



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Vaetchanan

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August 12, 2011

Vaetchanan

***Shabbat Nachamu:***  
**Be Comforted, My People**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Vaetchanan > Shabbat Nachamu > Be Comforted

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### ABSTRACT

We are living in uneasy times. Just as we prematurely thought we were out of the woods, the recent Washington budget debacle and the S&P’s unprecedented US credit downgrade, glaringly remind us of the profound uncertainty clouding our futures. With our economy floundering and so many of our institutions tottering, it seems like the pillars and foundations of our existing infrastructures – the ones we so deeply relied on and took for granted until now – are crumbling right beneath us. Is this the first death knell of Capitalism as we know it?

Closer to home, we just finished mourning the imagination-defying murders of nine-year-old Leiby Kletzky and the famed Rabbi Elazar Abuhatzera, grandson of the Baba Sali, both at the hands of other Jews.

All these shocking events – which open up and expose our deeper personal wounds and insecurities – seem appropriate for this time of year, as we come away from *Tisha B’Av* (last Tuesday) when we remembered the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and many other terrible things that happened on that day in history.

But just as things seem to hit rock bottom, we thankfully enter a time of consolation and empowerment. This week, the Hebrew calendar moves forward like a spinning wheel, and in its powerful way, teaches us to align our lives to the cycle of growing through uncertainty and healing from our wounds. This Shabbat, following *Tisha b’Av*, is called *Shabbat Nachamu* (the “Shabbat of Comfort”), for Isaiah begins: “Be comforted, be comforted, my people...”

This sermon analyzes the words of the Haftorah of *Shabbat Nachamu* line by line, demonstrating how Isaiah's timeless words teach us all how to heal our own damaged psyches and each other, how to build courage and strength even in times of insecurity, and above all – how we need not be trapped by who we are and our past attitudes; that despite our challenges and uncertainties we have the power to become what we want to be – excellent and great.

**SHABBAT NACHAMU:  
BE COMFORTED, MY PEOPLE**

**1. The Trouble with the Stock Market (Humor)**

The recent budget debates in Washington which raised the US debt ceiling by \$2.1 trillion, from \$14.3 to \$16.4 trillion – with every politician telling us that everything is fine – reminds me of the following joke:

A businessperson is walking down the street and bumps into a homeless beggar with an outstretched arm. The man gives the beggar a few coins, and asks him what circumstances led him to this destitute state. The beggar replies, that he lost his job due to the recession. In an attempt to console him, the businessman says: "Don't worry. My broker tells me that the recession will be over soon, and we will bounce back better than ever." The beggar stares into the businessman's eyes and says: "I am your broker!"

Or:

I really didn't know much about the stock market until becoming a senior in college. Here's what happened.

There was this guy, Ed, in my dormitory the entire 4 years of college. He was the genius type with bad eyesight. He had these thick coke-bottle glasses and never went to class, but he always got A's on every test. Instead of going to class, he just sat in his room and studied the stock market. He had stock charts all over the walls and even had a computer before you could even buy them in a store!

Upon reaching my senior year, I realized it was time to get serious about making a living, that I would need to go out and make some money. So I went down to talk to Ed.

“Ed,” I said. “I’ll work as hard as I have to. Tell me how I can end up with one million dollars in the stock market.” He scratched his head, then lowered his head and looked at me over the top of those thick glasses and said, “Start with \$2 million.”

## 2. Uncertain Times

[The recent budget debates in Washington which raised the US debt ceiling by \$2.1 trillion, from \$14.3 to \$16.4 trillion – with every politician telling us that everything is fine – only make us worry more.]

We are well aware we are living in uneasy times. Just as we prematurely thought we were out of the woods (the worst recession in history), the recent Washington budget debacle and the S&P’s unprecedented US credit downgrade, glaringly remind us of the profound uncertainty clouding our futures. With our economy floundering and so many of our institutions tottering, it seems like the pillars and foundations of our existing infrastructures – the ones we so deeply relied on and took for granted until now – are crumbling right beneath us. Is this the first death knell of Capitalism as we know it?

What is happening to our world? Despite so many astonishing technological and medical breakthroughs, our underlying core values seem to be in terrible state of decay. As we approach the 10th anniversary of 9/11 do you feel we are living in a more secure or less secure world?

All these upheavals – which open up and expose our deeper personal wounds and insecurities – seem macabrely appropriate for this time of year, as we come away from *Tisha B’Av* (last Tuesday) when we remembered the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – and when we reflected on all forms of turmoil and destruction in our lives.

### 3. Saddest Time of the Year

We have just completed the saddest period in the Jewish calendar, called the Three Weeks. This difficult time for Jews – in which we don't schedule weddings and other optional celebrations – began with the fast of the 17th of *Tammuz* (19th of July). This fast traditionally commemorates the day when the walls of Jerusalem were first breached by invaders, prior to the city's destruction. The Three Weeks ended last Tuesday with the fast of *Tisha B'Av* (9th of August) when we traditionally remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – in the year 422 BCE when the First Temple was destroyed, and in the year 70 CE when the Second Temple was destroyed. This is by far, the worst day in Jewish history, when many other terrible things were visited on the Jewish people.

This year was particularly heart-wrenching, because, unlike in the past when enemies of the Jews committed horrible acts against us, this year it was Jews.

We just finished mourning the imagination-defying murders of nine-year-old Leiby Kletzky and the famed Rabbi Elazar Abuhitzeira, grandson of the Baba Sali, both at the hands of other Jews.

### 4. We Are All Responsible

One of the most noble and powerful Jewish concepts is that we are not self-contained individuals; we all carry responsibility for each other and for events – including tragedies – happening around us (especially ones rooted from within our midst).

In fact, that is Torah law, as Maimonides states:

When a calamity strikes the public we must see it as a result of our evil actions. We must cry out, examine our lives and correct our ways. To say that the calamity is merely a natural phenomenon or a chance occurrence is insensitive and cruel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Laws of Fasting 1:2-3.

The words of Maimonides do not mean that we should be pointing fingers and looking to blame others, but that we should be looking into our own hearts, and seeing how we can correct our ways. Our society as a whole has to undergo a deep soul-searching to understand what we are doing wrong, and what we can do to remedy the roots of the problem.

We may not be responsible directly for these tragedies or any other problems in today's world, but we are responsible as a community for the environment that allows such things to happen. And we, therefore, must improve ourselves to ensure that such things do not continue to happen.

These murders – as well as other social maladies today – are symptoms of an ailing society. We must see ourselves as integral parts of one body, and we must realize that when one limb, or even one cell is weak, all of us are weak. And if one part is wounded due to a neglected infection, we are responsible for not having caught the problem in time.

So we need to see these calamities as wake up calls to alert us all to the fact that there is a festering problem.

## 5. Haftorah of *Chazon*

In this regard, last week's Haftorah reverberates with particular strength.

The Prophet Isaiah<sup>2</sup> doesn't mince words as he describes in no uncertain terms the damage humans can inflict on themselves and their children. The "vision of Isaiah" is brutal, as he cries out: "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for God has spoken!"

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<sup>2</sup>Isaiah 1:1-27.

He then continues, quoting God:

“The ox knows his owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know; My people do not understand ... The entire head is sick, and the entire heart faint. From head to foot there is nothing sound in it, only wounds, bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been pressed out, or bound up, or softened with oil.

Isaiah continues to deride not just sinners but also committed worshippers who, he says, again quoting God, are mechanical and repulsive, masking the corruption within:

“Stop bringing meaningless offerings; they are an abomination to Me ... When you spread out your hands [in prayer], I will hide My eyes from you. Yes, even though you multiply your prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes; stop doing evil. Learn to do good! Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow...

“Jerusalem ... was once full of justice, righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers lodge there. Your leaders are rebellious and companions of thieves. Everyone loves bribes and chases after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor do they take on the widow’s cause.”

Apply these words to our times and you have a description of a society that is allowing its children to fall prey to the forces of corruption, for Jerusalem is a symbol of each one of us.

And which of one of us is not a wounded child in some way? We all carry childhood memories and experiences that have shaped us at our most impressionable age, and turned us into the adults we are today. Our fears, insecurities, and inhibitions – as well as our strengths, of course – are products of our younger formative years. So the hurt children of the Haftorah includes each one of us as well – with whatever pains or fears we struggle with, whether they be subtle or severe.

## 6. Shabbat Nachamu

Thankfully, the story does not end here. Just as things seem to spiral totally out of control, this week, after *Tisha B'Av*, the Hebrew calendar moves forward like a spinning wheel, and in its powerful way, teaches us to align our lives to the cycle of healing from our wounds and facing with courage and fortitude the uncertainties that lay ahead.

This Shabbat, following *Tisha b'Av*, is called *Shabbat Nachamu* (the "Shabbat of Comfort"), for Isaiah begins:

"Be comforted, be comforted, my people..."<sup>3</sup>

For now we arrive at the point where we can repair and transform our fractured psyches, and build up strength to confront the problems of our crumbling infrastructures.

## 7. Be Comforted (Humor)

It is related that one year on Shabbat Nachamu, the rabbi of one synagogue began his sermon by quoting the first verse of the Haftarah, but, alas, he was using an antiquated translation.

So instead of "Be comforted, be comforted, my people" he said: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people."

That afternoon, a number of congregants turned up at his house. The Rabbi was puzzled and asked what suddenly brought them there. "We came for tea," they said.

"Oh?" the Rabbi did not know what to say, "I was not expecting you."

"But Rabbi," one of the congregants remonstrated. "You clearly said, 'Come for tea, come for tea, my people.'"

But all kidding aside ...

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 40:1.

## 8. The Power to Comfort

Today, *Shabbat Nachamu*, contains the very powerful energy of comforting. For time in Judaism is energy, and this special day infuses us with its unique power.

The opening words of the Haftorah *Nachamu, nachamu ami*, “Be comforted, be comforted, my people” instill in all of us a profound level of comfort, and double comfort at that – double in quantity and in quality.

What does it mean to comfort someone? Comforting someone after a tragedy or in the face of fear is not an act of patronizing. Truly comforting someone – as the prophet does in the name of God – means giving that person new strength and courage to realize that he or she or we cannot be hurt by anything. And not just that we can survive anything but that we can thrive and come away stronger than ever.

As we face today so many new uncertainties and challenges, as well difficult losses, *nachamu, nachamu* teaches and empowers us to know with complete and unwavering certainty that we are not trapped by our pasts ... that we are not victims of corrupt systems and selfish politicians ... that we are not shaped by the low standards and even lower expectations around us. We have the power to be whoever we want to be – to reach the sky and beyond!

Even as we witness the instability of the institutions around us which we may have relied on for “comfort” in the past, we are comforted today by far higher powers and far more reliable reservoirs of security.

We may have suffered. We may have endured much. But we are flowers waiting to bloom...

Twenty-seven years ago this week, on the night of his resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal, President Nixon purportedly stopped in front of the White House portrait of the assassinated President Kennedy and whispered: “They love you because you remind them of what they *want* to be. They hate me because I remind them of who they *are*.”

This then is the theme of Isaiah's timeless words in this week's Haftorah – teaching us all how to overcome our fears and heal from our wounds, how to build courage and strength even in times of insecurity, and above all – how we need not be trapped by who we are and our old habits and attitudes; that despite our challenges and uncertainties we have the power to become what we want to be – excellent and great.

Comforting others means teaching them not who they think they are, but who they can become.

## 9. Verse Analysis

Let us now look at the individual verses in this Haftorah and discern the message they carry for us today:

“Be comforted, be comforted, my people” – when you see others hurting, be gentle, be sensitive, extend kindness, comfort them. This is not a time for judgment or even analysis.

“Speak to the heart of Jerusalem” – speak not to the mind, but to the heart, the pure heart within the person in pain. Words from the heart enter the heart. Words from the mind enter one ear and exit out the other. In time of emotional anguish or fear only speaking from and to the heart can work.

“Proclaim to her that her warfare is over” – tell the hurting soul: you no longer have to fight. You can begin to let your guard down.

“Her iniquity is pardoned” – you are forgiven. Stop blaming yourself. One of the tragic symptoms of childhood hurt and abuse is the tendency to blame yourself. Children of divorced parents, of feuding adults, blame themselves for the problems. Some say that this is because children cannot tolerate the possibility that their parents – who are everything to them – can be at fault. Left with no one else to blame, the children erroneously see themselves as the culprit. And this self-loathing and sense of inadequacy further erodes their confidence.

“You are pardoned” – tell that child, now an adult: it’s not your fault. Don’t allow yourself to be invalidated. You have all the strength necessary to pick up the pieces and rebuild your life.

“For she has received from God’s hands double for all her sins” – for every fall, you receive double amount of strength to overcome the challenge.

## 10. Verse Analysis cont.

“Listen, a voice calls in the wilderness: Prepare the way for God. Make straight in the desert a path for God” – Even in the throes of despair, lost deep in the wilderness, your inner voice calls out ... and you can hear it more often if you allow yourself to listen. In your darkest moments, you can pave the way toward redemption. Because embedded within the shadows lies enormous potency.

“Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked will become level and rough places a plain” – Life is a cycle. Like a spinning wheel, even the dips in life are only a step away from the wheel’s ascent. And vice versa.

“And God’s glory will be revealed and all flesh will see it together; for God’s mouth has spoken:” Even our flesh, our hedonistic experiences of pleasure, can lead us to seeing the deepest dimensions of the Divine Essence. As Chassidic teachings explain: The material, created *yesh* (the ego of the flesh) originates in the true *yesh* (the Essence of the Divine). One who has self-indulged and been consumed by addiction and other material obsessions, can channel and transform these passions into powerful forces of good.

“Listen! One says: ‘Shout!’ And he says: ‘What shall I shout?’ ‘Shout that mankind is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades beneath God’s breath; surely the people are like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but God’s word will stand forever.’” – Shout, the prophet says. Yes, shout. Yell out from your very guts that even though everything dies, by connecting to a Higher Reality mortals become immortal.

“Like a shepherd He will feed his flock. He will gather the lambs in His arms, carry them in His bosom, gently leading those with young” – When you are vulnerable and allow yourself to be lifted, your divine soul will carry you through the darkest times. The one set of footprints in the sand are those of God carrying you when you had no strength of your own to survive.

“Do you not know? Do you not hear? Have you not been told from the beginning? Haven’t you understood from the foundations of the earth?” – People living in their comfort zones can often not see the inner truths. They are trapped on the surface level of existence. When you have nothing, you have nothing to lose and only to gain. Suffering reveals cracks in the veneer, allowing a peek inside, into the foundations of existence. When all is dark – a new light can shine through. But you need to avoid being trapped in your despair. You need to attune your perception and cup your ears – and listen to the voice that goes back to the beginning of it all.

## 11. Conclusion: No One is Missing

“Lift up your eyes on high, and see. Who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name through the greatness of His might, and the force of His power” – Those surrounded by material success, who see the functioning world around them, can be seduced and blinded by their own vision; they see nothing but themselves and their self-interests. (Witness the recent economic scandals infecting the highest echelons.) When everything around you is shrouded and you have nowhere to turn, except to your own self-destructive patterns, you have the unique opportunity – not being deluded by the follies of existence – to lift up your eyes on high and see the force that has put all in place.

“Not one is missing” – Your very survival, despite all that you have endured, is a testimony that someone is watching over you. Your only enemy is your own self-perception, for if you feel you are lost, you will remain lost. If you feel that you are missing, not just to others, but to yourself ... if you feel that you don’t recognize yourself ... your own self-defeating attitude will not allow you to be found.

That’s how the Haftorah ends, with the words: “Not one is missing.” So if nothing else, just do not give up on yourself.

Life is tough. For some tougher than for others. Many battles have been waged; many wounds endured. And there are more battles to come.

But today, rest your head on My shoulder, says God, and we say to each other: Be comforted all you tortured souls. Be comforted. Amen.