

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN
AUGUST 9, 2014
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This Shabbat, following the Fast of Tisha B'av, a memorial for the destruction of both Temples as well as other calamitous events in Jewish history, is called Shabbat Nachamu, from the opening words of the Haftorah. The Prophet Isaiah states: "Comfort, oh comfort My people, says your G-d."

However, when one tries to imagine the enormity of the tragedy in Isaiah's time – the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of our people to Babylon; or the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty; or the coldblooded murder of millions of Jews from the period of the Crusades all the way up to the present day, one wonders how it is possible to evoke feelings of comfort. What human action can bring soothing to the broken hearts of a sometimes distressed and demoralized people?

Isaiah, in the Haftorah, recalled G-d's promise and told the people that they would return from exile to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Second Temple there was no such return and for almost 2,000 years we were bereft of our national sovereignty, a place we could call home. During that time, while we endured exile and persecution, pogroms and the Shoah, we built up our spiritual side. From the Babylonian Talmud to Maimonides, from Yehuda Halevi to the Hasidim, from the Geonim to the teachers of the Musar Movement, we enhanced our spiritual discipline, we extolled the concept of study. Halakha was our mode of life even as we dreamed of going back to Zion. Not until 1948 did that dream come true.

It is remarkable to live in a time when there is a sovereign State of Israel. While Theodore Herzl believed that a national homeland would solve the Jewish problem, it clearly has not. Anti-Semitism can be found in different guises today, but it is still present. One needs only to look throughout Europe of the past few weeks, or in the social media to see its ugly head reared once more. Yet, the State of Israel and the Jewish people continue to survive and, in many places, even thrive. The depth of our scholarship, the activities of our communities, the devotion of our young people, are at levels never before present in Jewish history. Yes, we continue to witness assimilation and Jewish ignorance, but the battle is not lost as the next generation takes its place in Jewish communities throughout the world. It is truly the "best of times" and the "worst of times."

In these past few weeks we have seen some of the worst of times. Each of us has been following the news on our computers or in the newspapers, on our televisions or iPhones. We attempted to the best of our abilities to know what was going in Israel as Operation Protective Edge continued. We want to know what we can do to help and hopefully have found ways to do so. We are saddened as we recognize the loss of life. Families no longer have sons, husbands, brothers. Make no mistake about it, we mourn the loss of innocent Palestinian lives in Gaza. They have truly suffered. But also make no mistake about it, Hamas, which started the war, is ultimately going to be responsible to the citizens of Gaza for the destruction of infrastructure, homes, and the tremendous loss of life.

How do we comfort ourselves at this particular time? What would Isaiah say to our people if he lived at this moment recognizing the self-sacrifice of IDF soldiers, the bereaved families, those who will live with their injuries for the rest of their lives, and the tremendous stress of those who have lived under constant rocket fire? I am not quite sure what he would say, but I do know he would have us march forward and survive as a strong and united Jewish people.

As I reported to the Congregation upon my return from Israel, I was truly in awe of the resiliency of our brothers and sisters. It is not easy to live life when sirens can sound at any moment. You watch where you walk, you are careful to be within running distance of a shelter, your behavior is changed by the traumatic experiences that you see and hear.

When I traveled to Ashkelon and Sderot, I saw the resiliency of the human spirit and the courage of these communities. Hamas believed they could destroy not only lives, but also the spirit of the citizens of Israel through their indiscriminate rocket fire. This only strengthened the resolve of the citizens of these cities to combat whatever may come. Israeli ingenuity and American dollars have most assuredly helped through the magnificent Iron Dome, but the willingness to undergo the daily sounds of sirens and not give up hope for peace, is truly just as important. The Mayor of Sderot told us that he knows that we will be victorious. They may have rockets, but we have strong human beings. They live for death, we live for life.

He mentioned to us that many students are coming, including my own nephew, to Sderot to study there and strengthen the community. A Yeshivat Hesder was established and educational institutions have actually grown in the last few years. While everyone lives in fortified houses, it is their fortified souls that truly make a difference. In the past few weeks weddings and new babies were celebrated within the fortified walls of the Yeshiva. He told us he doesn't need comfort, he needs strength. And this strength cannot be destroyed by rocket fire. That is one of the lessons of this war and one of the comforting messages for our people.

Yet, there has been loss of life. Beginning with the unspeakable murder of our boys Naftali, Gilad, and Eyal, the strength of the Jewish people and their resolve to continue in the face of these horrors was evident. It was the mother of Naftali, Rachel, who said it all for the families and for the Jewish people at-large when she eulogized her slain son sixteen years of age: "We will have to learn to sing without you," she said, "life must go on." Everyone who met the three families was touched by the strength that they showed. Buoyed by their faith and the resolve of the Jewish people, they never broke and became symbols for us all.

That strength and resolve continued throughout the present operation. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin is the Chief Rabbi of Efrat. At the beginning of the war he was in the States, but after he heard that one of the boys killed was Yuval Heiman, born in Efrat and graduated from its institutions, he came back to Israel to pay a Shiva visit.

He informs us that when he entered the Shiva home, Yuval's grandfather, Yehuda, ran to the door to greet him with a warm embrace and they both wept silently. Then Yehuda caught himself. "In this Shiva house we do not weep; of course, we are overcome with grief but the dominant feeling in our hearts is pride and zekhut, the privilege of being able - in our generation - to sacrifice for the Jewish future."

Rabbi Riskin reports that Yuval's parents, Moshe and Zohara, both explained to him that of course they cried - but at night, into the pillow, privately, and not for others to see. "The profound message they convey", he writes, "is the merit of living in a generation of rebirth, of

their ability – which the past generation of the Shoah could not do – to take Jewish destiny into their own hands and pave the way, albeit with heartbreaking commitment and sacrifice, for the Jewish future and redemption.” In effect, Rabbi Riskin reports, they were repeating the words of the brother of Great Grandfather Heiman who said – upon establishing Kibbutz Nehalim, after losing the four members of the Heiman clan in the War of Independence – “The place, HaMakom, our home in Israel reborn, comforts me among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

If Hamas believed that they could break the Jewish spirit, they were terribly wrong. If Hamas believed that Jews would be slaughtered like they had been in the Second World War, they had erred. If Hamas believed that they could tear apart the unity of the Jewish people both in Israel and in the Diaspora, they simply do not know us. We may not agree on all decisions concerning Israel’s political or religious agenda, but we are all united in recognizing Israel’s right to exist and its right to live in security and peace. Israel needs to defend itself, and we should be proud of the fact that it insists its soldiers live by the highest of morals and ethics. Yes, mistakes do happen in the fog of war, but we ask whether any army, including ours here in the United States, would attempt to live by the guidelines that the IDF does on the battlefield.

That perhaps that is the comfort in all of this tragedy. We are united once more recognizing that our fate is a common one. We announce to the world that we will not go back to statelessness and powerlessness. We have learned our lesson only too well. The world is very sympathetic to dead Jews. It is not so empathetic to fighting Jews.

We come to Shabbat Nachamu but a few days after the day of national mourning, Tisha B’av, and recognize that we have much left to do to create a safe and secure State of Israel. We have much left to do to garner the energy of our people to create one united whole. We have much left to do to rebuild the homes that were destroyed, the trees that were uprooted, the fields that were laid to waste, the economy which was battered, and the psyche of people who have had to live under the threat of rockets for so many years.

Natan Shavansky, after attending the funeral of Hadar Goldin, wrote a letter to the Board of the Jewish Agency, on which I sit, stating: “I feel as though our entire society is undergoing a process as we adopt the beautiful attributes of our fallen boys and come together to make Israel a better and more hopeful place.”

On this Shabbat Nachamu as we rejoice with a new couple yet to be married, and two couples who are celebrating significant marriage milestones, we say proudly that Am Yisrael Hai as we pray that we will soon hear the promise of the bright future portrayed in the Sheva Brachot, “In the cities of Judea, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sounds of joy and gladness, the sounds of bridegroom and bride, the joyous sounds of bridegrooms under their wedding canopy, and of young people at their feast of song.”

Let us be strong, let us be resolute, let our spirits not be vanquished, and let us work for a time of peace and security for the State of Israel and joy and gladness for the entire Jewish people.