

Comfort!

Earlier this week a few of us gathered to study some of the laws and practices related to death and mourning. The fundamental categories of obligation connected to these two aspects of the end of life – dying and mourning – are known in Hebrew as *Kavod* and *Nichum*. *Kavod* – respect, honor – refers to the treatment of the body after the soul has departed. Jewish tradition prescribes that it be treated with care – washing, shrouding, quick burial, without viewing – are all considered aspects of respect for the physical house of the soul.

After the burial, the main attention turns to the mourners, and that is where *nichum* becomes the primary communal obligation. What a mourner will find comforting may vary, and may depend on the kind of death that has just taken place – the death of an elderly parent who has lived a long and fairly happy life is very different from the sudden death of a young person. But however it has happened, before the mystery of death Jewish teaching expects that we be present for one another. That does not mean always knowing just what to say – more may be conveyed by silence. There is no rush or necessity to make small talk in the face of grief. In fact, traditional practice is to wait for the mourner to speak.

Nichum, the comforting of mourners, also includes actions that the mourners themselves take – sitting *shiva*, reciting Kaddish, sharing memories.

In the weeks that follow Tisha B'Av there is a sense in which we see ourselves as mourners. We have recited the lamentations over the destruction of Jerusalem – traditionally done sitting on the floor or on the ground, in the posture of mourning. But the rhythm of the calendar then hastens to begin the process of comforting – announced in last week's *haftarah*: “Comfort, oh comfort My people, says your God.” The prophet Isaiah tells us that it is God Godself who is extending to us words of comfort. But the Hebrew of the verse might also be read as God asking us to extend words of comfort back to God: God too is bereaved by the destruction. We are in mourning together, and together we travel the seven weeks (a kind of *shiva*) between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah as a road of mutual comfort and encouragement.

In a lovely essay published on the Nextbook website, Diana Bletter writes of her experience as a member of a *hevra kadisha* in Israel. A *hevra kadisha* (“holy society”) is a group of volunteers who wash and prepare a body for burial. She finds that a lifeless body is surprisingly heavy, but she is told by a friend, “The dead are always heavy because the soul has gone and it's the soul that carries the body.” She also offers a teaching that she heard from the Lubavitcher Rebbe: “... you can hold a wooden chair in your hands and feel that it exists. But if the chair is burning, you can't hold the heat and energy that is created from the fire. No substance really disappears, he said, it is

transformed, and the same holds true of our souls.” I am not sure just what I believe about the soul, but I find these images somehow true, and certainly comforting.

Comfort, oh My people. Be consoled and encouraged, oh My people. These seven Sabbaths (of which we have now reached the second) are known as Sabbaths of *nehemta*, of comfort. All seven *haftarot* come from the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah, which encourage the exiles in Babylon to prepare themselves for return to the Land of Israel. *Nehemta* is from the same root as *nichum*, and it is the root of the opening word of the first of the seven haftarot: *Nahamu*. You know it also from the Aramaic of the Kaddish: “...*l’eyla min kol birchata v’shirata, tush’b’chata v’nechemata*...” – “...beyond all the blessings and songs, praises and words of comfort that are ever spoken in the world...” And at the end of this week’s haftarah, we see this root again: “Truly the Lord has comforted (*niham*) Zion, comforted all her ruins” (Isa. 51:3).

What do we mean by comfort? The comforts of Judaism are not quite the same as the comforts dangled before us by 21st-Century American consumer culture. The comfort Isaiah is talking about is not the comfort of putting up one’s feet on the recliner, sipping a margarita, and clicking through 270 channels on the big-screen HDTV

Neither is this notion of comfort what we mean when we say that we are looking for a synagogue where we can feel “comfortable.” Of course we want Or Chadash to feel like a kind of home for all of us. And we do indeed (rather well, I think) try to practice *hachnasat orchim* – the welcoming of guests and visitors in such a way that they too might come to feel at home among us. But feeling “at home” does not always mean feeling “comfortable” and comfort is not all we seek from a synagogue.

There must always be a sense of challenge before us. America is our home, and especially in this election season we are well aware of the challenge and responsibility that lie before us. Israel is also our home, but we can hardly feel “comfortable” when we think of the many challenges faced by that small country. Or Chadash, and – more importantly! – Torah are our home. Sometimes we feel their embrace and sometimes their challenge; sometimes a hug and a pat on the back, and sometimes the demand to do more and do it better.

Indeed, it may seem sometimes that Judaism presents us with a task like that of Sisyphus. Our obligations are endless, and redemption – what we imagine to be the ultimate goal of history and of all our efforts – is no closer than it ever was. But Rashi, in one of his comments on the Torah, reminds us that we never get to see the entire picture (even on a big-screen HDTV). We must do our duty, and leave it to God to do God’s part. And the Gerer Rebbe preached that brooding on our shortcomings, our sins, only leaves us trapped in them. In the time we are brooding, he says, “we could be stringing pearls for the sake of heaven!”

So the comfort that Torah offers us is the comfort of endless duty – and also of *teshuva*, the opportunity to return home, set right what we can, and start again. It is not the promise of a comfortable chair in which to kick back. It is the promise of connection and

meaning and purpose, the possibility to mourn our failings, ask forgiveness, and be assured of another chance. We say of the dead, “May her soul be bound up in the bond of life.” Judaism offers us that opportunity while we are still alive.

We begin to look ahead to a new year, now just six weeks away. (My sister had a calendar that warned – like objects in the outside rear view mirror – “events on this calendar are closer than they appear!”) During these six weeks we have opportunities to learn together, to pray together, to offer words of comfort and encouragement. Among the many words of comfort and encouragement provided in Jewish tradition, perhaps none are as familiar as the rhythms of the Kaddish. It is a prayer not only for mourners, but also (in the version known as Kaddish d’Rabbanan) for those who have learned Torah together.

If you have learned something this evening, I invite you to recite with me this version by Marge Piercy (on the handouts). May you be comforted and encouraged!

Kaddish

Marge Piercy

Look around us, search above us, below, behind.
We stand in a great web of being joined together.
Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent
passing through us in the body of Israel
and our own bodies, let’s say amen.

Time flows through us like water.
The past and the dead speak through us.
We breathe out our children’s children, blessing.

Blessed is the earth from which we grow,
blessed the life we are lent,
blessed the ones who teach us,
blessed the ones we teach,
blessed is the word that cannot say the glory
that shines through us and remains to shine
flowing past distant suns on the way to forever,
Let’s say amen.

Blessed is light, blessed is darkness,
but blessed above all else is peace
which bears the fruits of knowledge
on strong branches, let’s say amen.

Peace that bears joy into the world,
peace that enables love, peace over Israel
everywhere, blessed and holy is peace, let’s say amen.¹

¹ Reprinted in Anita Diamant, *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead & Mourn as a Jew* (Schocken, 1998), p. 206. I recommend this book, by the way.