

Dear Chavraya,

Shabbos Nachamu, the Shabbos of Comfort, I think of a little girl with a sprig of lavender. On this day many years ago, I had just asked my congregation about hope, what gives us hope, where do we find comfort and the strength to go on? At that moment, as though on cue, my then two year old eldest daughter walked down the aisle of the shul to me and reached up to hand me a small sprig of lavender. There was my answer, a small child, and a sprig of lavender.

This is the Shabbos that immediately follows Tisha B'Av, the day of mourning and fasting, of sorrow and sadness for tragedies that have befallen our own people, for the suffering of so many people and peoples, for all of the brokenness in the world around us. On Tisha B'Av we chant dirges called *kinot*. Every year at the start of Tisha B'Av, I share a favorite teaching from Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav. The word *kinot* is formed of the same letters as the word *tikkun/repair*. Rebbe Nachman offers a prayerful challenge, to transform the lament of *kinot* into the joy of *tikkun*, that we might ourselves come and so bring the world from despair to repair. I suggest a further play on the same words that I am sure from above is with Rebbe Nachman's permission. Formed of the same letters is *tinok/child*. In the face of every child is the challenge and plea to bring *tikkun*, a world of peace in which every child is safe to grow and thrive and to be a bearer of lavender.

As every child is a bearer of hope, a comforter, so each one of us. That is the reminder of this Shabbos. The first of seven weeks of comfort, the Sheva d'Nechemta, Shabbos Nachamu draws its name from the Haftarah of this Shabbos. The Prophet Isaiah sings out, *Nachamu nachamu ami/Comfort, comfort My people, says your God*. It is not God comforting, but God telling each one of us to be a comforter. The Hebrew month in which we symbolically move from despair to repair, helping us to know that process and bring it to be in the world, is the month of Av. Generally referred to as *Menachem Av/Av the Comforter*, it is further reminder that each of us is to be as the month we are in, a comforter.

As though to remind us that we are not to passively wait for comfort to come, but to bring comfort and so be comforted, the rabbis offer a beautiful teaching that is drawn from this week's Torah portion, Parashat Va'etchanan. Rabbi Yishma'el ben Elisha, the High Priest, entered the Holy of Holies and there saw God, if we can so speak, sitting on a high and lofty throne. Rabbi Yishma'el then recounts a mystical encounter that is yet so grounded, rooted in what should be the way of all relationship: And God said to me, "Yishma'el, My son, bless Me." I said to God, "May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer Your anger, and that Your mercy overcome Your sterner attributes, and that You behave toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and that for their sake You go beyond the letter of the law."

Going beyond the letter of the law in human affairs, not in regard to God's actions, but our own, is itself a category of Jewish law called *lifnim m'shurat ha'din*. Drawn from the verse in Va'etchanan, and you shall do that which is upright and good in the eyes of God/*v'asita ha'yashar v'hatov b'oney Hashem*, it is a challenge to us do good beyond what is commanded. It is a challenge to open our hearts and minds and to act in ways that will fulfill the spirit of Torah that will help to turn people from despair to repair, from *kinot* to *tikkun*. If even God seeks the comfort of our blessings, each of us is able to be a blessing and a comforter for each other in response to God's plea *nachamu, nachamu ami*/comfort, comfort My people.

On that Shabbos Nachamu so long ago, words came to me that I still sing, Little girl with a sprig of lavender, gentle she, gentle be, comfort ye My people; comfort ye, comfort ye with a sprig of lavender.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Victor