A Different Kind of Comfort

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The month of Elul marks the beginning of a process that leads us toward the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe. Yet in another sense, even at the beginning of Elul we are already mid-process.

Going back to at least medieval France,[1] the sequence of *haftarot* we read in the synagogue on Shabbat from 17th Tammuz until Yom Kippur were understood as representing a long process split into three periods:

1. Calamity (*pur'anut*)—the *haftarot* of the three weeks between 17th Tammuz and Tisha B'Av.
2. Comfort (*nehamah*)—the seven weeks between Tisha B'Av and the second-to-last Shabbat of the month of Elul.
3. Repentance (*teshuvah*)—on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah and the Shabbat before Yom Kippur.

[1] Tosafot to Megillah 31b, s.v. *rosh hodesh*.

Rosh Ḥodesh Elul, then, is in the middle of the *Sheva de-Neḥemta*, the "Seven [Haftarot] of Consolation"—in the midst of a process of *neḥamah* for the Jewish people.

It is easy to understand the need for consolation after Tisha B'Av. But the fact that this period of *neḥamah* continues into the month of Elul raises a question: What is the relationship between Elul as a time of *teshuvah*, a month of mercy and forgiveness, and its place within this period of *neḥamah*? After all, Elul ushers in a period of growing tension and apprehension, one that seems, at least at first glance, much closer to calamity than to comfort. What kind of consolation can we find when, according to the familiar religious imagination, the sword of judgment hangs over our necks? When we have not yet discovered, in the words of Unetaneh Tokef, "who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire, who by the sword and who by the beast"?

To answer this question, we need to say something about *neḥamah*. The first appearance of the root נ.ח.ם in the Torah comes at the end of Parashat Bereishit, when humanity sins and God resolves to destroy the human beings God created at the beginning of the *parashah*:

בראשית ו:ו

וַיִּנָּחֶם ה׳ כִּי עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל לִבּוֹ׃

Bereishit 6:6

God reconsidered having made humankind on the earth, and God was grieved to God's heart.

Here, *neḥamah* does not necessarily mean consolation at all. In its plain sense, it describes a change of position: something I once looked at one way and formed one judgment about is

now something I see and feel differently about. Rather than comfort, this kind of *neḥamah* is very connected to Elul: *neḥamah* can mean regret. During Elul, we look back at our actions and become capable of saying, as God says about humanity: "What I did was not good." We reconsider our previous assessment of ourselves and of our actions.

But later in the Torah, the word *neḥamah* takes on another meaning—one that becomes dominant in the language of the prophets and, eventually, in modern Hebrew:

בראשית לז:לה

וַיָּקֻמוּ כָל בָּנָיו וְכָל בְּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיְמָאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֵרֵד אֶל בְּנִי אָבֵל שְׁאֹלָה וַיִּבְךְּ אֹתוֹ אָבִיו׃

Genesis 37:35

All his sons and daughters rose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "I will go down to Sheol mourning for my son," he said. And his father bewailed him.

Here, *neḥamah* describes a process of recovery after a catastrophe.

What is the relationship between these two meanings of *neḥamah*? Encountering death can plunge us into despair. It can make us feel that there is no point in living, that the defining reality of life is now grief, and that there is no way out of it. *Neḥamah* is the process through which we become capable of embracing a renewed faith in life. It is the ability to see loss and difficulty not only as things that have happened to us, but also as the possibility of rebuilding. In other words, *neḥamah* is not merely an experience of "regret for being sad." It is a change of perspective—a process of putting on a new pair of glasses through which to see reality. Perhaps thinking of Elul as a time of *neḥamah* teaches us that *teshuvah* can and should be

more than a moment of regret. Perhaps it requires a renewed understanding of who we truly want to be and what our role in the world is.

According to the chronology preserved in the Rabbinic tradition, there is another connection between 17th Tammuz and Yom Kippur: on 17th Tammuz, the first tablets were broken; on 10th Tishrei (Yom Kippur), the second Tablets were given.[2] This means that the day on which Moses ascended Mount Sinai for the second time and began preparing the second Tablets was Rosh Hodesh Elul. As this *midrash* puts it:

פסיקתא זוטרתא שמות לד:א

פסל לך שני לוחות אבנים כראשונים", זה היה מעשה בראש חודש אלול... וארבעים יום עשה בקבלת לוחות האחרונות, מצינו שביום הכפורים ניתנו לוחות האחרונות.

Pesikta Zutrata to Exodus 34:1

"Carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones"—this took place on Rosh Hodesh Elul.… Moshe spent forty days receiving the second tablets; we find that the second tablets were given on Yom Kippur."

Seen through the prism of the *Sheva de-Nehemta*, Rosh Hodesh Elul therefore serves as a significant turning point between different stages of *nehamah*. It is the moment when, after the initial process of recovering from the shock, a person hears God's call to begin the work of repair. During Elul, we can find *nehamah* in the very possibility of *teshuvah*—in our ability to influence our own fate and even the fate of the world.

[2] For more on this see my essay for 17th Tammuz, "What Must Be Broken," available here: https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/what-must-be-broken.

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It has been my great privilege to share with you Divrei Torah for the Holidays this last year. I am passing on this honour to my colleague and friend Dr. Tsivia Frank-Vigoda, and I am sure we will all be inspired by her Torah.

Throughout the year, I have tried in my writing to highlight the different ways our holidays invite us to take responsibility—for our communities, our country, our relationship with God, and even for life itself. The realization that, however small and imperfect we are, can make all the difference—that our choices can save the world—is for me the most precious spiritual gift. In the words of Unetaneh Tokef: "תשובה תפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה - Repentance, prayer, and charity avert the severity of the decree."

That, in itself, is profoundly comforting.