



Haftara for Va'ethanan-Nahamu 5777: Recovery

*“The reality is that you will grieve forever.
You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it.
You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered.
You will be whole again but you will never be the same.
Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”
— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*

Isaiah 40:1-26

Synopsis

This haftara comforts us from last week’s strong words of rebuke and condemnation. The Shabbat on which we read it is named after its first word: Nahamu — ‘Be consoled’. Yishaya’s words of consolation begin with comfort and forgiveness aimed at the city of Jerusalem, Israel’s capital. We are told that God will manifest before all flesh and all will see at once that God has spoken (5). God will come and reward the hardships: ‘He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in His bosom...’(11).

God’s unfathomable wisdom and majesty are portrayed. He compares to nothing. He is singular and infinite and in Him we abide.

When tragedy strikes, and our lives are shaken, and we feel that life as we know it has changed, we wonder how we might move on. Things do get better, but they are never the same. When we experience loss and suffering, life challenges us to recover. Not recovery in the literal sense of ‘covering again’ what has been exposed to us as a difficulty, but rather finding a way to absorb the change and heal around it.

With loss and hardship we are pressed to carry on through the pain, discomfort, sadness and uncertainty. Some of us make it through and find ways to build whole lives in ways that are different from the ones we knew before, while, sadly, some do not. The secret to moving through it and finding a road to the future is in discovering what Torah calls *nehama*. *Nehama* — meaning comfort or consolation — is specifically achieved through the discovery of a way forward towards change and renewal. The *avel* (mourner) requires *nehama* for rehabilitation.

Nehama includes in its meaning the concept of change in the sense of having to accommodate a changed situation in one’s life after a loss or failure. The *Hakhamim* use this term in the Talmud when they assert an idea that they are quite certain will not be proven wrong. They will say ‘I will see *nehama* if it is not as I say...’ (Hagiga 16).

God Himself uses this word when changing course in Creation when He finds that humankind has reached a point of core corruption through their own free choice.

‘And God (vaynahem) regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I have (nihanti) - reconsidered having made them.’ (Gen., 6:6-7)

Again it is used in reference to God as He accepts Moshe’s plea to spare the nation after the sin of the Golden Calf — He abandons His original plan to annihilate them and agrees to a new road forward



'And God (vaynahem) renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people'. (Ex., 32:14)

In *nehama* we discover new roads into the future that previously were undetected and not considered by us. This is the task of the one who visits a mourner. The *nehama* one brings is the presentation of a possibility for life that extends beyond the loss, pain and sorrow. Often this is achieved in the very visit itself. The presence of friends at a time of loss brings with it the meaning and context of a valuable life that awaits.

In the course of a lifetime we all experience sorrow. These times of grief are often embedded with grace. Opportunities for spiritual, emotional and psychological growth hide within them but often, because of the pain of their packaging we miss their gifts. It was because of these lessons learned through life's instability that Rabbi Yohanan would stand for the elderly both Jew and gentile.

Rabbi Yoḥanan would stand before Aramean (gentile) elders. He said: How many hardships have occurred to these individuals. It is appropriate to honour them, due to the wisdom they have garnered from their long lives. (Kiddushin, 33a)

We are habitual by nature. We quickly get used to the status quo and forget that life is replete with possibility and chance. It is only in the lap of possibility and chance, that comfort and consolation can be found from sorrow. Roads can be open to us that we were once blind to.

Nehama involves paving new pathways not only in our progress through our lives but in the neural pathways of our brains. In *nehama* we learn to use them to look at life and its possibilities more robustly and in greater health.

A voice rings out: "Clear in the desert a road for the Lord! Level in the wilderness a highway for our God! (3)

These new ways draw from God's infinity. It is in the unbounded expanse of His power that life itself and its prospects are renewed. For this reason our haftara of *nehama* ends in an elaborate portrayal of God's power:

*Who measured the waters with the hollow of His hand,
And gauged the skies with a span,
And meted earth's dust with a measure,
And weighed the mountains with a scale
And the hills with a balance?
Who has plumbed the mind of God,
What man could tell Him His plan?
Whom did He consult, and who taught Him,
Guided Him in the way of right?
Who guided Him in knowledge
And showed Him the path of wisdom?
The nations are but a drop in a bucket,
Reckoned as dust on a balance;
The very coastlands He lifts like motes...
To whom, then, can you liken God, what form compare to Him? (12-15,18)*

God is the home and hearth of the universe. He subsumes it in His infinite power and benevolence and fills it with grace. In the throes of change and loss life is renewed and born again and again into new and unimagined futures. In our pain and loss we are gifted with renewal. It is intimate and familiar, not careless and indifferent.



*Lift high your eyes and see: Who created these? He who sends out their host by count,
Who calls them each by name:
Because of His great might and vast power,
Not one fails to appear. (26)*

To know this is to know that we do not live in a deaf and dumb expanse of a spiritless universe but rather in the often tough-loving embrace of its infinite Master. In loss there is always the potential for *nehama* - always a way forward. And while the birthing pains may be great what is born from it can be even greater.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Joseph Dweck

Parasha Perspectives

II Va'etchannan

- 1f Moshe is denied (3:23-29)
- 2 Revelation and other gods (4:1-24)
- 3 Uniqueness of revelation and Exodus (4:25-40)
- 4 The 3 Cities of Refuge, eastside of Jordan (4:41-49)
- 5a Covenant. Intro. to Ten Commandments (5:1-5)
- 5b 1st Com. - God; 2nd Com. - Other gods (5:6-10)
- 5c 3rd Com. - Blasphemy (5:11)
- 5d 4th Com. - Shabbat (5:12-15)
- 5e 5th Com. - Parents (5:16)
- 5f 6th Com. - Murder (5:17)
- 5g 7th Com. - Adultery (5:17)
- 5h 8th Com. - Stealing (5:17)
- 5i 9th Com. - Perjury (5:18)
- 5j 10th Com. - Coveting (another's wife) (5:18)
- 5k 10th Com. (ctd) Coveting (property) (5:18)
- 5l Indirect Revelation (5:19-6:3)
- 6a First paragraph of the *Shema* (6:4-9)
- 6b Don't forget God on arrival (6:10-15)
- 6c Don't test God (6:16-19)
- 6d Retelling history (6:20-25)
- 6e Destroy the seven local nations.
God's love for you (7:1-11)

Taken from, 'Torah for Everyone' by Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum, Dean of LSJS