

Shabbat 08 16 19 Sermon

The song that we just sang to come out of the Amidah, taken from the words of the prophetic writings, the prophetic readings that are read on Shabbat morning. And tomorrow morning in particular, the Haftorah, the reading from the prophets, beginning tomorrow and seven weeks leading up to the Rosh Hashanah, leading up to the Chagim, these seven Haftorah, these seven particular prophetic readings begin with the famous words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40, Perek Mem of Sefer Yeshayahu, where the prophet says, Nahamu, Nahamu Ami Yomar Eloyichem. Dabru aleiv Yerushalayim V'kiru Elehah. Nahamu, Nahamu, Comfort be comforted, my people. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, speak to the heart of my people and tell her that she is comforted. The name of this particular Shabbat is Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of being comforted.

And in naming that moment for us, the rabbis, and this is a very old tradition, these Shabbat Nachemta, these seven weeks of being comforted or being held and that word Nechama, of being consoled or comforted, Nechama. The rabbis brought us in a way into the very arc of time, the way that Jewish time plays with us, our emotions, our feelings, our values, where we are in the world. Last Shabbat, of course, many of us remember that it was Eichad, it was Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, which is of course the Jewish National Mourning Day or the catastrophe, the day that commemorates and consolidates all of the moments of trauma and drama and pain and anguish and angst that we as a people have endured. And a short six days later, we have Tu B'Av on the full moon of the very month in which those, right, those desolations are remembered. We have Tu B'Av, the 15th, two of that month, which is Love Day. We're told that it's a very old tradition of big parties and people connecting with each other and love is in the air, in the air.

And in a bigger way with this Haftorah, with the prophetic readings, we have another moment of after Eichad, after the laments and the loss and the howling, Eichad is howling, Eichad, Eichad. We have Nachamu, be comforted. And just to feel ourselves into the sacred literature and how time and literature and our tradition work together, not only is tomorrow called Shabbat Nachamu because of the reading of the Haftorah, but every year we read the same Torah portion, Parshat Ve'etchanan, the Torah portion that I believe in and of itself might be a Nechama, it also might be a consolation because in this Torah portion tomorrow morning we have so many nutrients that we need for living a holy life, for living a meaningful and purposeful life.

The Shema and the Ve'ehavta, right? Those six words of our great mantra are in chapter six of the book of Devarim, tomorrow morning reading Shema and Ve'ehavta. Tomorrow morning we are hearing the 10 commandments the second time, right? The second iteration of the Aseret HaDibro, tomorrow morning. The Parshat is full of reminders of what it is to be able to enter the land, to enter into the place of a holy society, a good society.

But it begins with something funny and it begins in a way that I think bridges for me comfort and what we're leading up to over the next seven weeks, which is Tshuva, which is repair, repentance, readying ourselves for the year ahead. There's something in the very beginning of tomorrow morning's reading of our sacred wisdom that points in the direction of a question and an answer about both comfort and change. How comforting Nechama and

Tshuva, which of course also, by the way, Tshuva appears tomorrow morning in the Torah portion, Ve'ehavta Adonai Elohecha.

I wanna bridge those two things. And it begins with a very funny word, which is kind of, or phrase, which many of us might know from either a book or a movie where one of the characters says, more, name that movie. Oliver. More. May I have some more? More. To ask for more. There's a funny phrase, some of you might know this a little bit from Seinfeld, like get out, like when she says, doesn't Lane say like too much or she says, get out of here or something like that. Too much, right? The Torah will tell us that Moses will come to God and say, God, are you willing to go back on your promise, your oath not to let me into the land? Right, so believe it or not, tomorrow morning's reading begins with a figure who won't allow somebody who is a leader into the land of Israel. Does that sound familiar to you? So there's God and then there's one who imagined themselves to be God.

But let's just say that tomorrow, we're reading about God saying to Moses, after Moses pleads, some say 515 prayers, some say, right, so many prayers. Va'etchanan al Adonai, va'idahid leimor. Moses says to the people of Israel, at that time when God had said to me, I can't make it into the land, I came and I said, really? And the word va'etchanan is the word hein, charming. As if Moses, the rabbis imagined Moses coming like our kids or kids we know, come to the parents and say, really? You're not gonna let me use the iPad? Have the car? We can figure some other things. There's a charm, there's a hein, there's va'etchanan. The word in Hebrew, etchanan, from the word chanina, etchina, a prayer, is also playfully read as the rabbis as Moses coming and using everything within Moses's power to convince God to annul the decree, to let him in. Let me, please, ebran na, va'et, please let me go in. I want to go in. Just let me. And God, in this Elaine moment, in this Mormon moment, says to Moses, rav lach, al tosef, taber laiot va-tavar zed. God is like this ogre-like parent saying, enough already. No, enough.

But the word enough is not enough. The phrase is rav lach. Rav, rabim, rav, you have more than enough. Rav lach means kilo yeshlcha masbik, ma kara lacha? What's wrong with you? Rav lach, you have rav, rabim, you have a lot. Al tosef, no more for you. No Israel for you. No more. You want seconds, thirds? You haven't got firsts yet. Too much. Rav lach.

The commentators are very perplexed by this phrase. Rav lach. God says to Moses, rav lach, and here's one of the commentators. It's early Midrash. The Midrash says that basically, here was a conversation between God and Moses. God says to Moses, you have to stop speaking now because if you keep going, people are gonna think that I'm really harsh and you're really sweet. That's one Midrashic voice. Another Midrashic voice says that here's another conversation between God and Moses. Moses says to God, listen, God, I have the power to annul a vow. I have the power, right? You've given human beings, kol nidre, get a group of people together. You made a promise. We can break the promise, no problem. He says to God, hey God, if I can do it, then you can do it too. You made a promise that I can't enter the land, but we all know promises are made to be broken. Come on, God. And God says, rav lach, meaning that's all good because you have someone greater than you, but I have no one greater than me that can annul my decree. You can bring together a group of people and they can say, you are only human, but what are you gonna say to me? I'm God, rav lach, meaning there's one greater than you, rav lach. There's one greater than you and therefore you could break or have others annul your vow.

But here's the Midrash that I want to bring us to and hopefully apply for our lives. The Midrash says there's another place in the Torah where Moses heard these very words. Moses heard the phrase *rav lach* once before and you know how he knows it? He spoke it. Moses spoke the words *rav lach*, you have more than you need. You have more than enough. When Moses spoke, when Korach, his cousin and others gathered together to rebel against Moses' leadership, Moses said to the house of Levi of which he was a member, *rav lach b'nei Levi*, you have enough, you Levites. Why do you want more? Why do you come asking for more voice, for more power, for more space? Why do you need more space? As if the Levites came and rebelled and others rebelled and said, Moses, give us room on the platform, on the dais, give us a voice, Moses. We don't have enough. And Moses said to them, *rav lach*. And the Midrash says now that when God repeats those words to Moses, Moses gets a dose of his own medicine. Taste what it feels like, Moses, when someone says, *rav lach*, you have more than enough. *Al tosef*, we can't add any more. All full here, no room for you. No room for you.

As if God as a great therapist, the character of the divine in the Torah reflects back to Moses a moment where he failed to offer *nechama*, where he failed to offer the very heart and the very essence of what it is to comfort another, which is to be able to make room for you, to make room for your grief, to make room for your rebellion, to make room for your resistance, to make room for your voice, to make room for your beautiful, unique, absolutely unrepeatable way of being. At the heart of the project called *nechama* is for there to be *makom*, to be space, space for the undoing of thousand-year-old traditions that need to change, but there's room enough to imagine them and reimagine them as Yael is doing with her regendered Torah. Space to allow a voice that says, maybe this is not the way to support Israel or not the way. Space and the proliferation of voices, that in that space voices grow and voices awaken.

At the heart of every democracy is a promise, which is that voices matter and that every culture and every society that marginalizes voices and says, no room for your voice, every secret that is swept under the carpet, every conversation that is cut off invites us to continue to repeat it over and over again like grief that is not complete until it is completed. The secrets that we keep seep. The conversations that we don't allow, the voices we don't hear, the faces we ignore, the Congress people whose views we might vehemently oppose, but who are allowed, not allowed, who are, we are blessed to have that proliferation of voices from those many, one. Democracy dies in the dark, whether it's American democracy or Israeli democracy or whether it's the democracy in your own heart and mind when a voice arrives and says, I want more and we say, shut up, you've had enough. *Rav Lach*, *Al Tosef*, and what beautiful irony then that Moses, of course, in a land that doesn't have even one Jew in it yet is one who said, you can't come in, there's no room for you.

Oh, you, Moses, the one who couldn't hear the voices of your own home, what does it feel like when you're left out? When Joshua at the very end of this beginning of the parasha will now, who, *yanchil otam*, Joshua will go ahead. Maybe that's why we say, *nachamu*, *nachamu*, twice. Because until we comfort completely, it'll keep going around and around. It'll be *nachamu* this week and then another *nachamu* next week. In the never-ending cycle of repetition and repetition until we can say, *rav lach*, *shevet v'emek hapacha*. You have now been too long ignored. You have now for too long been swept under the carpet. You, *shechina*, you, *Elohim*, you, voices of the mothers and of the daughters and of the

matriarchs and all of those who have been silenced for generations and our African-American brothers and sisters and all of those other disowned parts of our own collective unconscious.

Until they rise up, until we awaken voices. We won't know the secret of comfort. In every home and every shiva, we come to pay our respects and the halacha, the Jewish law tells us that we are to sit silently until we are spoken to. Not because our own voice isn't important, but the opposite. That in the silence that we hold for the other, they might find their own voice. That our spaciousness awakens in them what they need to say.

So of course, it makes sense that at every shiva, when you leave, you say, hamakom yinachem, may the space give you nechama. May the space comfort you. May this permission giving that we give one another help us, each and every one of us, awaken our own voice and the voices all around us. Because there's enough room for you.

Please rise.