



DEVARIM

Vaetchanan / 13 Av

Shabbat Nachamu: The Birth of True Therapy

August 5, 2017

THE BIRTH OF TRUE THERAPY

A 2600 YEAR-OLD TIME TESTED MODEL

ABSTRACT

Does the world have more therapists or clients?

More than 30% of all adults in the USA go to therapy today (an estimated 69 million people). There are approximately half a million licensed therapists in the US (in case you're wondering, that works out to be 138 people for every therapist). Americans spend about \$65 billion every year on psychotherapy and medication. That's a twelve-fold increase (considering inflation) since 1980. So the numbers are just skyrocketing upwards.

And statistics show that most people stay in therapy longer than they ever expected or should, simply out of habit, desperation or just to be able to unload their chests.

Indeed, some studies show that therapy provides more happiness than money (32 times more, they say), because a sympathetic ear and getting understanding trumps getting stuff.

But with all this therapeutic intervention are we healthier people today?

Long before we entered the modern age with all its gifts and shortcomings, Isaiah the prophet delivered one of history's most eloquent – and powerful – words of comfort to the Jewish people who had just suffered great destruction. We read Isaiah's immortal words this Shabbat following *Tisha b'Av*, *Shabbat Nachamu* (the "Shabbat of Comfort"), for the Haftorah which begins: "Be comforted, be comforted, my people..."

Isaiah's words are actually a system – a methodology, offering us a modality of dealing with challenges, comforting our suffering souls and healing our wounds.

Indeed, *Nachamu* reflects the cycle of life. First came the Three Weeks concluding with *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, 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 loss. Beginning with *Shabbat Nachamu*, we enter a time (the seven weeks) of comfort and empowerment.

This sermon analyzes the words of the Haftorah of *Shabbat Nachamu* line by line, demonstrating how Isaiah's timeless words teach us and provide us all with tools 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 fears we have the power to become what we want to be – excellent and great.

Today let us travel back 2600 years to the establishment of the first ever therapeutic model of healing and consolation.

1. Therapy Today

Did you hear the one about the difference between the neurotic, psychotic and psychiatrist?

The neurotic builds castles in the air. The psychotic lives in them. The psychiatrist collects rent from both.

A quick quiz: Does the world have more therapists or clients?

Here are some actual statistics:

More than 30% of all adults in the USA go to therapy today (an estimated 69 million people). There are approximately half a million licensed therapists in the US (in case you're wondering, that works out to be 138 people for every therapist). Americans spend about \$65 billion every year on psychotherapy and medication. That's a twelve-fold increase (considering inflation) since 1980. So the numbers are just skyrocketing upwards.

And statistics show that most people stay in therapy longer than they ever expected or should, simply out of habit, desperation or just to be able to unload their chests.

Indeed, some studies show that therapy provides more happiness than money (32 times more, they say), because a sympathetic ear and getting understanding trumps getting stuff¹.

But with all this therapeutic intervention are we healthier people today?

2. The First Ever Therapeutic Model

Long before we entered the modern age with all its gifts and shortcomings, Isaiah the prophet delivered one of history's most eloquent – and powerful – words of comfort (you will ever hear, as he spoke) to the Jewish people who had just suffered great destruction. We read Isaiah's immortal words in the Haftorah of this Shabbat following *Tisha b'Av*, which is called *Shabbat Nachamu* (the "Shabbat of Comfort"), for the opening of the Haftorah: "Be comforted, be comforted, my people..."

Isaiah's words are actually a system – a methodology, offering us a modality of dealing with challenges, comforting our suffering souls and healing our wounds.

Indeed, *Nachamu* reflects the cycle of life. First came the Three Weeks concluding with *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, 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 loss. Beginning with *Shabbat Nachamu*, we thankfully enter a time (the seven weeks) of comfort and empowerment.

¹ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-therapy/200911/therapy-32x-more-effective-money>.

Today let us travel back 2600 years to the establishment of the first ever therapeutic model of healing and consolation, building strength and fortifying our psyches.

Yes my friends, the best therapeutic model, one that has withstood the test of time, was born 2600 years ago. And it is relevant today more than ever.

3. Uneasy Times

We are living in uneasy times.

Besides for the challenges we face in our personal lives, as evidenced by the therapeutic statistics mentioned earlier – and frankly, each one of us knows in our hearts the various struggles we are dealing with – we also are facing upheaval on the global front.

The Middle East is as volatile as ever. Israel, in particular, is facing a new resurgence on the Temple Mount, exposing the foolish, if not tragic, mistake made 50 years ago when Israel, after its miraculous victory in the Six-Day-War, returned control of the Temple Mount to Muslim authority (the Waqf).

Meanwhile, prejudices against Israel continue to simmer in Europe and elsewhere.

Jewish woes such as these seem “appropriate” for this time of 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* (11th 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* (1st 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 destroyed. This is by far, the saddest day in Jewish history, when many other terrible things were visited on the Jewish people.

But just as things seem to hit a low, we thankfully enter a time of consolation and empowerment. And indeed, we discover that the low is ultimately a stepping stone to reach unprecedented new heights.

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 the Haftarah from Prophet Isaiah begins: “Be comforted, be comforted, my people...”

4. 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 Haftorah, 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.’”

This makes me wonder how many other things we Rabbis say are misunderstood...

But all kidding aside ...

5. 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 G-d – 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, *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 shaped by the low standards and even lower expectations around us ... that 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 world around us, 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 have each other.

6. Comforting Each Other (Inspirational Story)

Several years ago, at a weekend retreat over *Shabbat Nachamu* conducted by a colleague of mine, one participant proved particularly troublesome. This woman was clearly unhappy about almost everything. She didn't like the lodging, the food, the people, etc. None of the staff were able to appease her. My colleague recognized that something else was bothering her, so he allowed her space.

On Shabbat [Saturday] morning, before the Torah reading, he spoke about *Nachamu*. The question he posed was this: Why didn't G-d Himself come to console the people, instead of sending the prophet, His messenger?

He suggested that perhaps the reason for this is because G-d wanted to instill in human beings the power to console each other. G-d obviously has the power to console us, and He does so later in the Haftorah cycle. But the big question is whether we have the power to console and give strength to each other? Be comforted my people (*Nachamu Nachamu Ami*) clearly states that we were given this power.

He compared this to the Talmudic statement regarding healing – that a specific verse in the Torah (*v'rapeh ye'rapeh*²) declares that G-d has given us (or our doctors) the divine permission and power to heal.

After his talk, the unhappy woman came to speak with him and confided that this *Shabbat Nachamu* was the first *yahrzeit* of her son, and it also happened to be his Bar Mitzvah *parsha*. She had come to this weekend retreat to try to get away from the pain. She acknowledged that her distress was the cause of all her complaints. But upon hearing the Rabbi's words about the power we have to comfort each other, *nachamu, nachamu ami*, she felt as if these words were directed to her. And she felt consoled. She believed that we indeed do have the power to comfort each other, and so she wanted to dedicate the Haftorah reading in honor of her son...

7. The Power to Console

Yes, my friends, we have the power to console and strengthen each other. We should not take this lightly; it is a Divine power given to us as a great gift. Obviously, this gift also comes with its alter ego: the ability to hurt each other. But the focus must be on our ability to choose the path of empowering each other.

This may also explain the great power in human touch. We know today – something that was always emphasized in Torah tradition – the profound effects of a mother's cradling her newborn child. We have yet to fully appreciate the impact of nine months of pregnancy on a child's development and sense of security in this world. But it is abundantly clear that the loving touch of parents helps a child develop safety and confidence,

² Exodus 21:19-20. Talmud *Berachos* 60a.

and the ability to, in turn, love and touch others.

G-d could have created us to be completely self-dependent, without the need for human affirmation, but then we humans would not be part of creating the magic of love. So G-d did take a risk – as He did with all the powers bestowed on humans – but this was risk well worth the benefits: the great power we generate when we synergize, love and empower each other.

It is true that Hillel the Sage says³, “If I am not for myself who will be for me?” But he also continues, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” The second phrase does not contradict the first, because first and foremost, each of us is an individual that has the power to stand on his or her own feet. Even if we do not receive the proper love, we are not doomed and we have the ability to compensate by nurturing our selves, through connecting to our Divine souls. In other words, our inherent value is not determined by other people.

But once we have established the sense of self (“If I am not for myself who will be for me?”), we can reach great heights only with the support of others (“If I am only for myself, what am I?”).

So, remember that every time you interact with another person: You have the unique ability to empower him or her. Every time.

It’s all about human dignity. To respect another’s dignity is the same as respecting your own. If one thing is compromised the other will quickly follow. Furthermore, each of us is a microcosm of the whole. When we touch one person we touch a universe. And finally, to touch another is to touch G-d.

8. Isaiah’s Timeless Words

This is the theme of Isaiah’s timeless words in this week’s Haftorah – the first ever-therapeutic model – 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 not to be trapped by who we are and our old habits and attitudes. For despite our challenges and uncertainties we (all of us, ourselves and those we comfort) have the power to become what we want to be – excellent and great.

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.

³ Avot 1:14.

“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 sees 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 G-d’s hands double for all her sins” – for every fall, you receive double amount of strength to overcome the challenge.

9. Verse Analysis Continued

“Listen, a voice calls in the wilderness: Prepare the way for G-d. Make straight in the desert a path for G-d” – 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 G-d’s glory will be revealed and all flesh will see it together; for G-d’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 Chasidic 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 G-d’s breath; surely the people are like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but G-d’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 G-d 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.

10. 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. 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.

Not bad for a therapy born 2600 years ago.

Nachamu offers us a time tested model for healthy comfort and therapy.

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 G-d, and we say to each other: Be comforted all you tortured souls. Be comforted. Amen.