintaining a broader perspective on life, and his belief that everything is eternally good. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 61b) illustrates the fate of R. Akiva as follows:

בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה, והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקות של ברזל, והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים. אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבינו, עד כאן? אמר להם: כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך – אפילו נוטל את נשמתך, אמרתי: מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו? היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד.

When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for reciting the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, ‘with all your soul’ – ‘even if he takes your soul’. I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it? R. Akiva prolonged the word *echad* until he died while saying it.

R. Hershel Ryzman² asks a simple question on this chilling story. Why did R. Akiva extend the word *echad*, and not *nafshekha*, which is the textual source of giving up one’s life for the sake of God? He answers that R. Akiva was conveying a lesson to the Jewish people. The secret to living a life completely in line with *be-khol nafshekha* is to be focused on the singular nature of *Hashem echad*, since it is the same God that brings both good and evil into this world.

It is therefore appropriate that we read in *Parashat Vaetchanan* (*Devarim* 6:4) the verse of *yichud Hashem*, “Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is the One and Only” before reading the double consolation of “*Nachamu, nachamu.*”

This theme is expounded in writings of R. Yeruchem Levovitz.³ After enduring a challenging time in one’s life and finally reaching the light at the end of the tunnel, the natural reaction is to have wished that the *tzarah* (hardship) had never occurred. However, explains R. Levovitz, the Torah’s perspective on these moments, as taught to us by R. Akiva, is to view the *tzarah* as an opportunity for growth and to recognize that the salvation could only come after enduring the tremendous pains of the *tzarah*.⁴

The challenge of “*kol ha-nechamot be-lashon kaful*” is to perceive the *nechamah* as a two-part process which includes the *tzarah* as part of the ultimate *nechamah*. Furthermore, we are challenged to internalize the concept that the salvation does not come as an answer for the *tzarah*, but rather the entire purpose of the *tzarah* is to bring about the salvation.

With this in mind, we can also explain⁵ the imagery of a shepherd used by *David Ha-Melekh* in *mizmor* 23, “The Lord is my shepherd,” which we often recite in times of *tzarah*. R. Chaim Volozhin⁶ explains that the role of a shepherd is to guide his sheep to stay on course. The *mizmor* begins, “ה', אֶחָסֵר לֹא רֵעִי, – “[since] *Hashem* is my shepherd, I do not lack anything.” Even if the sheep want to wander or graze from another area off to the side, “וְרִבְצִנִי דָּשָׁא, בְּנְאוֹת” – the shepherd may strike the

². *Iyunim Be-Haftarah* (2004), 439.

³. *Da'at Chokhmah U-Mussar* (vol. 1), 7.

⁴. See also the story with R. Akiva in *Berakhot* 60b regarding “*kol mah de-avid Rachmana le-tav avid.*”

⁵. Based upon R. Eliyahu Wolf, *Mah She-Haya Hu She-Yihyeh* (2004), 351.

⁶. See *Ruach Chaim Avot* (2:4).

sheep in the lush meadows to stay on the path. Perhaps the sheep may want to rest for a while, whereas the shepherd would rather continue on the journey, “וְנַהֲלֵנִי מִנְחוֹת עַל־מִי” – to reach the restful destination. Here, too, we find the reference to *nechamah*, “שָׂבַטְךָ, וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ” – “יְנַחֲמֵנִי הַמָּה וּמִשְׁעֲנֵתְךָ, שָׂבַטְךָ” – through the “striking of the rod” as representative of our difficult time, we find comfort.

We can now better appreciate the declaration of the *navi* Zechariah⁷ that the days of mourning over the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* will one day be refashioned into days of great joy and happiness.

כֹּה אָמַר יְקֹוֹק צְבָאוֹת צֹם הָרְבִיעִי וְצֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי יְהִיָּה לְבֵית יְהוּדָה לְשָׂשׂוֹן וּלְשִׂמְחָה וּלְמַעֲדִים טוֹבִים.

So says God, the fast of the fourth and the fast of the fifth and the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be for the house of Judah for joy and happiness and holidays.

Additionally, the expression in *Chazal* (*Ta’anit* 30b) that “רואה זוכה ירושלים על המתאבל כל” – “whoever mourns over Jerusalem will merit seeing it in joy,” presents us with this same perception of a communal *tzarah* which will ultimately lead to the ultimate redemption. Only those that appreciate the communal destruction, or their personal *tzarot* as a message from *Hashem*, will truly feel the embracing hand of God in delivering our salvation.

As such, at the time of our redemption, as we reflect upon over two thousand years of *galut*, on pogroms and massacres and expulsions, we will better appreciate the greatness of *Hashem*’s salvation, echoing the words of *Yeshayahu Ha-Navi*’s triumphant encouragement to the Jewish people, “*Nachamu, nachamu*”!

⁷. Zechariah 8:19.