

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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"Nachamu, Nachamu Ami"

- Are there any better expressions of comfort to leave for a nation in mourning than the one which opens this week's haftara?

"Nachamu, Nachamu Ami" - Are there any more fitting prophetic cries with which to begin this post-Tish'a b'Av season of consolation?

"Nachamu, Nachamu Ami" - And are there any other well-known biblical expressions that are as widely misunderstood as this one?

Let me explain. This expression is not a call from Hashem to Israel to be consoled, nor is it a call from the navi Yishayahu (or any other navi) to the grieving nation to be comforted. These oft-quoted words are actually directives from G-d addressed to the prophets themselves, charging them to reach out to Israel and deliver His message of solace and succor.

And perhaps one of the reasons why this call to the chosen leaders was selected by our scholars to serve as an introduction to the subsequent haftarot of consolation was to remind

the religious guides of all future generations that their primary mission to a suffering community is "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami" - to go out and comfort My nation!

We often listen to the prophecies of the N'VI'IM ACHARONIM and, quite understandably, we regard their function as one of reproach, criticism and condemnation, to be a call to the nation to repent and to repair their wayward ways. Yet, Hashem cries out to the prophets, "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami" - your purpose is not one of censure alone but of reproach tempered with the message of consolation. Indeed, when Hashem describes the mission charged to the prophet Yirmiyahu (in the haftara we read just three weeks ago), He tells him (Yirmiyahu 1:10) LINTOSH V'LINTOTZ, ULHA'AVID V'LAHAROS ..." - "to uproot and smash, to destroy and raze". But He then adds another part of the prophetic task: ...LIVNOT V'LINTO'A - "to build and to plant".

You see, a true leader must do more than censure his people; he must offer them hope, he must promise them a future.

"Nachamu, Nachamu Ami"

Seventy-three years ago, when our nation was still mourning the loss of one third of its people, a loss of life

that surpassed the number of martyrs sacrificed during destructions of both Temples combined (!), this grieving nation "built and planted" and revived its ancient land, its ancient language and its ancient dream. No. It was not yet perfect nor is it now yet perfect. But how should we, and our religious and political leadership seek to perfect it? Should it be done only through messages that focus on what is wrong and what is IMperfect? Is that what real leaders should preach? Our haftara reminds us: "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami", that, added to the "not-yet-perfect" message must be words of comfort and promises of a bright future. It is these promises that are essential in bringing the "perfection" that we seek.

As we use these weeks of comfort as a season to prepare for the Yamim Nora'im, the time of t'shuva, we would be wise to keep in mind the charge given to our n'vi'im and to remember that repentance is best achieved through words of comfort and through prophetic assurances that G-d is also proclaiming: "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami". ✨