

Dear Chavraya,

It is late in the day, wishing I had more time to reflect, feeling very much in the spirit of this Shabbos, anticipating its embrace. This Shabbos is *Shabbos Nachamu*, the Shabbos of Comfort. The words come from the opening of the Haftorah from the Prophet Isaiah, *Nachamu, nachamu ami/Comfort, comfort My people, says your God*. Each year when we arrive at this Shabbos, whenever I hear these words, I remember a memorial service I attended in the days following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It was held in an old New England church in the town of Winthrop, where I grew up. A friend and mentor, Rev. Bob Mackie, who was also a trained opera singer stood before the gathering of so many grieving souls. He began to sing, as though it were this week's Haftorah sung for all in English, *Comfort ye, comfort ye, comfort ye My people....* I still cry as I remember that moment of what felt like inconsolable grief and that call to comfort.

What I didn't realize then, nor is it clear in how we usually speak of this Shabbos as the Shabbos of Comfort, that the words *nachamu, nachamu* are two verbs in the plural imperative. Every Shabbos offers comfort, but the name of this Shabbos is not meant to simply describe one gift of Shabbos as a place of succor and refuge. The words of Isaiah by which this Shabbos comes to be called are cried out, sung out, as with the powerfully gentle voice of Rev. Mackie, as a challenge. We are being told to be the comforters. We are being called to go out and comfort, not just one of us, but all of us, each one needed. *Nachamu, nachamu/you go out and comfort, comfort My people*.

We all need comforting and we are all called to comfort. The Torah portion of *Shabbos Nachamu* is always *Parashat V'etchanan*. It is a word of supplication, of crying out. Moses recounts his pleading with God to be allowed to enter the land, a wish he has already been told will not be granted. As Moses needed comfort, so do we, both in the realm of the personal and for all that touches us deeply from events in the world and among people. Comfort comes as a process, reviving us as though by a crystal stream of living waters, *mayyim chayyim*. It is the process that brings us to the eve of the new year. *Shabbos Nachamu* is the first of seven Shabbatot of consolation, the *Sheva d'n'chemta*. We are soothed for all that has been difficult as we prepare to cross a threshold in time.

On this Shabbos of Comfort, I find myself thinking about sources of comfort, about where we find comfort, and about the nature of comfort, of what we mean by comfort. Do we find comfort in the sweet sound of a child's voice? Is it in the embrace of a loved one or friend, perhaps an acquaintance who hears our silent cry to be held? Is there comfort in the span of the heavens, or in a gentle flower that knows not of the beauty it gives? Perhaps there is comfort in finding our own voice and in the strength to speak words of joy, of pain, of challenge, all in a way that the one we address is able to hear?

And then we wonder, what is comfort? Is it the feeling that comes of knowing that we are not alone, whether in the great or small ways of such knowing? Is it the knowledge of a friend's presence, of God's presence as *Yedid Nefesh/Friend of my Soul*, as we sing at the start of *Kabbalat Shabbat*? Is it comfort that we feel in the understanding glance of another, or in their words? Is it in the willingness of

another to receive our tears when we have suffered a loss, the offer of a shoulder to cry upon? Is it what we feel in knowing that we are supported in the face of words and deeds that diminish us, as a person and as a people?

*Nachamu, nachamu ami/Comfort, comfort My people. Nachamu is a verb. We are each to be an instrument of God's comfort. It is for us to speak up on behalf of all of God's people, whether of our own family or our neighbor's family. Perhaps most of all, comfort is found in knowing that we are called to be comforters. We are each so important, each needing comfort at times, each able to give comfort at times. The very last words of the Haftarah tell of each one's importance, *ish lo ne'edar/not one is missing*. Each one is so important, so needed. In comforting, so may we be comforted.*

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor