

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5778

Temple Beth Or
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Seek Peace In Yourself, Pursue It In the World, Part I

I. Intro: Difficult Year, We Need Comfort.

Rosh HaShanah has arrived, despite the herculean efforts natural and human driven to destroy the world, a New Year begins. God willing, we can use this season to bring humanity back from the iniquities infesting our world.

Our imperfect world cries out for a return to the beginning of time when God created order out of chaos. Our imperfect lives cry out for a path toward comfort and wholeness.

I cannot remember a year in recent history that so acutely demonstrated the imperfections of the world. From Charlottesville, to hurricanes Harvey and Irma, to the wildfires consuming the west and the earthquakes in Mexico; from the crass rhetoric pervading top political offices, newsrooms, college campuses, dinner tables, and twitter feeds.

The difference between hope and despair, light and darkness, lies in the precipice of this eve of the Days of Awe. Our Torah offers many dos and don'ts, for which we are called upon to account on this Day of Judgement. Two of those commandments stand out from the rest, as that pathway to hope. Peace and justice, for, of these two Torah teaches: not only must we do them, we must **pursue** them. Hope lies in the difference between **doing** peace and justice when the opportunity for them crosses our path, and **pursuing** peace and justice as a way of life. Over the course of the holy days we will explore these two mitzvot and how we may embrace them for the sake of ourselves and our world.

Let us begin with seeking peace and reconciliation for ourselves, the prime task of these Days of Awe. The Psalms implore us: "Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it" (Ps 34:14). This verse in and of itself sets up the Holy Season and gives us salve to soothe the wounds of this past year. How do we turn away from evil and toward good? How do we abandon those paths that divert us from building the world we want?

Rabbi Simcha Bunam suggests, from the Sages: "Seek peace' – in your place ... (Tanhuma Hukat, 22). You cannot seek peace anywhere but within yourself, until you find it there. In Psalms it is said, 'There is no peace in my bones because of my sin' (Psalms 38:4). Only if we find peace inside ourselves can we seek it throughout the world" (R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, Poland, cited in Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 32).

Building the world we want begins with restoring the self. Teshuvah -- the Jewish form of repentance which leads to inner peace. Chet the Hebrew for sin means to miss the mark, to fall off the path. Teshuvah/repentance brings us back onto that path of wholeness-another definition of shalom. At Rosh Hashanah we hear that still small voice, regain our footing, and return to that place **where we feel secure**.

Simcha Bunam's commentary instructs us that through teshuvah we release our sins and unveil an inner-peace that allows us to pursue peace in the world. The exploding maliciousness of this last year has ignited epic inner-discord. Charlottesville's riotous rally stands as an iconic symbol of the pervading, unbridled hatred, of these times. The greatest sin of this year has been the disillusion of the menchlikite of humanity. The constant pulse of malice in the air leaves us feeling insecure and off-balance.

II. Finding peace within yourself begins with coming to a place of comfort. Nachamu Nachamu

In order to wash out the sin of our day, the sin of hatred and division that has unnerved and infected us as much as it has society, we have to seek that place of peace and comfort. We have to resist the draw of ratcheting up hatred, we have to turn from the vituperative and replace it with assurance.

At the edge of despair, on the Sabbath following the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple -- Tisha B'Av, we implore God from the words of the prophets: "Nachamu, nachamu: Comfort us, O Comfort us" (Isaiah). These are the words we need now, to lead us out of the depths. Our comfort, finding security from within, is requisite to releasing the grip of the sin of our day and pursuing a world that knows peace.

Comfort rises from the refuge of the familiar

Consider what brings you comfort. For me, a fifth generation southerner, comfort comes from:

a bowl of hot grits,
a cool glass of sweet tea,
sitting around the dinner table with family after a long day,
perching in the meandering branches of a live oak,
or standing on the edge of a cotton field in bloom.

These are a few of the things that put me in my comfort zone.

Take a moment and think about your own comfort zones: whether the scent in the air on a beautiful fall day, your grandmother's chocolate layer cake, sharing a beer with a good friend, or sitting in your favorite chair watching your sports team play. What is it that shapes how you find comfort?

I suspect for many that the touchpoint of the Holy Days offers a measure of comfort. This Holy Season restores us to a familiar place, reminding us that our inner peace is not dependent on the news cycle, or the maliciousness of others. The constancy of returning to this time and place in the Jewish year, coming back to this sanctuary, knowing that we have a community supporting us, family and friends, the familiar prayers, assure us that hope is within our grasp, peace before us, if we seek it.

Knowing that, amidst the turmoil of our world, we have a heritage, a ritual, a way of life, and a congregation, to gird us, as we shed our wrongdoings and turn back to a more secure path, lifts the battered soul.

Comfort flows from the familiar, from the ritual of return, from shedding our sin and knowing we have another chance. Just as comfort comes from varied sources, the Hebrew root for comfort has varied meanings. In addition to comfort the concordance

sites several translations for the root Nun Chet Mem: appeasement, regret, moved to pity, repenting, and relenting.

III. Consolation as Comfort

Rashi, Rabbi of the 11th Century and one of the most influential Torah commentators of all time, speaks on the repetition of comfort *Nachamu*, *Nachamu* in the prophets. The first use Rashi attributes to God's comfort, citing *Genesis Rabbah*: "It was a **consolation to God** that God had created humans as earthly beings, for had humans been of the heavenly beings they would have incited the heavenly hosts also to rebel against God" (*Genesis Rabbah* 27:4).

Here comfort comes as self-consolation for God, that at least the damage of the Israelites rebellion is limited to the earth bound. The Holy One offered the Israelites comfort from God's own consolation. Does that sound comforting? – God saying: I forgive you because the destruction could have been so much worse if you were celestials? And God admitting, after all, you are just humans, I can't expect you to be perfect.

We often employ this type of consolation, whether for ourselves or for the one receiving comfort. "I did what I could. I'm only human. And, it could have been so much worse." Consolation offers a rope to pull us out of the depths, to lift us up from the malaise.

A recent Allstate Insurance commercial features a teen sheepishly entering his parents' bedroom, opening with consolation: "Mom, dad, Hi! I had a very minor fender bender tonight in an unreasonably narrow fast food drive through lane." – reveals the boy, adding that it was a "powerful life lesson". "And don't worry, I have everything handled. I already spoke to our agent and I know that we have accident forgiveness. Which is so smart on your guy's part!" says the boy, adding with enthusiasm: "Like the fact that they'll just...forgive you..." (<https://alltvspots.com/2017/allstate-accident-forgiveness-commercial-boy-telling-parents-about-fender-b+ender/>).

Judaism upholds this very lesson as central to the Days of Awe. If, like the boy in the advertisement: we admit we are not perfect, take steps to right the wrongs, and face the ones we have wronged, then we find consolation through forgiveness during this sacred season. Herein comfort brings us back on track and leads to a sense of peace.

Softening the depth of pain with consolation can indeed ameliorate a loss, as confounding as it sounds. Consolation gives a broader context to pain. My parents employed this very technique as they fled New Orleans with the approach of hurricane Katrina. I will never forget the phone call as they sat in the evacuation traffic before the storm. My Dad said, "We have a great life now; the storm may take our house; but, no matter what happens, a year from now we will still have a great life." His words of consolation helped to allay the impending doom. They played a pivotal role in shaping how my whole family faced the storm that took our childhood home and much of our family possessions. How well I remember when I drove back with my parents to what was left of their home after that storm. That consolation, "we have a great life now; and a year from now we will still have a great life," hung as a beacon illuminating the pathway out of destruction.

I pray that consolation, that humanity has the capacity to rise above our sins and losses and rebuild, will bring comfort to those facing destruction from the hurricanes, wildfires, the earthquakes, and more.

Let us accept the consolation that we are imperfect humans, in an imperfect world, and with that comfort we can restore a modicum of peace in our lives.

IV. Comfort through reaching out to others

Surely, consolation as a form of comfort serves well when one can see pain in the light of what might have been so much worse. Consolation may soothe the loss of a broken house, but it cannot rebuild a broken heart. Seeking peace in the face of unbridled fear, a government enacting laws that attack ones health and well being, the tragic loss of a loved one, or painful and debilitating illness, requires more than consolation.

Rabbi Haim of Romshishok shared a compelling story of heaven and hell, that offers insight into finding comfort from a different source. The familiar tale offers two doors. Inside door one people sit around a table set for a feast for royalty. Instead of enjoying the feast the guests cry out in despair as they hit each other over the head in frustration. The guests are tied to their chairs, their elbows bound straight, so they cannot bring the food to their mouths. Inside the next door, the same scene, the table set with the feast, the guests tied to their chairs with elbows bound straight. In this room the guests are content. They have figured out, that though they cannot feed themselves, they can feed the person sitting across from them or next to them. Behind the second door the guests found comfort through recognizing their own pain in the plight of others and reaching out to help the other.

When we cannot see the way out of our own anguish, often the best remedy comes from reaching out to others facing similar affliction. They recognize your pain in ways that the non-afflicted cannot know; they understand the depth of your loss and your longing. They bring you reassurance that you do not suffer alone. With them you form allegiances to combat the source of your suffering. Even without a solution, even with elbows still bound straight, joining with kindred spirits alleviates the loneliness of our pain, and offers remedies that we cannot find on our own.

Thich Nhat Hanh in his book, *How to Love* writes: "Love is understanding. Understanding another's suffering is the best gift you can give another person. Understanding is love's other name. If you don't understand, you can't love." Rabbi Karyn Kedar adds how there is comfort in love: "Love is a gift, not a get. It is the gift of empathy, ... for the suffering of another. It is the gift of a broken heart. When my heart understands suffering, understands my imperfections, I can understand yours. ... That is why it is written in Leviticus: love your neighbor as yourself. We are commanded to have compassion for the humanity in one another. And we are commanded to have compassion for ourselves." (Karyn Kedar, <http://www.karynkedar.com/blog/>, 9/12/15)

V. Comfort through changing thoughts.

Comfort comes through consolation; comfort comes through compassion and understanding both given and received; and yet still comfort can be illusive. Rashi suggests that an additional avenue to comfort comes from the most essential meaning of comfort in Torah. He compares the meaning of *nechama* across several passages

and concludes that Genesis 6:6 contains the ultimate meaning of comfort: וינחם AND [THE LORD] Regretted/repented meaning — **The thoughts of God turned** from Divine mercy to Divine justice: God **reconsidered what to do** with humanity whom God had made on the earth. Wherever the root *nechama* is used in the scripture, Rashi says, it means rethinking or “**considering what to do**”. He offers examples from Numbers, Deuteronomy, Exodus and 1st Samuel, where all these passages with the word *nechama* denote a change of thinking. (Numbers 18:19) “nor the son of man that He should consider (ויתנחם)”; (Deuteronomy 32:36) “and reconsider (ויתנחם) regarding His servants”; (Exodus 22:14) “and the Lord reconsidered (וינחם) regarding the evil”; (1 Samuel 15:2)— Rabbi Julian Sinclair unpacks Rashi’s explanation: “Rashi generalizes that all the cases involve *machshavah acheret*, “having a different thought”. This is the common thread (taking one from) regret to comfort - **thinking differently about a situation.**” <https://www.thejc.com/judaism/jewish-words/nachamu-1.4503>

Thinking differently about the situation is what saved Abraham from taking the life of his son Isaac, in the Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning. It was as if that angel who said: “Abraham, Abraham, do not harm the lad,” awoken him to a new possibility of how to fulfill God’s words. Abraham had a different thought, and only then did he look up and see the ram in the thicket, and realize that the ram was the sacrifice God wanted.

Finding comfort through changing one’s thoughts, moving from devastation to solace brings us to a deeper form of *Teshuvah* in this holy season. Facing the paralysis of our own sins and the sins of our world requires a paradigm shift. The thought processes that governed the past no longer offer a viable answer. In order to move forward we must be willing to think differently. One has to summons the will to rise, lift his/her thoughts from the depths, and envision a way forward.

Understanding how “thinking differently” might bring consolation does not require a grand disaster. In a personal sense, each of us has had to rethink after facing loss of one type or another. Take my bum left knee for example. Years ago, my doctor told me I had to stop running. I, however, could not wrap my mind around that, so I kept running, right past a first then a second surgery. Even when I stopped running, my thoughts still pined after running.

Until last spring, a physical therapist said to me: “You have arthritis; the rule for arthritis is: if an activity aggravates it, stop doing it. Ever since I had stopped running, I had been using an elliptical. My knee hurt as much as ever even though the doctors assured me that the elliptical would not hurt me, so I pushed through the pain. The PT’s advice changed my thoughts, “if it hurts don’t do it.” I stopped using the elliptical, I stopped pining after my running days, and my knee pain was gone. I changed my thinking and comfort followed.

The same can be true of the disparaging rhetoric that pervades our culture. Consider, for example, instead of waging war on social media, with “friends” we never see or talk to, asking someone with an opposing view to share a cup of coffee. Listen to them, reflect what you hear, ask them curious questions. See if you can understand some part of their thinking. Ask them if they understand where you are coming from. Doing so may change your thinking and there’s.

If only, there were a shortcut out of the depths. If only we could say: “I have had a good life until today, and tomorrow I will have a good life,” and make it ease the pain.

If only reaching out to all who face our affliction could take away the affliction. In the end comfort comes when we change our perspective; consider that pain through a new lens, whether it be the pain from our own faults, the sting of a loss, or the acts of hate and oppression that mar all of humanity. Reconsidering how to handle our pain, therein we find comfort.

Nechema – comfort is being brave enough to think new thoughts when it would be so much easier to give up, to remain frozen in a past that no longer exists. Albert Einstein put it this way: “The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without ... thinking.”

Pain comes in many forms built by the walls that we erect that blind us from freeing thoughts. Thinking anew offers a lesson for profound loss and for profound living.

Console us O God, lead us to your consolation, for we are only human.
Comfort us O God, comfort us with the loving presence of those who truly understand our pain. Relieve us O God, bring us to that new thinking that lifts us from our anguish. Restore us O God to the sacred act of living.