

COMFORTING WORDS

by Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen

On each Shabbos of the seven weeks between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana, we chant words of hope and comfort from the Book of Isaiah. The chapter that we read on the first Shabbos of the seven weeks opens with the following proclamation of Hashem - the Compassionate One:

"Comfort, comfort My people, says your G-d. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her period of exile has been completed, that her iniquity has been forgiven; for she has received double for all her sins from the hand of Hashem. A voice calls out in the wilderness, 'Clear the way of Hashem; make a straight path in the desert, a road for our G-d.' Every valley will be raised, and every mountain and hill will be lowered; the crooked will become straight and heights will become valley. The glory of Hashem will be revealed, and all flesh together will see that the mouth of Hashem has spoken." (Isaiah 40:1-5)

In the above verses, there is a message of hope for both Israel and humanity. The exiles of Jerusalem will return, the glory of the Compassionate One will be revealed to the world, and all human beings together will finally acknowledge the words of the Compassionate One.

We conclude our reading with the following verse, where the Prophet Isaiah calls upon us to observe the multitude of stars in the heavens:

"Raise your eyes on high and see Who created these! He brings forth their legions by number. He calls to each of them by name; by the abundance of His power and by vigor of His strength, not one is missing!" (40:26)

In what way is Isaiah's message about the stars to bring us comfort? We are compared to the stars, as it is written: "Hashem, your G-d has made you like the stars of heaven" (Deuteronomy 19:22). By reminding us that we are like the stars, Isaiah is addressing the question of each soul in exile: "Does my life - with all its suffering and challenges - truly have a purpose?" The Prophet is therefore reminding us that just as each star is given a name and a purpose, so too the Compassionate One

gives each of us a name and a purpose, for each of us is a unique "star" with the power to give light to a dark world. We are all part of the Divine legion - "not one is missing"!

A related idea is expressed in the words of a daily psalm that we chant during our morning prayers:

"The Builder of Jerusalem is Hashem; the outcasts of Israel He will gather in. He is the healer of the brokenhearted, and the One Who binds up their sorrows. He counts the number of the stars, to all of them He assigns names." (Psalm 147:2-4)

The Compassionate One will rebuild Jerusalem through gathering all the outcasts of Israel. He will also heal our broken hearts and bind up our wounds by reminding us of how precious and worthy we are. For just as the Compassionate One counts the stars and gives each of them a special name, so too, He counts all the outcasts of Israel and gives each of us a special name. And through our ingathering and healing, the Compassionate One will rebuild Jerusalem!

The author is the director of: "Hazon - Our Universal Vision".