

HOW CAN WE BE COMFORTED?

by Shlomo Katz

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Vaeschanan

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Today's Learning:

Terumot 5:6-7

Orach Chaim 140:3-141:2

Daf Yomi: Rosh Hashanah 20

Yerushalmi Mo'ed Kattan 10

This Shabbat is known as "Shabbat Nachamu" after the first word of the haftarah. R' Chaim of Krasna z"l (18th century; one of the early followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov) offers the following homiletical interpretation of the haftarah's opening verse:

That verse (Yishayah 40:1) states: "Comfort, comfort, My people," says your G-d." R' Chaim relates this verse to the discussion between the Jewish people and Hashem which is recorded in the midrash. In that discussion, Hashem says (Zechariah 1:3), "Return to Me and [then] I will return to you." The Jewish people respond (Eichah 5:21), "Return us, Hashem, to You and [then] we will return." In other words, Hashem and the Jewish people disagree over who should take the initiative in order to bring about a reconciliation between us and Him. Hashem says that we must return to Him, but we maintain that He must reach out and draw us in.

oo Hashem's desire is also expressed in Hoshea (14:2): "Return, Yisrael, to Hashem, your G-d . . ."

What He asks is that you make Him "your G-d."

Returning to the verse from our haftarah, R' Chaim explains (by repunctuating the verse): We ask, "Comfort?" How can we be comforted?

Hashem responds: "Comfort [when] My people says, 'Your G-d'." He tells us that He will comfort us when we call Him, "Our G-d."

In reality, however, these words themselves comfort us, for He has called us, "My people," and thus taken the first step. (Mishnat Chassidim p.364)

"Va'etchanan/I implored Hashem at that time, saying . . ." (3:23)

R' Menachem Mendel of Vizhnitz z"l (died 1884) comments: One must pray on each of the six work days that he merit to honor the Shabbat properly. This is the meaning of the verse (Shmot 31:16), "Ve'shamru Bnei Yisrael et ha'Shabbat," usually translated, "The Children of Israel shall observe the Shabbat." "Ve'shamru" can also mean, "They shall anticipate" (see Bereishit 37:11 and Rashi there); thus the verse teaches that the Children of Israel should anticipate Shabbat.

This is alluded to in our verse as well. "Va'etchanan" - the first letter "vav" alludes to the six work days.

"Etchanan el Hashem/I will implore Hashem."

"Ba'et ha'hee laimor"/"at that time saying" - has a gematria of 760, equal to "Bayom ha'Shabbat"/"the day of Shabbat."

Thus: "I will implore Hashem during the six work days regarding the day of Shabbat." (Tzemach Tzaddik)

"I am Hashem, your G-d . . ." "You shall not have other gods . . ." (5:6-7)

The midrash explains the order of the commandments as follows: When a king conquers a new land he must convince the people to recognize his authority before he can legislate effectively. So, too, before Hashem could instruct Bnei Yisrael regarding the commandments, He had to convince them to accept His rule.

R' Yisroel Kanarik z"l (rosh yeshiva in New Rochelle and Peekskill, New York) writes: It appears from this midrash that Bnei Yisrael accepted Hashem's rule only after they heard, "I am Hashem . . ." They did not accept Him based on the miracles of the Exodus alone.

Indeed, our parashah (5:20-22) states: "It happened that when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness and the mountain was burning in fire, that all the heads of your tribes and your elders

approached me. You said, 'Behold! Hashem, our G-d, has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; this day we saw that Hashem will speak to a person and he can live. But now, why should we die when this great fire consumes us? If we continue to hear the voice of Hashem, our G-d, any longer, we will die!' This teaches us, writes, R' Kanarik, that Bnei Yisrael received the Torah in a state of unimaginable awe that penetrated to the very foundation of their beings. Specifically, this awe made the giving of the Torah complete. Man does not attain perfection by keeping the Torah because it is beautiful or because it creates a workable social order. Rather, one must observe the Torah out of a realization that there is no alternative. (Chevlei Mashiach p.27)

"You said, 'Behold! Hashem, our G-d, has shown us His glory and His greatness . . . But now, why should we die when this great fire consumes us?'" (5:21-22)

Bnei Yisrael heard the first two commandments directly from the "mouth" of G-d. However, in the above verses, Bnei Yisrael asked Moshe to be an intermediary between them and G-d, and to teach them the rest of the commandments himself after he alone heard them from Hashem.

R' Moshe Yisrael Feldman z"l (1883-1944; Hungarian rabbi, brother-in-law of the "Maggid" R' Shalom Schwadron) offers the following interpretation of Bnei Yisrael's words: R' Yosef Albo z"l (14th century) observes in Sefer Ha'Ikkarim that there are two ways G-d could calculate reward and punishment. He could take into account the majesty of the Lawgiver (i.e., Himself) and reward or punish man as is appropriate for one who obeys or disobeys such an exalted King. Or, He could look only at the puniness of the one performing the mitzvah or the sin and dispense a reward or punishment accordingly. Obviously, the latter type of reward or punishment will be lesser than the former.

What does He in fact do? R' Albo writes that when Hashem rewards man, He gives a reward that befits a servant of an exalted king such as Himself. However, when He punishes, He ignores the identity of the Lawgiver (Himself) and chooses a punishment based only on the sinner's (lowly) status.

There is one exception, says R' Albo. The sinner referred to above is one who sins out of weakness. However, if one rebels against G-d, the punishment does take into consideration the greatness of the One whose laws were broken.

Why? R' Feldman explains that one who rebels against Hashem violates the first two commandments, "I am Hashem" and "You shall not have other gods." These two commandments were spoken to all of Bnei Yisrael by G-d himself, and one who violates them deserves a punishment commensurate with the insult to the Lawgiver Himself. In contrast, all of the other mitzvot were taught to Bnei Yisrael through Moshe; they were heard from a mortal. Thus, disobeying those commandments is less of an insult to Hashem Himself and the punishment need not take into account the Lawgiver's greatness. (As for the positive commandments, the observance of any of

them is an affirmation of one's faith. Because such an affirmation confirms one's acceptance of the first two commandments, which G-d Himself spoke, the reward takes into account the honor given to the Lawgiver.)

The foregoing is alluded to in our verses: 'Behold! Hashem, our G-d, has shown us His glory and His greatness' by speaking the first two commandments, and we know that we will therefore be punished more severely if we disobey those commandments. Accordingly, we do not want to hear any more from Him. "But now, why should we die" for violating those other commandments as well? Rather, you, Moshe, speak to us. (Shem Yisrael)

Letters from Our Sages

This week's letter was written by R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook when he served as Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim. It is printed in Igrot Ha'Rayah, Vol. IV, No. 980. We have deleted references to the specific issue under discussion; what is of primary interest is R' Kook's approach to persuading both those who abide by halachah and those who do not.

B"H, In the holy city, Yerushalayim,
may she be built and established,
11 Tishrei 5680 [October 5, 1919]

An Open Letter

To the honorable board of the organization, Mizrachi:. . .

I think that the question has three parts:

- 1) Regarding the halachah-is it permitted or prohibited?
- 2) Regarding the good of the community-can anything good come to the Jewish people either from a positive answer or a negative answer?
- 3) Regarding the ideal-does our moral consciousness negate this thing or demand it?

Regarding the halachah, I have nothing to add to those rabbis who preceded me . . .

It remains for us to deal with [the question from] the perspective of the good of the community. Regarding this, I think that we are obligated to inform all of our brothers from the various factions-all of whom certainly seek the good of our nation and the broadening of our rights in Eretz Yisrael-that the declaration by the British government [i.e., the Balfour Declaration], which planted a delicate shoot that may grow into the redemption, is based primarily on the viewpoint from which the best of the nations in general and the British in particular see our rightful connection to Eretz Yisrael as something sanctified by Heaven. They are influenced to this outlook by the Tanach which is considered holy by the majority of civilized peoples in our day . . .

The enemies of Yisrael, from both within and without, make use of the accusation that the Jewish youth has lost its connection to the Holy Book and therefore has no right to the Land of the Tanach. We are obligated to stand guard to demonstrate to all that the soul of Yisrael is alive in its true form and the Land of the Tanach belongs to the People of the Tanach . . . This will come about specifically by protecting our true form according to the decrees of the Torah and its laws, which guide us towards a life that will elevate our honor and lead us towards a higher freedom and redemption.

Sponsored by Rikki and Nathan Lewin in memory of his mother Pessil bas R' Naftoli a"h

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