

# O'ER THE RAMPARTS WE WATCHED

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

These weeks between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana are often referred to as the "sheva d'nechmosa," the seven weeks of consolation. They are marked each Shabbos by stirring haftorah readings taken from the book of Isaiah. Each haftorah resonates with a powerful message of hope and consolation to the people of Israel.

Isaiah's prophecies took place towards the end of the First Temple period during the reign of Kings Uziah, Achaz and Chizkiyahu, and foretold the Temple's destruction and the exile of the nation. Nevertheless, the majority of his prophecies vibrate with hope, reassurance and consolation. They express the powerful yearnings of every Jew to return from exile to the Promised Land, and depict the glorious homecoming that awaits the Jewish people at the in-gathering of exiles.

These wondrous visions of redemption, occurring simultaneously with the people's downward spiral, and the spiritual oblivion threatening them, was proof that Hashem had already prepared the medicine and healing potions prior to the punishment. Hashem sought to strengthen the nation's faith in advance, so that they could endure the difficult trials and tribulations that lay ahead.

The message of Isaiah is an eternal one, for each of us experiences moments of challenge and exile, grief and suffering, where we feel estranged from and rejected by our Creator. At such times we are in danger of losing our most powerful and important treasure-our connection to the Divine. Isaiah's message that suffering always has a meaningful end result is important to internalize as we grapple with life's setbacks and disappointments.

The question is how can one, in the grip of suffering, be receptive to the message of hope? In the throes of crisis, one is likely to be impervious to consolation. In the crucible of pain, it is virtually impossible to glimpse the sunshine that lies behind the horizon.

The answer lies in understanding that the message is not simply that better days are around the corner and that all will work out for the best. The focus is on how we are to interpret where we are today, in our current moment of distress, turmoil or loss.

In this weeks Torah portion, Hashem tells us how we are to deal with Divine wrath when it manifests itself: "For just as a father chastises his son, so does Hashem your G-d chastise you" (Chapter 8; Verse 5). By being aware, as we are experiencing life's darker moments, that they are being sent our way by a loving G-d, we are conditioning ourselves to accept and even embrace them. Just as precious drops of oil can only be extracted when the olives are crushed, so, too, life's difficulties

tend to force us to reach deep into ourselves to discover strengths we never knew we possessed. Situations that challenge our ego and identity lead us to realign our perspective on life, and draw closer to our life's Source.

A great sage once illustrated this point with a beautiful parable.

*A child once watched a farmer as he plowed his field, baffled at the way the farmer turned the beautiful land in to a mass of shallow furrows and ditches. "Why are you ruining this beautiful field?" he asked.*

"Just be patient" replied the farmer, "wait and see." Before long a tractor came along, dropping wheat kernels into the ditches and furrows. "What are you doing?" exclaimed the child. "Why are you ruining that good grain?"

Time went by and lush stalks of wheat began to fill the field. The farmer started to chop them down, and again the child protested. A similar scenario repeated itself through the winnowing and milling process.

Finally, the farmer mixed the flour with water and placed the dough in his oven to bake. In the child's eyes, this was the most inscrutable act of all. "Why are you burning up all this precious work?" he wondered. Only after a delicious freshly baked loaf emerged from the oven were the child's questions fully answered.

Throughout the sheva d'nechmosa, we seek to internalize the message that only when the process of exile is complete and the redemption a reality, will we fully understand that even its most destructive phases were integral to the "harvesting" of our nations' ultimate goodness and beauty.

By extension, we must try to survey the landscape of our personal lives with a similar perspective. Simply assuring ourselves that all will work out well does not always suffice. If we absorb Isaiah's message, however, that we are Hashem's children at all times, and even in the grip of pain and suffering, Hashem's love is pulsating beneath the surface, we can then rest assured that all will truly end well. Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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