

## Comfort

The selection of today's Haftorah is from Jeremiah's Book of Consolation, but I prefer to call it Jeremiah's Love Song to Israel because, in love, one is comforted by the presence of the other, and here is boundless imagery of the flow of love specifically between God and the people Israel.

At this time of year we “talk” to God through prayers, or through whatever other means, because we long for comfort; our hearts are aching, and our sins and transgressions loom over us. We are like children, wanting to be held and comforted, to be assured of our parent's love.

In conjunction with the theme of our receiving comfort from the words of Jeremiah, I will be quoting, briefly, from those pertinent excerpts. Also, I will just remind you that Jeremiah was a priest of Levitical descent who actually lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple of Solomon.

God reminds us that after saving Israel from the sword and they were marching homeward back to the Holy Land, at that difficult time God revealed himself to the weary, disheartened travelers, telling them “Eternal love I conceived for you then; I will build you firmly again, O maiden Israel.

Again you shall take up your timbrels  
and go forth to the rhythm of the dancers,  
Again you shall plant vineyards  
on the hills of Samaria:  
Men shall plant and live to enjoy them.

Realistically, we know that there is no magic wand that can be waved and our troubles will disappear. But when we hear the beauty of the words of encouragement – that we can relate to - words, of dancing for joy, of planting vineyards, of the joy and comfort of being at home, at long last.

These were a degraded peoples, only a remnant of the tribes who had witnessed the destruction of their homeland and were sent into exile in a foreign land, now painfully trudging their way back home. But, says God,

Cry out in joy for Jacob,  
Shout at the crossroads of the nations!  
Sing aloud in praise and say:  
Save, o Lord, your people;.....  
With compassion will I guide them.  
I will lead them to streams of water,  
By a level road where they will not stumble.  
For I am ever a Father to Israel,  
Ephraim is My first-born.

Imagine a parent clasping a child closely when a dangerous situation arises, or even just crossing a busy street, and then celebrating together, giving comfort to each other.

Now God promises to gather the scattered wanderers and will guard them as a shepherd his flock.

They shall fare like a watered garden,  
They shall never languish again.  
Then shall maidens dance gaily,  
Young men and old alike.  
I will turn their mourning to joy,  
I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief.

There is comfort even in the sadness of Rachel's impending death on the road to Efrat – now Bethlehem - weeping after the birth of her beloved son Benjamin whom she would never see again. Rachel weeps for her children, and refuses to be comforted.

Thus said the Lord:

Restrain your voice from weeping,  
Your eyes from shedding tears;  
For there is a reward for your labor  
They shall return from the enemy's land,  
And there is hope for your future  
Your children shall return to their country.

But since that time, Rachel's tomb, sitting out on the road in Israel, has comforted the many, many thousands of pilgrims to this day, who come to pray and recite psalms, to still feel her closeness.

As we have done from the beginning of the month of Elul, we are acknowledging our transgressions, as did the Israelites, lamenting that they have been chastised, and beg to be received back by God. They are remorseful and ashamed.

Declares God

Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me,  
A child that is dandled!  
Whenever I have turned against him,  
My thoughts would dwell on him still,  
That is why My heart yearns for him;  
I will receive him back in love.

There is a delightful playfulness in the image of a child bouncing on the parent's knee, celebrating their love for each other.

We have spoken about being comforted by God's words, but there may also be another avenue to consider. A couple of weeks ago I happened to turn on my car radio and heard a broadcast of Leonard Bernstein's Kaddish symphony in which the narrator sings to God about God's relationship with the people in the world He created, and of some sad outcomes that occurred and then the narrator, concluding, says these words, “Oh, My sorrowful Father, if I could comfort you”.