

Parshat Va'etchanan, Shabbat Nachamu - July 31, 2020
Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue
Rabbi Leora Abelson

I have a lot of respect for the psychological movement of the Jewish calendar, and it is an important part of my personal spiritual practice to take it seriously. I try to feel joy when the month of Adar begins, even if I am resistant. I try to experience gratitude and acceptance on Shabbes, as if the world is exactly as it should be. And I lean into my grief and sorrow leading up to, and especially on, Tisha b'Av, trying to stay present in the mourning, even though I know that comfort will follow because it, too, is commanded/prescribed.

The Shabbes after Tisha b'Av is the Shabbes of Comfort, and this year, I couldn't help anticipating, on Tisha b'Av, what follows Tisha b'Av, because I couldn't imagine how I could give a comforting Dvar Torah tonight. Comfort feels so elusive this year. Perhaps it was because just before Tisha b'Av began, I heard from some chaplain colleagues who work in a nursing home about the tremendous fear and exhaustion their staff are feeling right now. In this moment of relative calm, they are anticipating another surge of death, anticipating the extraordinary toll that both the disease and sheltering-in-place take on staff and residents alike.

Perhaps it was because I read about Operation Legend, the Trump administration's response to demands to defund the police, a response that is so vindictive, so dismissive of the centuries of violence Black people have experienced at the hands of the state. Perhaps it was because I read about Trump's suggestion to delay the election, which brings up such profound fear about the state of our democracy. I realize that reviewing my own fear and despair does the opposite of provide comfort, but it's important to me to acknowledge how elusive comfort feels this year.

Last night at the BLM 9bAv vigil, it felt so hard not to give hugs, give handshakes, sit close, and that's another reason comfort feels so elusive this year: when words can't fix it, when we can't rationalize or analyze to make ourselves feel better, there is so much comfort in a hug, in simply sitting next to someone, davening next to someone, singing together.

So even as I tried to be present with my grief on Tisha b'Av, I found myself worried about how I would give comfort in this Dvar Torah. And then I read the [piece in the NY Times by Congressman John Lewis](#), alav hashalom, an essay he wrote shortly before he died, with the request that it be published on the day of his funeral. That he had the strength and foresight to do it, that he understood what his own death would mean for our country and

that it would therefore be an opportunity for him to speak to us, to share his message with clarity and with love, is so moving, and so comforting to me.

His message is also comforting, and I tried to understand the nature of the comfort it offers. His message is one of hope; his message acknowledges the terrible reality we still live in, but it affirms the possibility for transformation. Lewis wrote, "I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society." And he wrote, "Though I am gone, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe." Comfort and hope are not the same thing, but following a day when we mourn systemic injustice and oppression, perhaps it is hope that we need, even more than comfort.

The haftorah for this Shabbat, from the book of Isaiah, begins with the words,

נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יְאִמֵר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

And the comfort that is offered is this: Behold, the Lord GOD comes in might, And His arm wins triumph for Him." We are invited to find comfort in the faith that God will prevail, that God is in control, that redemption will come to us.

But I think, after a day mourning centuries of anti-Jewish oppression; after a day grieving the destruction of Black lives and communities; what we need is not the promise that redemption will come to us, but the hope and the inspiration that we will make our way to redemption: that we will liberate ourselves, all of us, together.

And I think we find that in the parsha, Va'etchanan. Va'etchanan is in Sefar Devarim, the Book of Deuteronomy, most of which is Moshe's final speech to the Israelite community, and like Congressman Lewis, Moshe is very intentional about the kind of message he wants to pass on before he leaves them.

The parsha begins with Moshe's anguished self-revelation, in which he describes *begging* God to allow him into the Promised Land, and his plea is rejected by God.

Aviva Zornberg writes, "Moses relates to the people a moment when God refused to listen to him... In the first person, Moses testifies to an unbearable encounter with God's otherness." Moshe, who has the closest relationship to God of anyone in Jewish history and mythology, uses his own experience to model for the people the inevitable frustration and difficulty of being in relationship with God. And he goes on to affirm for them that they will, without his leadership, experience fear; they will experience distance from God; and Moshe

reassures them that they will find a way to act in accordance with God, they will find a way to maintain relationship, they will find a way back to love.

He retells the story of receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and he reminds them - you were *there*, “you came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain,” the covenant was made with *you*, just like it is made with every Jew who ever was or ever will be. And Moshe repeats the aseret hadibrot, the ten commandments - he re-enacts the moment of covenant with the people, reminding them that it will need to be continually re-enacted, with their children and their children’s children; that it is not a covenant made only with our ancestors, but with us, every generation of Jews. I will not go with you into the land, Moshe says, but the Torah will. וְזָאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: *This is the Torah, this is the way Moshe will be with his people when they cross over the river without him.* The teaching is about how to live in right relationship with the Divine, which is to say, how to live in right relationship with truth; in right relationship with the earth; in right relationship with justice; with compassion; with love.

Moshe is not comforted for his own loss, but he comforts the people by giving them hope, by reminding them of their own agency, their own power, their own inherent relationship with the Divine.

John Lewis wrote, each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.

Though I may not be here with you,” he wrote, “I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.”

In this parsha, Moshe shares the first line of the Shema and the words of v’ahavta with the community. V’ahavta... Love God with your everything - with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole strength. Take these words to heart, and live them out with your whole life. I think that is exactly what John Lewis meant when he said, “I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.” Make your hope, make your vision for your own liberation and all of ours, part of your daily life, and our shared life.

So while I’m not sure I can really feel, or offer, comfort tonight, I am confident that I can offer hope, and I want to close with a creative interpretation of V’ahavta, which I imagine

many of you know well, by Aurora Levins Morales - one of the most hopeful pieces of liturgy I know.

[V'Ahavta by Aurora Levins Morales](#)

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:
Another world is possible.

Thus spoke the prophet Roque Dalton:

*All together they have more death than we,
but all together, we have more life than they.*

There is more bloody death in their hands
than we could ever wield, unless
we lay down our souls to become them,
and then we will lose everything. So instead,

imagine winning. This is your sacred task.

This is your power. Imagine

every detail of winning, the exact smell of the summer streets
in which no one has been shot, the muscles you have never

unclenched from worry, gone soft as newborn skin,
the sparkling taste of food when we know
that no one on earth is hungry, that the beggars are fed,
that the old man under the bridge and the woman
wrapping herself in thin sheets in the back seat of a car,
and the children who suck on stones,
nest under a flock of roofs that keep multiplying their shelter.
Lean with all your being towards that day
when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune
out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters.

Defend the world in which we win as if it were your child.

It is your child.

Defend it as if it were your lover.

It is your lover.

When you inhale and when you exhale
breathe the possibility of another world
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
until it shines with hope.

Then imagine more.

Imagine rape is unimaginable. Imagine war is a scarcely credible rumor
That the crimes of our age, the grotesque inhumanities of greed,
the sheer and astounding shamelessness of it, the vast fortunes
made by stealing lives, the horrible normalcy it came to have,
is unimaginable to our heirs, the generations of the free.

Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth
Into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
Over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.

Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live