“The Possibility of Comfort”

D’var Torah for Shabbat Nachamu, July 31, 2020

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

Take comfort, take comfort, my people, says your God. *Nachamu, nachamu ami, yomar eloheychem*.

Or as some of the Rabbis intentionally misread the syntax: *Nachamu* – take comfort – and *nachamu ami* – give comfort to my people, says your God.

This is the opening line of tomorrow’s haftarah, from the prophet Isaiah. It is assigned to the Shabbat following Tish’ah b’Av, the harrowing “Nine-Eleven” of the Jewish calendar, which we observed yesterday. It begins the first of seven haftarot of *nechemta* or “comfort.”

Comfort for what we’ve suffered through, and comfort for the days ahead, leading, we hope, to repentance, redemption, and renewal at the new year. To healing for ourselves and our families; for our fractured Jewish people in Israel and around the world; for our dysfunctional, distrustful American society; for our planet that’s choking on its own poisons.

*Nachamu* bids us to do more than simply take comfort. It commands us to take comfort in the possibility that we can overcome all of these sicknesses of body and soul, of individuals and society. That we should only feel hopeless if we give up the struggle. That we should never feel hopeless as long as we keep marching. As long as we give comfort even while we are taking it.

What better conveyer of that prophetic message do we have than the late John Lewis? To quote from *his* Haftarah, published on the day of his funeral:

“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble…You must…study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time…The truth does not change, and that is why the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time…I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe…and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

His words echo the famous verse from our portion, *Va’et’chanan*, that we recite in conjunction with the Sh’ma: “Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” *V’ahavta et Ado-nai elo-hecha b’chol l’vav’ca, b’chol naf’sh’cha, uv’chol m’odecha.*

It sounds like a sing-song catch phrase, because we recite it so often, and often so mindlessly. But when a leader like John Lewis breathes fresh air into it, we can start to hear it as a call to courage, and even as a call to take and give comfort. To love with all our heart and all our soul, and to let that love reconstitute our strength and might.

Our tradition notes that the full moon of this Hebrew month, the fifteenth or “Tu b’Av,” is itself a minor holiday. How so? The midrash tells us that each year of our forty years in the wilderness, on the eve of the Ninth of Av, all the Israelites would dig graves and lie down in them. The next morning, some 15,000 souls failed to get up. Over the course of forty years, that number accumulated until it had reached the 600,000 who left Egypt as slaves, thus making way for a whole new generation to take our people forward.

But one year, everyone got up. No one died. Assuming they had gotten the date wrong, they all lay down in their graves for a second night. Again, no one died. They continued to do this until the full moon, the 15th of Av, when they realized that this generation would be the one to rise up and march forward toward their destiny. That day became a holiday, because it celebrated the possibility that a people could suffer, heal, take comfort, give comfort, and stand up together for what they believed in.

We can do that, too. On Tuesday, take note of the full moon. Let it be a sign of comfort, but also of summoning us to be the generation that puts away racism and hatred, that puts behind environmental destruction, that abolishes cynicism and divisiveness, that moves beyond faithlessness and skepticism. Let the full moon represent the fullness we could achieve together.

*Sh’ma Yisrael* – “listen O people who wrestle with Godly truth” – *Ado-nai echad* – “God’s oneness calls us to oneness - to love with all our hearts, our souls, our might. To stand up and not die, not give in, not quit the struggle for love and truth, for wholeness and healing.