THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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"Disconsolation and Discontent"

This week, after spending the past three weeks memorializing and mourning the past catastrophes which befell our people over the course of our long history, we all are offered consolation at the hands of Prophet Isaiah.

In the *haftarah*, which serves as the climax after the reading of this week's Torah portion, *VaEtchanan* (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11), we are asked to be edified by the eloquent words which only Isaiah was capable of articulating:

Comfort, comfort, My people—these are your God's words—speak to Jerusalem's heart and call out to her that her term is served, her guilt appeased, that she has received at the Lord's hand twice over for all her sins. A voice calls out: "Clear the Lord's way in the desert: smooth across the arid plain a road for our God." Every valley will be raised, each hill and mountain leveled; the twisted road will be made straight; the mountain ranges, open land, to let the Lord's Glory be revealed... (Isaiah 40: 1-5)

These reassuring words are meant to console and comfort a people who have suffered severely and repeatedly over many centuries, nay millennia. One wonders, however, if it is realistic to attempt to allay the profound pain of victims of unspeakable terror with mere words, eloquent as they may be.

After all, when Jacob was first informed about his favorite son Joseph's supposed fate, he declared, "A wild animal must have eaten him! Josef has been torn limb from limb!" And then we read, "... he mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'I will go down to the netherworld mourning for my son.'" (Genesis 37:33-35)

To say the least, Jacob was disconsolate, inconsolable, dejected. Is it only fair to ask, "If our patriarch Jacob would not yield to the words of comfort extended to him by his own immediate family, how can we be expected to easily recover from the agonies of our heart-rending history?"

Or consider the example of Jacob's cherished wife, Rachel. This time, I refer to the

words of the Prophet Jeremiah: "A sound is heard in Rama: wailing, bitter weeping. It is Rachel, weeping for her children. She refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are all gone." (Jeremiah 31:14)

Note that both Jacob and Rachel *refuse* to accept comfort, to be consoled. They adamantly choose to remain disconsolate, inconsolable, dejected.

How are we, then, to blithely dismiss the emotions of recent weeks, laden as they were with sadness, fasting, and heartfelt lamentations? Can we deftly transmute *Shabbat Chazon* and the elegies of Tisha B'Av into *Shabbat Nachamu* and no less than seven weeks of joyous inspiration?

Or, to focus on our contemporary circumstances, surrounded as we are with widows and orphans of soldiers killed in battle, can we not empathize with those who "refuse still to be consoled?" Can traumatized individuals conceivably be soothed by comforting words, however inspiring they may be?

To address this question, and hopefully to provide some food for thought for those of my contemporaries who still feel perplexed and stymied by the horrors of the Holocaust, and more recently by all that has ensued since October 7, 2023, allow me to refer to two rabbinic sources as well as draw upon my own training in the psychological treatment of trauma.

The first source is from Rabbi Shimon Schwab's *Maayan Bais HaSho'evah*. He reflects upon this verse: "As a man is consoled by his mother, just so shall I comfort you…" (Isaiah 66:13) He asks, why a "mother" rather than a "father", and why a "man" rather than a "child"? He answers that it is the mother who went through the difficulties of pregnancy and the pangs of childbirth, and all of the consequent difficulties of child rearing, especially during adolescence. During that entire time, she did not experience the full joy attributed to having a child. It came with all sorts of tribulations and disappointments. But now that her son was a mature man, she could conclude that it was all worth it. She could assure her grown child, who was going through his own tests and challenges, that he will reach the point of being able to be consoled and indeed to accept his current difficulties from a fresh perspective, just as she has now that she raised him.

Another approach is offered in an essay by Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, author of the *Seridei Aish*. He reflects upon his own Holocaust experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto before he escaped from it. He writes: "That is the manner of the experience of suffering. It has a way of creating a new soul-energy in the person, "softening his sins," as the Talmud puts it. A new and revived soul enters the fray. New powers emerge from the subconscious and transform one's previous existence."

Rabbi Weinberg's approach is very close to that of one of my mentors in the field of recovery from trauma. I refer to Dr. Judith Lewis Herman, author of the book *Trauma and Recovery*. In the introduction to her book, she writes:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness… Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of the psychological trauma…

She emphatically asserts that the process

of healing from trauma takes quite a long time, often even many years. But it reaches a point when the person achieves what she calls "reconnection".

Thus, Dr. Herman continues, "the simple statement—'I know I have myself'—could stand as the emblem of my own recovery... Her task now is to become the person she wants to be!"

In my own thinking, I've adopted a slightly different terminology. All who suffer have, as the author of *Tehillim* puts it, a "broken heart". But with time, inner work, a supportive environment, and well-meaning consolation, there comes a "breakthrough". It is a sense of a mission and new life purpose which is freeing, sundering the bonds of victimhood and relieving the burdens of anger and anxiety.

It is a freedom that we call *nechama* and *geula*, comfort and redemption. Such is the mood of *Shabbat Nachamu,* and such should be the mood of the next seven weeks of consolation culminating in the wonderful New Year which lies ahead, a year of healing and recovery, of calm and true peace, of a "breakthrough" to new and lasting achievements as individuals and as a totally unified nation at last.