



FINDING COMFORT IN THE DEPTHS OF MOURNING: THE UNIQUE PRAYER OF NACHEIM

As the day of Tisha B'Av winds to a close, the poignant tefillah of *Nacheim* is recited at Minchah. Its piercing words beseech Hashem for comfort on behalf of Yerushalayim and her mourners. Interestingly, an analysis of the source for *Nacheim* reveals several striking variations between its initial and its contemporary forms. The original presentation of the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Berachot* 4:3) records in the name of R. Chiya that *Nacheim* is the “*mei'ein ha-me'ora*,” an additional prayer related to a day's events (e.g. *Ya'aleh Ve-yavo, Al Ha-nissim*), of Tisha B'Av:

א"ר אחא בר יצחק בשם רבי חייא דציפורין יחיד בט"ב צריך להזכיר מעין המאורע מהו אומר רחם ה' אלקינו ברחמך הרבים ובחסדיך הנאמנים עלינו ועל עמך ישראל ועל ירושלים

עירך ועל ציון משכן כבודך...

R. Acha Bar Yitzchak said in the name of R. Chiya of Tziporin, “An individual must mention “mei'ein ha-me'ora” on Tisha B'Av.” What does he recite? [He should say,] “Hashem, our G-d, with Your abundant mercy and trustworthy kindness, have mercy on us, on the Jewish nation, on Yerushalayim Your city, and on Tziyon the abode of Your glory...”

From the Talmud Yerushalmi, three distinctions between the original description of *Nacheim* and our recitation of it emerge. First, while our text of the Talmud Yerushalmi employs the language of “*racheim*,” “have mercy,”¹ we request instead “*nacheim*,” “comfort [us],” the version accepted by Rif (*Ta'anit* 10a *be-dapei ha-Rif*) and Rosh (*Ta'anit* 4:34). What are the implications of our usage of

“*nacheim*” for how we understand the essence of this prayer?

Second, whereas the Talmud Yerushalmi does not limit the recitation of *Nacheim* to Minchah, we follow the ruling of Rama (*Orach Chaim* 557:1) and recite *Nacheim* exclusively at Minchah.² Rama (*ibid.*) justifies his position by noting that Minchah is particularly apt for the prayer of *Nacheim* since the Beit Ha-mikdash was set aflame during the afternoon. Rama's explanation, however, prompts an obvious rejoinder: do we yearn for comfort only while the Beit Ha-mikdash was burned in the afternoon and not when it was captured and seized at night and in the morning?!

Finally, the continuation of the

Talmud Yerushalmi (ibid.) highlights another distinction between contemporary recitation of *Nacheim* and its origin. After questioning in what context of Shemoneh Esrei the tefillah of *Nacheim* should be added, R. Mana concludes that an addition that pertains to the future should be incorporated as part of “*Avodah*” (i.e. after *Retzei*) while one that concerns the past should be integrated with “*Hoda’ah*” (i.e. after *Modim*).³ Various authorities debate about which category *Nacheim* belongs, but contemporary practice, surprisingly, is to do neither! Rather, *Nacheim* is added to the berachah of “*Bonei Yerushalayim*.”

What accounts for the seemingly puzzling contemporary recitation of *Nacheim*? Why does our version veer from the Talmud Yerushalmi’s presentation of *Nacheim*, and what does our practice reflect about the contribution of *Nacheim* to our experience of Tisha B’Av?

The paradigm of *nichum aveilim*, the mitzvah to console a mourner, sheds light on these anomalies. At first glance, the requirement to comfort *aveilim* is quite intuitive in nature. Basic to interpersonal relationships is the principle of “*ve-ahavtah le-reiachah ka-mochah*,” the obligation to do for another as one would desire for himself. This principle dictates that just as a mourner generally seeks out comfort for his pain, so too, one is obligated to provide consolation for others. Indeed, Rambam (*Aveil* 14:1) codifies “*le-nacheim aveilim*” as a rabbinic commandment that satisfies the biblical principle of “*ve-ahavtah le-reiachah ka-mochah*.”⁴

However, much evidence suggests that *nichum aveilim* also plays an intrinsic role in the very process of mourning.

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 152a-b) relates:

אמר רב יהודה: מת שאין לו מנחמין הולכין עשרה בני אדם ויושבין במקומו. הוא דשכיב בשבבותיה דרב יהודה לא היו לו מנחמין, כל יומא הוה דבר רב יהודה בי עשרה, ויתבי בדוכתיה. לאחר שבעה ימים איתחזי ליה בחילמיה דרב יהודה, ואמר ליה: תנוה דעתך שהנחת את דעתי.

Rav Yehudah said, “If a deceased has no *menachamin*, ten people should go and sit in his place.” In the neighborhood of Rav Yehudah, there was once a person who died and had no *menachamin*. Every day, Rav Yehudah would send ten people who would sit in the place of the deceased. After seven days, [the deceased] appeared to Rav Yehudah in a dream and said to him, “You should be calmed since you have calmed me.”

The word “*menachamin*” requires clarification. To whom does it refer? Maharsha (*Chidushei Aggadot* ibid.) argues that “*menachamin*” means “comforters,” and as such, Rav Yehudah’s requirement is that ten people comfort the soul of the deceased. Rashi (ibid.), however, claims that it means “mourners who need to be comforted,” in which case Rav Yehudah’s requirement is for ten people to *mourn* the deceased. Seemingly, though, Rashi’s interpretation confronts an obvious problem; if “*menachamin*” refers to mourners, why does Rav Yehudah use the term “*menachamin*” in place of the simpler “*aveilim*”?!

Rambam’s codification of Rav Yehudah’s requirement may resolve this difficulty. Rambam (*Aveil* 13:4) agrees with Rashi and defines “*menachamin*” as “*aveilim le-hitnacheim*,” “mourners to be comforted.” Moreover, Rambam adds that Rav Yehudah’s requirement is not only that ten people should substitute as mourners but also

that the community should console these replacement mourners. *Lechem Mishneh* (ibid.) wonders: what is Rambam’s source that these substitute mourners must be comforted? After all, Rav Yehudah says only that ten people should go and sit in the place of the deceased, but he does not mention that they must be consoled by others!

Apparently, Rambam extrapolates from the quizzical usage of “*menachamin*” that indispensable to the process of *aveilut* is the presence of *nechamah*. According to Rambam, *aveilim* are not just those who mourn but those who are consoled, “*aveilim le-hitnacheim*.” Rav Yehudah employs the term “*menachamin*” since, by definition, *aveilim* receive consolation. Rambam infers further that implicit in Rav Yehudah’s requirement for substitute mourners is the obligation for others to comfort those mourners; on Rambam’s view, integral to mourning is the *nichum* of a community.

From Rambam’s understanding of Rav Yehudah’s requirement emerges a dual status of *nichum aveilim*. On the one hand, *nichum aveilim* is a fulfillment of *gemilut chesed*, while on the other hand, it is a definitional aspect of the process of mourning. As R. Soloveitchik comments, “If there is a mourner and people do not come to give him words of comfort and solace, the process of mourning is not complete.”⁵ Rambam (*Aveil* 13:1–4) even codifies the procedural requirements of *nichum aveilim* before mentioning (ibid. 14:1) that *nichum aveilim* fulfills the commandment of “*ve-ahavtah le-reiachah ka-mochah*!” This ordering suggests that according to Rambam, *nichum aveilim* constitutes an essential facet of the

process of mourning, separate and apart from its status as *gemilut chesed*.⁶

Rambam's position demonstrates the intimate relationship between *nechamah* and *aveilut*. The interweaving of *nechamah* within the fabric of *aveilut* suggests that halakhic mourning must be coupled with and tempered by feelings of faith, optimism, and hope. Without doubt, *nechamah* is not meant to dilute the experience of mourning; on the contrary, *nechamah* enhances *aveilut* by lending it a necessary context and framework. *Aveilut* unbounded by *nechamah* runs the risk of a mourner descending into an infinite sea of sorrow, unable to integrate his painful loss as part of his continued religious future.⁷ In contrast, *aveilut* juxtaposed with *nechamah* ensures that a mourner, while engaged in profound and authentic mourning for his loss, maintains a foundation of optimism that will guide him through his *aveilut* and into his future.

Rambam's view of *nechamah* as an integral part of the experience of *aveilut de-yachid* has ramifications also for *aveilut de-rabbim*, the communal mourning of Tisha B'Av. *Aveilut de-rabbim*, just like *aveilut de-yachid*, must be imbued with the element of *nechamah*. With the recitation of *Nacheim*, we proclaim that we are no longer mired in the immediate shock and chaos that results from the loss of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Instead, we are ready to embark upon a stage of reflective mourning that is complete only with the presence of *nechamah*. Our beseeching of Hashem for consolation reflects that we are now mourners in need of comfort, not just to ease our pain but to ensure that our mourning is inextricably linked to a sense of optimism and hope.

If so, the anomalies associated with *tefillat Nacheim* actually highlight the indispensability of *Nacheim* to our experience of *aveilut de-rabbim*. First, the usage of "*nacheim*," as opposed to "*racheim*," conveys that the prayer is not just a plea for our exile to come to a speedy close but one that conjures up the idea of *nechamah*. By petitioning "*nacheim*," we imply that our *aveilut* is not one that impedes our future. Rather, it is tinged with a feeling of optimism, with a recognition that despite our current mourning, our future still exists.

Second, the limitation of "*nacheim*" to Minchah, to the afternoon of Tisha B'Av, can be understood as well. As evinced by many of the legal changes that coincide with it, the afternoon of Tisha B'Av marks a new stage in the Tisha B'Av experience.⁸ Ritva (Responsum 63) presents the remarkable view that Tisha B'Av is divided into discrete phases of mourning. The night and morning parallel an individual's *aninut*, the stage a relative of a deceased undergoes prior to the burial. In contrast, the afternoon of Tisha B'Av correlates to *aveilut*, the mourning of relatives that follows burial. Since Tisha B'Av afternoon initiates the stage of reflective mourning, it is the time that allows for and must be linked to the concept of *nechamah*.⁹ R. Soloveitchik explains that ironically, the characterization of Tisha B'Av afternoon as the time of *nechamah* lies at the core of Rama's explanation of why we limit *Nacheim* to Minchah.¹⁰ The destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, which transpires at midday, counter-intuitively affords us the most comfort because it illustrates that Hashem has chosen to destroy the Temple but not the Jewish people.

Finally, the addition of *Nacheim* to "*Bonei Yerushalayim*," as opposed to *Avodah* or *Hoda'ah*, also follows the pattern of changes that underscores the true character of *tefillat Nacheim*. To add *Nacheim* to *Avodah* would be to reduce it to a plea to Hashem to end our current exile. To add it to *Hoda'ah* would be to circumscribe it to an expression of gratitude for preparing our future redemption and preserving our nationhood. By incorporating *Nacheim* in "*Bonei Yerushalayim*," we accentuate the unique role of *Nacheim* as a prayer that reflects the infusion of *nechamah* within our *aveilut* for Yerushalayim.¹¹ The berachah of "*Bonei Yerushalayim*," the berachah that implicitly recognizes the loss of Yerushalayim, is the perfect forum for the addition of *Nacheim*, the prayer that blends *nechamah* into the process of mourning that loss.

In truth, the theme of consolation is woven into every stage of our mourning on Tisha B'Av. The notion of consolation lurks in the background throughout the experience of *aveilut de-rabbim*. Beginning with our recitation of Eichah, we refuse to conclude the *megillah* on a harsh note of rejection and scorn. Instead, we repeat the verse "*Hashiveinu Hashem eilechah ve-nashuvah chadeish yameinu ke-kedem*," "Return us to You, Hashem, and we will return, renew our days like the days of old" (Eichah 5:21).¹² Furthermore, as R. Soloveitchik explains, our recitation of *Kinot* is also intertwined with the motif of *nechamah*,¹³ as we express our steadfast belief in our return to Israel and say, "*Eini chiketah le-chazon ben Berechyah*," "My eye pines for the [fulfillment of the] vision of ben Berechyah (Zechariah)."¹⁴ We then reach the afternoon of Tisha B'Av and, together with the recitation

of *Nacheim*, begin the process of reflective mourning contextualized by the enduring optimism of *nechamah*. Eventually, we transition from the mourning of Tisha B'Av to the *shiva de-nechemta*, the seven *haftarot* that, according to Tosafot (*Megillah* 31b), increase successively in the potency of their consolation. These various instantiations of *nechamah* permeate our experience of *aveilut de-rabbim*.

On Tisha B'Av 5781, the recitation of *Nacheim* takes on outsized significance. This year, we mourn not only for *churban ha-bayit* but also for the inexplicable tragedies that befell our people during this difficult phase of our history. The integration of *nechamah*, a sense of genuine hope and optimism, within a most painful and heart-wrenching process of *aveilut* helps calibrate our mourning experience. It ensures that rather than becoming lost in an abyss of despair, we find consolation in knowing that we can turn to the Almighty and ask “*Nacheim Hashem Elokeinu*,” Hashem, our G-d, please comfort us.

Endnotes

1. This text is codified by Rambam (*Tefillah* 2:14).
2. Rosh (*ibid.*) wonders why we limit the recitation of *Nacheim* to Minchah. *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 557:1), according to *Mishnah Berurah* (*ibid.*), rules that *Nacheim* is recited also at *Ma'ariv* and *Shacharit*.
3. *Abudraham* (*Tefillot Ha-chol*) cites the opinion of R. Gershom b. R. Shlomo, who posits that if one mistakenly omits *Nacheim* from “*Bonei Yerushalayim*,” then he should recite it as part of *Hoda'ah*, which is its original

placement. In contrast, *Taz* (*Orach Chaim* 557:1) assumes that because *Nacheim* is a future-oriented prayer, its original placement is within *Avodah*. See *Eliyahu Rabbah* (*ibid.*), who cites *Rashi Al Ha-Rif* (*Ta'anit* 10 *be-dapei ha-Rif*) as characterizing *Nacheim* as a past-oriented prayer since it pertains to the past *churban ha-bayit*.

4. *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah* (*Berachot* 11b *be-dapei ha-Rif*) concur with Rambam's view that comforting a mourner constitutes a fulfillment of a biblical principle, but based on the Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 30b), they characterize it as a fulfillment of “*ve-hoda'ta lahem et ha-derech — zo gemilut chasadim*,” “and you shall teach them the path — this refers to acts of kindness.”

5. *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, pg. 42.

6. See also Rambam (*Aveil* 13:2), where Rambam describes the procedure of *shurat ha-menachamin*, the lining up of onlookers who console a mourner after his deceased relative is buried. Rambam (*ibid.*) records that the consolers say to the mourner, “*tenuchamu min ha-shamayim*,” “you should be consoled from above.” According to *Perishah* (*Yoreh Deiah* 393:3), the mere wish of “*tenuchamu min ha-shamayim*” does not suffice to fulfill the *gemilut chesed* component of *nichum aveilim*, which requires that one empathize with a mourner by at least sitting together with him. If so, Rambam's procedure of *shurat ha-menachamin* also reflects the second component of *nichum aveilim*, namely, the integration of *nechamah* within the process of *aveilut*. Rambam (*ibid.*) then emphasizes that on every day of the seven days of *aveilut*, “*ve-chol yom va-yom mi-shiv'at yemei aveilut*,” people should come to the mourner to comfort him. The accentuation of “every day” suggests that *nichum aveilim* plays a definitional role in the observance of *aveilut*.

7. *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh Deiah* 394:1, 6) records two *halachot* that buttress this idea. On the one hand, he states, “*ein mitkashin al ha-meit yoteir midai*,” “we do not exaggeratively grieve a loss.” On the other hand, he chastises one who does not mourn

properly and dubs him an “*achzari*,” “a cruel person.” The combination of these two *halachot* demonstrates that *aveilut* must be both deeply felt but also non-paralyzing.

8. Rama (*Orach Chaim* 554:22) notes that the custom to refrain from work on Tisha B'Av applies only until midday. *Shulchan Aruch* (*ibid* 555:1) records that tallit and tefillin are donned at Minchah. Rama (*ibid.* 559:3) rules that after the conclusion of *Shacharit*, we sit on benches, and *Magein Avraham* (*ibid.*) explains that according to Rama, one may sit on benches at midday. Rama (*ibid.* 559:4) also records that “*tikkabeil*” is reinserted into *kaddish* during Minchah.

9. Ritva (*ibid.*) advances the novel view that the prayer should be recited during all tefillot, but the usage of “*racheim*” should be employed during the night and morning while “*nacheim*” should be reserved for the afternoon!

10. *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, pg. 35.

11. The characterization of *Nacheim* as a tefillah that is not just a plea but one that captures the nature of *aveilut de-rabbim* coheres well with *Nacheim*'s status as “*mei-ein ha-me'ora*.” See the debate between Rama (*Orach Chaim* 557:1) and Gra (*ibid.*) regarding whether *Nacheim* is added to *Birkat Ha-mazon* in circumstances in which one must eat on Tisha B'Av. Rama's ruling that *Nacheim* is recited in *Birkat Ha-mazon* further emphasizes its “*mei-ein ha-me'ora*” status, which can be understood in light of our perspective that *Nacheim* reflects a critical element of *aveilut de-Rabbim*. See also *Chochmat Shlomo* (*ibid.*) for other justifications for the addition of *Nacheim* to *Birkat Ha-mazon*.

12. See Rashi (*Eichah* 5:23), as interpreted by R. Michael Rosensweig, “Tisha B'Av: A Day of Tears, A Day of Hope, A Catalyst for *Teshuvah Me'ahavah*,” *torahweb.org*.

13. *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, pg. 45.

14. *Kinah* 7, “*Shavat suru meni*.”



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