



Torah Reflections on *Shabbat Nachamu*

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If you think you have trouble naming your pets and kids, try naming the Messiah! In the Talmud there is a heated conversation about the name of the Messiah. Given names linked to peace, love and justice are suggested and rejected. Finally, our Sages conclude that the Messiah will be known as Menachem, the comforter (BT Sanhedrin). In the Sages opinion the Messiah is the symbol of a better world, and comfort is more world-changing than peace, love or justice. Everyone needs to be comforted differently – some of us need soup and hugs, others need silence and a respect for privacy -- if we lived in a society in which everyone was comforted in their own way, we would live in a brave new world where each of us is truly understood and no one feels alone.

This Shabbat is known as Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of Comfort. It is the first Sabbath after the fast day of Tisha B'Av (the 9th day of the month of Av.) According to tradition many of the calamities of Jewish history fell on Tisha B'Av including the destructions of both Temples in ancient Jerusalem, as well as the expulsions from England and Spain. On Tisha B'Av we read The Book of Lamentations, which explores the people's terrible losses after Jerusalem was destroyed: losses of loved ones, homes and families, as well as losses of hope and meaning. According to custom when this text is read aloud in synagogue we sit on the floor and wail. There is no explanation or meaning ascribed to the tragedies of Tisha B'Av, it is simply a day of grieving. Tisha B'Av honors the fact that sometimes loss cannot be repaired or even understood, it can only be mourned by drawing together as a community, weeping and sitting near to one another.

Tisha B'Av marks the communal losses of the Jewish people however it can also teach us how to mourn losses in our personal lives. In today's society the raw grief that springs from losses of loved ones or the losses connected to illness such as mobility, independence, dignity, freedom and identity, are often only discussed within the privacy of our homes or confined to a hospital room. But Tisha B'Av teaches us that it is healing to lament out loud. Loss can't always be understood, but it can always be mourned. Lamenting with others has the potential to heal us as individual mourners, and it also helps the community to grow – it reminds others who have grieved in the past or will in the future (in other words all people) that they are not alone.

Av is not just a month of grieving, just a few days after the fast day of Tisha B'Av comes Tu B'Av, a sort of Jewish Valentine's Day that celebrates lovers coming together and friends reconciling. Grief and joy are intermingled in the communal

observances of the month of Av as they often are in our own lives. If we do not allow ourselves to name our grief and be comforted we are also unable to share our joys.

The Talmud teaches that the messiah is named Menachem (the comforter) because true comfort is radical. When we allow someone else to comfort us in our own way, we are letting them see who we truly are both in joy and in pain. And when we console another, we change the world.

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