

## Nachamu: Comforting the Wounds

*Isaiah, chapter 40, 1-26*

(Sing 2 lines of niggun)

A simple wordless tune, a niggun. Hasidic tradition says, “There are gates in heaven that cannot be opened, except by melody and song”. I also believe singing or hearing a niggun can open the heart. Especially, when our hearts are wounded, and in need of comforting. Niggunim help me provide comfort to others, and to myself. The Rabbis say, “As G-d comforts mourners, so should you”, meaning not just that we ought to console mourners because G-d does, but that when we comfort them, we should do it in G-d’s way. A divine strategy for this arrives this week with Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Comfort. In the wake of the Temple’s destruction, G-d advises Isaiah, *Nachamu, nachamu, ami*, comfort my people, comfort them”. Last week brought Tisha b’Av, a time to remember the suffering of the Jewish people. It’s a time to mourn the destructions of the first and second Temples, as well as other tragedies of the Jewish people that occurred on that day. Today we take a deep breath, and let go of all of that sorrow. This week’s haftarah instructs us to bring comfort. In fact, for the next seven weeks that follow Tisha B’Av, we’ll read seven haftorot of consolation. How are the people of Israel supposed to be comforted after all of the mourning that follows the devastation? The answer may lie in the whole phrase, *nachamu ami*, “Take comfort my people” They understood at that moment, that even in grief, they were not alone. G-d is with them. Shabbat Nachamu may bring the kindest words we’ll ever read, we are never alone. Although the people of Israel find themselves wounded in this moment, they are not alone in their pain. G-d has put the power of comfort into Isaiah’s hands, and is opening it up to all humanity, giving the gift to comfort one another.

In this request, I feel G-d is also teaching us that comforting someone is not about trying to compensate for a loss or to actually change someone’s situation. At its’ core, comfort is about being present, listening and speaking words that console. This way of offering comfort is close to my heart. As a healthcare chaplain, providing interfaith pastoral care to patients, families and staff in the hospital, I’ve dedicated myself to offering compassionate spiritual care and emotional support as resources for healing. Chaplains work as part of the interdisciplinary team, recognizing that spiritual care is vital to healing. Often, people are not fully aware of the breadth of the Chaplain’s role. As healthcare professionals we are called to support people struggling with the meaning of illness, having concerns with spiritual issues, wrestling with difficult treatment choices, requesting a religious ritual specific to their tradition (I’ve been called for a Mi Sheberach, Vidui, Shabbat blessings, and even for a brit milah ceremony in the NICU), if they received bad news, if they are far from home and need support, when anticipating surgery, if they’d like someone to pray with or bless them, when grieving a loss, or feeling lonely or alone.

As a chaplain, I've had visits that have touched on all of these reasons. During these visits to patients and their families, I receive the personal stories they bravely and generously share with me. I know I'm blessed to listen and collect people's stories, and give the gift of comfort in return. And through these sacred conversations, I also have come to understand that I've been comforted by their stories too.

In her book *On Living*, Hospice Chaplain and author Kerry Egan writes about how she's been transformed by other people's stories. One such special time occurred a few years before she began her hospice work, when she had an emergency C-section with her first baby. The initial anesthesia failed, so Egan was administered another anesthesia, which triggered a psychotic state after the baby was born. Luckily for her, the state was temporary, but Egan missed the first year and half of her son's life. She reflects on how being present for others ended up comforting her. Egan writes, "I don't know if listening to other people's stories as they die can make you wise, but I do know that it can heal your soul. I know this because those stories healed mine. Just as was true for every one of my patients, something had happened to me too. What I thought of as the story that had shaped my life up to that point, was one I was ashamed of. I thought I was broken and cracked, and could not be put back together again. When I started working at hospice, I didn't yet understand that everyone-everyone- is broken and cracked."

While Chaplain Kerry Egan's example is vivid and intense, I can relate to this with my own experience at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, on one challenging Sunday afternoon last March. On that day, I too came to see how in helping others to comfort and heal their wounds, amazingly, we can be comforted in turn by them. I was on call, carrying the pager, as it was often the case on Sundays, the only chaplain in the hospital that day. Anything goes, I could be called to any of the medicine floors, Oncology and Cardiac Units, the ICU, Trauma or Labor and Delivery, a department I hadn't been paged to in my internship, and truthfully, carried some apprehensions about. As one of my beloved supervisors would say, "this hospital is your congregation" After a steady morning of visits, a page came in the early afternoon to visit a family requesting a chaplain. There was a death. I went right away, spoke to the nurse outside the room, and she shared that the 77 year-old, husband, father and grandfather, had died of a brain hemorrhage, pretty suddenly, after being admitted the night before. The nurse added, they were the warmest and most appreciative family she'd ever seen. I walked in and was welcomed by two big linebacker looking brothers, an aunt and uncle, and the grieving wife who was quiet. I couldn't avoid seeing their deceased husband and father, pale, with dark hair, and a face that wasn't terribly aged, in the bed. The brothers informed me they were Catholic, proud Irish, and looking for a chaplain to be present with them, hold them in their grief, and bless them and pray with them. However, they didn't want to begin until a third brother arrived, who was on his way. We had time, and I felt that to offer blessings, I needed to know more about this man. The family, in particular the

two brothers, expressed their hard-working dad was a kind, sociable, joker. He drove vans for disabled children and adults, had a caring soul. Through heartbreak and tears, especially the wife's, they painted a picture for me of a man who would go far for anyone in trouble. This family was open with me in their sharing, and at that moment, I felt a connection to them, even as they mourned. The still body, became filled with life, as I learned the kind of mensch their husband and father had been. He was so loved. Just at that moment, a page came, STAT-Labor and Delivery. I excused myself, and told them to tell the nurse to page me when the brother arrived. Off I went to offer spiritual care to those with one of deepest needs, and to a part of the hospital that frightened me, because it was unknown to me. I walked into the room, and approached the couple in their early thirties. The mom was on the bed being monitored, and dad was by her side rocking a baby, wrapped in a pink blanket, doll like, no lines or tubes attached, no sound, still. I knew immediately what I was seeing for the first time. I offered words of comfort, but mostly was present and listened. The couple wanted me to know about the experimental kidney trial the mom was a part of, as the baby she was carrying had not developed kidneys, and was only 25 weeks. The news was not a surprise, but the couple held out hope. I asked if they had chosen a name. They didn't want to name her. They wanted me to know they were concerned about explaining the loss to their preschool daughter at home. As I heard them speak, I realized the power of presence and companionship. My fears dissipated. The couple was strong and secure in their Catholic faith. They asked for a prayer for end of life (I reached for my interfaith prayer book), and I also gave a spontaneous prayer addressing their emotions, asking for G-d to heal their hearts, restore them, and surround them with comfort. I told them to reach out if they needed me again, and then I left the room, feeling very alone and deeply saddened. I found the empty nearby stairwell and cried. The pager beeped, alerting me the prior family was ready. I remembered then an expression I'd heard, "the chaplain needed a chaplain".

I took a deep breath, walked in, and was immediately embraced by each family member, even the brother I hadn't met. They had no idea the tragedy I'd experienced, and how I was affected by it. I felt supported by this family. I was there to comfort them, yet I was wounded and needed comforting. I found that comfort in their hugs and kind words. I was set to offer end of life prayers, along with reflections lifted from the stories I had collected earlier. I concluded with, ***"May G-d watch over him and bless him with gentleness and love, as he blessed all of you. And may you find comfort in your memories and in each other."*** They were not alone and neither was I. At that moment, this hospital was holy ground, where I can comfort and be comforted.

So, nachamu ami, take comfort my people, we are not alone, humans can comfort each other, as they are comforted by G-d. But, with all of the sadness and loss, all of the brokenness in the world, it seems that G-d too desires, deserves our comforting. The Temples are destroyed. A loving, righteous, menschlike father gone too soon, hopeful parents expecting to celebrate life are

grieving. Humans are mourning, but it seems to me that G-d mourns too. Humans and G-d share in the sadness of these and all losses. We seek comfort from a compassionate G-d in these moments, and G-d seeks the same from us, when G-d sees creation is broken. The mourning is mutual. Nachamau teaches us that G-d isn't whole, but G-d needs us to make G-d complete. After all, if humans are not alone, why should G-d be? Is it possible that in the words nachamu ami, G-d is calling out, "please comfort me!" An example from Torah can be found in Exodus, Chapter 3. G-d cries out to Moses in the burning thorn bush, "Moses, Moses do not come closer!" G-d is sensitive in this moment, G-d is saddened. G-d is in the thorns with Moses, and is suffering too. Whether we can visualize those human qualities in the divine, or not, the message is clear, G-d needs our comforting.

***May we use the gift of comfort wisely, and in turn, may we be comforted by others who share this gift with us. And from that nachamu, take comfort. Shabbat Shalom***