

CLOSURE AND CONSOLATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This Sabbath is traditionally called the "Sabbath of Comfort." It invariably falls in the week after the Fast of the Ninth of Av and when the words of comfort of the prophet Isaiah are read as the maftir in the synagogue, and thus, in its simplest form the name "Sabbath of Comfort" derives. But there is a deeper look at the concept of comfort and consolation that this Sabbath, in fact all Sabbaths, represents. Since grief, pain, disappointment and loss are all part of the story of every human being, it is remarkable how little attention most people pay to the necessity of dealing with misfortune - of how to achieve comfort and consolation. We are all actively engaged in attempting to avoid problems and pain - and correctly so - but deep down within our being we know that no human escapes tasting the bitter cup that life always brings with it. So it would be of aid to all of us to investigate how to deal with sadness and bring consolation and closure.

Judaism considers the comforting of others to be an obligatory commandment - a mitzva. The Talmud points out that God Himself, so to speak, came to comfort Yitzchak after the death of his father, Avraham. Thus our tradition of imitating our Creator, so to speak, naturally encompasses this process of comforting others. There are two components of "Jewish comfort." One is the empathy and sympathy expressed to the bereaved by fellow human beings. Sharing the burden is an essential part of comforting others, for it allows a sense of belonging and support to form in the psyche of the one stricken. In fact that is the greatness of faith in the Creator in all such instances - the realization that one is never alone and abandoned. Even "in the shadow of the valley of death... - ...You are with me." Whether through silence or conversation, the sense of the caring concern of others, sustains and comforts. Thus having the ultimate and eternal Other care and understand, at a level far beyond our abilities, our troubles and travails is in Jewish tradition the strong and basic foundation of comfort and consolation. And this idea is reflected repeatedly in the words of Isaiah, where the Lord is portrayed as the ultimate comforter and champion of Israel and even though He has visited troubles upon the Jewish people, His hand of comfort, so to speak, is never far removed from us. All seven haftarot of the weeks between Tisha B'Av to Rosh HaShana are taken from the book of Isaiah's prophecies and the representation of God as being the comfort of Israel is Isaiah's greatest gift to Israel's posterity.

The other aspect of the Jewish concept of comfort is the ability to accept even the hardest of fates and to persevere and rise again. Tradition teaches us that upon hearing bad tidings one should recite an acknowledgment of God's true judgments. Acknowledgment of God in the affairs of humans, in our life-cycle events, our careers, our triumphs and seeming defeats is a fundamental tenet of

Jewish behavior. Jews always believed that life and death both came from the hand, so to speak, of the Creator. Thus the unpleasant, the tragic, the inexplicable and seemingly unjust, all become more bearable because of the Jew's ability to accept God's will and therefore justify the otherwise unjustifiable and thereby attain a measure of solace and comfort. Bearing grudges, especially against God, is invariably aggravating and self-destructive. Giving insipid and feel-good answers to explain God's behavior and explain or marginalize the Divine Presence in tragedy is demeaning to Jewish tradition and faith. Acceptance of God's will and the appreciation that God need not "think" or "behave" according to our finite minds and standards opens the way for closure and consolation.

Shabat Shalom.

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