

Dear Chavraya,

Against the backdrop of utter destruction as recalled on *Tisha B'Av*, this Shabbos is *Shabbos Nachamu*, the Shabbos of Comfort. From the depths of despair we wend our way through seven weeks of comfort now, called in Aramaic the *Sheva d'N'chemta*, until we arrive at the portal of a new year and its hope of renewal. *Shabbos Nachamu* takes its name from the first words of the *Haftarah*, the prophetic reading from the prophet Isaiah: "*Nachamu, nachamu ami, yomar Elokeychem*/"*Comfort, comfort My people," says your God*. It is a call addressed to all of us, to bring comfort into this world, to our own people and to all people.

The tension between *Tisha B'Av* and *Shabbos Nachamu* is our tension. It is the place in which we often find ourselves in response to events in the worlds around us, suspended somewhere between outrage and acceptance, caring and apathy, hope and despair. *Tisha B'Av* is a paradigm and a warning, and most of all a call to action. To be a comforter in a world that is hurting and sick means to be a healer. Working together to remove sources of the world's sickness -- war, injustice, pollution, racism, hate, indifference -- we receive and offer hope through the possibility of change.

The Torah portion for *Shabbos Nachamu* is *Parashat V'etchanan*, filled with poignant teaching by Moses as he approaches his death. Through the commandments taught and the spirit of action that underlies them, the *parasha* emphasizes the human role in sustaining Creation. We are God's partners. Not meant to be passive dwellers on earth, we are indeed meant to be activists. In a fascinating *midrash* to *V'etchanan*, concerning a matter whose power is in its underlying meaning, human initiative is emphasized along with God's need for us to act. Responding to a verse that tells of God's closeness to us, the rabbis imagine angels in Heaven going to God and asking, *When is Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur?* With all the warmth of such teaching tales, God says to the angels: *Why do you ask Me? Let's you and I go and consult with a rabbinic court below.*

Derived from this *parasha*, one of the greatest expressions of hope and one of the greatest challenges to act comes through the verse most central to Jewish consciousness and belief, the *Sh'ma*: *Sh'ma Yisra'el Hashem Elokeynu Hashem echad*/Hear, O Israel, God our God, God is One. The radical depth of the *Sh'ma* is generally overlooked in its rote saying. If God is One, and all people are created in God's image, then people are one! Too often, we say the *Sh'ma* without full awareness of what is expected of us as sayers of the *Sh'ma*. Directing our hearts and minds to its meaning, saying the *Sh'ma* with *kavannah* is itself a radical act. In the *chumash*, a scribal note indicates that the letter *ayin* at the end of the first word and the letter *daled* at the end of the last word are to be written large, and so they are, in the Torah itself and in the *siddur*/prayerbook. These two letters spell the word *ayd* / witness. We are not meant to simply say the *Sh'ma*, but in saying it to bear witness to its meaning. The Ten Commandments are also in this *parasha*. The ninth commandment tells us not to be a false witness. Lest we give false testimony, we say the *Sh'ma* believing in the ultimate oneness of humanity as a reflection and consequence of God's Oneness.

As true and faithful witnesses to a greater harmony, we bring a vision and a way to a world riven with strife. As activists in response to the warning of *Tisha B'Av*, we fulfill God's call to comfort that is given voice on this *Shabbos Nachamu*. Restored by the comfort and hope of Shabbos, may we then bring its peace out into the world.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor