



DEVARIM

Ki Tavo / Chai Elul

Can We Regain Lost Love?

September 9, 2017

CAN WE REGAIN LOST LOVE?**ABSTRACT**

A pre-school principal noticed that one of the children was love-starved; he was constantly seeking attention and being very clingy. So she called the mother in for a woman-to-woman talk and told her in the nicest way possible that she felt the child needed more love. The mother listened patiently and said: “I know you’re right. The psychologist told me the same thing. So I instructed our babysitter to hug him more, but I guess she just doesn’t understand.”

This sermon demonstrates how this week’s Haftarah contains a fundamental lesson in reclaiming love that so many of us were deprived of as children – a powerful life-changing lesson, relevant today more than ever.

This week’s Haftarah is the sixth in a series of seven Haftarahs of consolation, a series that began after the worst date in Jewish history – *Tisha B’Av*. The Prophet Isaiah consoles us and tells us to “rise and shine.”

But how can we do that if we have been victims of childhood abuse? How can we do that if we have experienced a personal holocaust? How can we do that if we feel unloved, forsaken and lost?

Today, Chai Elul, is also the birthday of the two great luminaries, the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe, who came to revive the Jewish spirit from a comatose state. As the actual date of their birthday suggests, they infused new life (*chai*) and hope in the love of Elul, helping us all to rise and shine – and reclaim any love and beauty that may have gone into hiding and we may have seemingly lost.

Note: Some of this material is very sensitive and explicit, and needs your discretion. The sermon can be given without sections 3 and 9. We included it because of its important relevance to many. But obviously, only you can gauge your audience and determine what should or should not be said.

1. Starving for Love

Children today are starving for love. Like a flower in need of water, a child is in need of nurturing and validation to survive. Without love, a child’s psyche will wither, leaving a profound impact for the rest of that child’s life. This story speaks volumes for itself:

The principal of a pre-school noticed that one of the children was love-starved; he was constantly seeking attention and being very clingy. So she called the mother in for a woman-to-woman talk and told her in

the nicest way possible that she felt the child needed more love.

The mother listened patiently and said: “I know you’re right. The psychologist told me the same thing. So I told our babysitter to hug him more, but I guess she just doesn’t understand.”

2. It Gets Worse

But it can be worse – much worse.

Most of us can remember when we learned for the first time that there is such a thing as child abuse – not from something we saw on TV, or heard about as a warning from our parents – but as something that actually happened to someone close to us. I hope that no one here was ever a victim or was ever exposed to such horrors. But, sadly, we have all come across (in one way or another) with this problem because, in our world today, wounded children are not uncommon. Even if we thankfully have never endured abuse, many of us have experienced the pain of such a thing by proximity.

As difficult as it is to discuss these matters, I believe that it is vital that we address them, demonstrating our sensitivity and empathy, and above all, our willingness to learn how we can be of help to anyone struggling with these challenges.

3. A Victim of Incest (Optional)

A colleague has shared with me his shock and disbelief when one of his students confided in him that she was considered a bit crazy for climbing atop the refrigerator in her home. Or when that didn’t work, under the kitchen table. Both evasive tactics to escape an abusive father. She would devise all types of schemes and ruses to avoid sleeping in her bedroom, lest she have to host another one of his nightly visits.

It is almost too horrible to imagine a father deliberately exploiting his own child. G-d knows that we all have our temptations, some very difficult to control. We all have our ugly sides, the ones we would rather never expose, even to ourselves. But what twisted psyche would cause a parent to hurt his own child this way? It’s totally beyond the scope of any normal distortion.

And then, what was even worse – if that is possible – was the silent mother of this child, who ignored the violation of her daughter, who went about her own merry way, smiling, acquiescing ... creating the illusion of normalcy, making excuses for her husband ... insisting on “family gatherings” and taking “family pictures”

... as if all was just fine and dandy. Meanwhile, that little girl was living in hell, retreating deeper into her inner shell, never to return quite the same.

Such are the depths of human darkness.

4. The Source of Human Darkness

The great 16th century Kabbalist known as the Ari calls the source of human darkness – this black shroud that conceals the true reality – “the mystery of the *tzimtzum*.” The *tzimtzum* – the “contraction” of the divine light to conceal G-d’s presence in this world – created a cosmic black hole. There was a good reason for this. Because G-d’s presence was hidden, our independent consciousness was able to arise, and we could exercise our free will. But this condition also became the root of existential loneliness, and of all injustice and abuse. Only because we felt independent from G-d could we delude ourselves that we were accountable only to ourselves and, fearing no one, we could hurt one another and ourselves in the process.

No one can know what this withdrawal of light – this horrible darkness known as the *tzimtzum* – is really like until he or she has experienced a holocaust, whether individually or collectively. Until you see an adult trembling like a child when recalling the profound shame and betrayal that results from one form of abuse or another. Until then, you have not seen the darkness of the *tzimtzum* – not really. And then, and only then, do you have the sacred right to cry out and demand justice. To challenge G-d and implore of Him: Why?

This is not an intellectual process. It is a gut-wrenching, emotional cry that comes from the innermost depths of an anguished heart, trying, groping, gasping for some air: “Why was I not loved?” “Did I not deserve love?” “What is the matter with me?”

Every night when the sun sets, how many little girls and boys shrivel up in fear?

For some of us a sunset is a beautiful sight. For many others it is a nightmare beginning to unfold.

5. Darkness Covers the Earth

Darkness covers the earth. But an even thicker cloud covers people’s perception. As dark as the *tzimtzum* may be, it doesn’t compare to the density we bring on when we are complicit in the concealment of G-d’s goodness.

Tragically, there are many forms of child abuse – psychological, physical, verbal, even religious. Then, there are

other equally traumatizing experiences – like premature death of a parent, divorce and other jolting tragedies – that shatter the innocence and pure belief of a child’s seamless life.

And yet, the paradox is the same – the G-d we want to “blame” for these problems is the source of all consolation and hope.

This is the message we get from the Prophet Isaiah in this week’s Haftarah reading.

6. The Worst Date in Jewish History (Optional)

Since *Tisha B’Av*, every Haftarah we have read has been from Isaiah, and everyone – leading all the way to the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana – has carried a message of consolation.

Tisha B’Av – the 9th day of the Hebrew month of *Av* – is the date that will live in infamy in Jewish history. It is, by far, the worst day in the entire Jewish calendar, when the full horror of the darkness was made apparent:

- In the year 1312 BCE, it was the date on which the Israelites sent scouts into the Promised Land and chose darkness instead of light. They did not trust in G-d enough to enter. Because of this, they were doomed to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all those of the slave generation – those who had lived too long in the darkness of bondage – had died. But even when they all died, and when the land was settled, darkness has always obscured *Tisha B’Av*.
- In the year 422 BCE, it was the date on which the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon’s Temple and exiled the Jews from their homeland.
- In the year 70 CE, it was the date on which Jerusalem was devastated by the Romans and the Second Temple was destroyed by Titus. At that time some 2.5 million Jews were killed and another million exiled from their homeland.
- In the year 1096, it was the date on which the first Crusade was launched, an event which led to the brutal murder of half of the Jews of Europe and all of the Jews of Jerusalem.
- In the year 1492, it was the date when the Jews of Spain were given an ultimatum by the Inquisition – leave, convert or die.
- In the year 1914, it was the date on which World War I – the prelude to the Holocaust – begun.

And this is just a small sample of all the horrible events that befell the Jewish people on that date. *Tisha B’Av* is – bar none – the worst date in Jewish history. And, when it approaches, those familiar with all that has taken place on that date cannot help but feel the collective tension.

And yet, on the first Shabbat after *Tisha B'Av*, we read this message in a Haftarah from Isaiah: “Be comforted, be comforted, my people, says G-d.”¹

7. Message of Consolation

All the Haftarah readings since *Tisha B'Av* have come from Isaiah and all have conveyed a similar message of consolation. The Midrash² explains the progression of these seven Haftarahs as a dialogue between us and G-d.

The first week, G-d sends His messenger, the prophet, to console us after the devastation of *Tisha B'Av* with these words: “Be comforted, be comforted, my people, says G-d.”³

The second week – when we read, “And Zion said: ‘G-d has forsaken me, My G-d has forgotten me...’”⁴ – we refuse to be consoled by messengers. We ask why G-d Himself has not come.

The third week – when we read, “O afflicted, storm-tossed, unconsoled one...”⁵ – the messengers report to G-d that the nation is not consoled.

The fourth week – when we read “It is I, I am He who comforts you...”⁶ – G-d responds and begins to console us Himself.

The fifth week – when we read, “Sing out, O barren one who has not given birth, break out in a happy song and be joyful...”⁷ – G-d’s presence truly brings us consolation.

1 Isaiah 40:1.

2 *Pesikta Rabsi*, sec. 30, cited by Avudraham.

3 Isaiah 40:1.

4 Isaiah 49:14.

5 Isaiah 54:11.

6 Isaiah 51:12.

7 Isaiah 54:1.

8. This Week's Message

And then we reach the sixth week – this week – when we read: “Rise! Shine! For your light has arrived, and G-d’s glory shines upon you. Behold, darkness will cover the earth and dense clouds the peoples. But G-d will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.”⁸

Hear what Isaiah is saying:

Despite the darkness covering the earth and its peoples, “G-d will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.”

So, “Rise! Shine! For your light has arrived, and G-d’s glory shines upon you.”

“You were once forsaken and hated,” and you have endured many dark nights, but now it is all over. “Your sun will no longer be your light by day, nor will the moon give light for brightness. For G-d will be your everlasting light. Your days of mourning will be ended.”

9. Healing is Possible (Story of Nina Q.)

But you may well ask: How is it possible that after enduring so much damage an injured psyche can bounce back?

The story of Nina Q. proves that it is absolutely possible.

Nina’s abuse by her step-father lasted from the time that she was 6 until age 13. The most searing part of her story was that in order to endure this abuse she would recite *nursery rhymes* while unimaginable things were done to her. That is how she stayed sane and escaped in her mind from the torture of her body.

When Nina’s abuse ended at age 13, she tried hard to suppress the memories, but her personal dignity and her self-esteem had suffered untold damage. Her teenage years were marked by desperate attempts to blot out what had happened to her. She abused drugs and alcohol. She abused herself and was hospitalized several times after botched suicide attempts.

Eventually, Nina was able to find the professional help she needed and the consolation she craved. She straightened out her life, pursued a higher education, and finally married a stable, loving man who understood her. Nina realized that the past was truly behind her when she gave birth to her first child.

⁸ Isaiah 60:1-2.

During the pain of labor, she resorted to the one thing she knew that brought her relief when trying to withstand the unimaginable incidents of abuse. She recited *nursery rhymes*. And that is when she knew she had rebuilt herself, because this seeming reminder of past tortures was no longer that – now it was a source of consolation in a moment of pain, which was quickly followed by indescribable joy at the birth of her baby.

And this is exactly what Isaiah tells us in the most powerful statement that we will ever hear: “Your people ... are a branch of My planting, the work of My hands, in which to take pride.”

Your very birth says that you are indispensable to G-d. You are G-d’s planting. You are G-d’s flower, the work of His hands – you have an essential contribution to make that no one else but you can fulfill. You and all you do matters now and forever. No person can ever take that away from you, because no person ever gave it to you – not your parents, not your teachers, not your customers and not your employers. Your very existence is testimony to your indispensability.

10. Antidote to Abuse

Human indispensability is the core of human dignity. [In the language of Kabbalah this is called *malchus*, kingship, dignity]. And the knowledge of this is the antidote – the cure to the damages of abuse.

Of all the devastating effects of abuse the worst is the violation of human dignity. This is what causes such deep shame, what demoralizes the human spirit and strips a person of his or her G-d-given birthright – the sense of self-value and self-esteem.

But, tells us Isaiah, “even though you were once forsaken and hated,” you can never be destroyed. No matter how much abuse you have endured, your inherent Divine dignity could never be touched. Even in the worst experience of darkness, you are inviolable.

And not only that, your purpose is much greater than even you can imagine now.

When G-d’s light illuminates you, says Isaiah: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around ... The sons of your oppressors will come bowing to you, and all who despised you will fall at your feet.”⁹

When you rise and shine, you will not just be empowered individually, you will influence your environment and society. “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The redemption of violated dignity is not merely its restoration; it can and must also affect the world.

However, for this to happen, you must “lift up your eyes and look around.” An oppressed spirit is often weary,

⁹ Isaiah 60:3,14.

and just wants to be left alone. But the inner dignity of your soul is never weary. It won't allow you to just lick your wounds and wallow in self-pity: "Rise! Shine! For your light has arrived ... Lift up your eyes and look around. They are all gathered together and coming to you."

Your friends are waiting, your community is waiting, nations, kings and the world are all waiting for you to rise to the occasion and illuminate your surroundings with your unique light.

And what better time to begin than now in the final days of the year 5773?

What better time than now as we prepare for the restoration and rebuilding of *malchus* / dignity on Rosh Hashana, when we crown anew G-d as our Sovereign King. In effect, we are also renewing His contract with us and with our sacred and indispensable lives.

11. Call to Action

This is a good time to take stock. After Shabbat put your pencil to paper – or your Blackberry to the Wifi – and make a list. Note down what abuse you may have suffered in life, and how you have overcome it, or are working to overcome it. Most of all, identify the parts of you that remain inviolable, the parts that are connected to the Divine and can never be damaged.

If you cannot do the latter, consider how you can rise and shine – how you can connect to the Divine through prayer or through action.

If you can, then resolve to console others who may not be as strong as you. Visit a sick person in a hospital, call a friend who is feeling down, send a greeting to a person who is lonely.

While G-d is always there to console us, the message of these seven weeks of consolation is also that we have a responsibility to console each other – to bring healing to people and places damaged by abuse. No one can console another vulnerable person better than the person who has been there. Consolation is a great gift – one we receive from G-d and one which we give to each other.

12. Chai Elul

Today, Chai Elul, is also the birthday of the two great luminaries, the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) and the Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), who came to revive the Jewish spirit from a comatose state.

As the actual date of their birthday suggests, they infused new life (chai) and hope in the love of Elul, helping us all to rise and shine – and reclaim any love and beauty we that may have gone into hiding and we may have seemingly lost.

They did this through the teaching of Chassidus, the inner dimension of Torah, which is called the soul of Torah. Just like a soul which brings a body to life, Chassidus breathes vitality into what could otherwise be mechanical actions and rituals.

Armed with the dynamic love of Torah, both its body and soul, we all have the power and responsibility to console ourselves and each other, and to love ourselves and each other in anew and unprecedented ways.

13. A Special Message to Parents and Grandparents

For those of us who are parents or grandparents, let us all resolve to love our own children like never before. Take an extra moment each morning to tell our children (or grandchildren) how much we care about them, how happy they make us.

In middle of a busy day, make a spontaneous call to your child just to share your love. Before bedtime, make that extra gesture to hug your child. Look at your children as flowers entrusted to you, the gardener, to water, nourish and protect. *Midah ki'neged midah*, “measure for measure,” declare our sages: as you love your child, so too will you be loved.

14. Conclusion

Now as we prepare for Rosh Hashana – for the New Year and the new unprecedented energy and light that it will bring – *now* is the best time to set our minds, align our hearts and mobilize our actions to begin new and revolutionary initiatives that will shine into the universe with our unique light. Amen.

© Copyright 2017 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.