

## *Nachamu*

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Usually on the last Friday of the month, if we don't have a special program, we read a section from the weekly Torah portion. But this Shabbat takes its name, Shabbat Nachamu, from the special Haftarah that is read on the week after Tisha B'av. With services at Big Basin this Saturday, tonight is the only opportunity we have to share this special reading and its beautiful musical setting, composed by Max Janowski.

*Nachamu* means comfort, and it is with these words that the portion begins: "Comfort, O Comfort My People." I don't think I ever would have fully appreciated the need for comfort that those Jews living at the time of Deutero-Isaiah must have felt if I had not seen the Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The gate was excavated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the original bricks were brought to Berlin, where the gate was reconstructed using the excavated bricks. I was totally unprepared for its size, its grandeur, and its magnificence.

The Ishtar Gate was constructed by Nebuchadnezzar II, the same Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem. The inscription on the gate alone is almost 30 feet tall and over 30 feet wide. The original gate and the Processional Way leading toward it, which stretched over half a mile, were used by the Babylonians for an annual New Year's procession.

I imagine an ancient Israelite, standing in front of this gate with its roof and door of cedar wood, its bricks glazed with a blue the shade of lapis lazuli, its surface decorated with 120 lions, bulls, dragons, and flowers. Even as they mourned their beloved Temple, the Israelite exiles who were brought to Babylonia must have recognized that their Temple was totally outclassed. They were a kingdom, but the Babylonians were an empire.

So what is the comfort that the prophet Isaiah is offering to his people, and how does that read for us today?

Some commentators focus less on the words of the Haftarah than on the transition from Tisha B'av to Shabbat Nachamu. From sitting on the ground in the dark, as we do on Tisha B'av, the mood changes completely. It is as if the middle verses of the *Lecha Dodi*, the ones we usually skip over, were written for this particular Shabbat. I'll remind you of just two of them:

Royal shrine, city of kings, rise up and leave your ravaged state  
You have dwelt long enough in the valley of tears,  
Now God will shower mercy on you.

An end to shame and degradation, forget your sorrow,  
quiet your groans.  
The afflicted in my people find respite in you  
The city renewed upon its ancient ruins.

It is this getting up and doing which is one kind of comfort. Even before the Persians bring redemption to the exiles, the people are instructed, "Seek the peace of the city in which you are living." In other words, if you act as if life goes on, then indeed it will.

The second kind of comfort is in the prophets' promise that this is just an episode in a longer story, and that this is God's doing and not a result of God's absence. Suffering can be borne if there is a meaning to the suffering. Israel has been punished for its sins, but the God who created the universe is not powerless in the face of Israel's enemies. This is the gist of all seven of the Haftarot of comfort. It is the plea we hear at the very end of the book Lamentations, *Hashiveinu Adonai eliecha venashuvah. Chadesh yameinu kikedem.*

This current state of loss is not the normal state of being. We maintain hope that this episode will be resolved and life will return to normal. We pray, "Turn us back to you and we will return. Renew our days as of old."

But our Haftarah sounds another note. In words that we often read at the graveside, the prophet states:

A voice rings out: 'Proclaim!' Another asks, 'What shall I proclaim?'  
'All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field: grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Indeed, man is but grass: grass withers, flowers fade—but the word of our God is always fulfilled! (Isaiah 40:6–8).

If these words are not in the reading accidentally, if these words are offered as comfort, then we have to ask, as did Rabbi Mychal Springer, what is comforting about these words? Are they an attempt to put the troubles of that time and place into a more global perspective, as in the conclusion of the book of Job? Are these words saying that consolation comes, not from a solution, but from crying out and feeling that one has been heard? Or are they about the acceptance of the nature and essence of human limitations? Perhaps these words are to remind us that it is in the limited time and space we have that we can create moments of beauty, kindness, wonder.