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Haftarat Shoftim: Nechamah: The Divine Prerogative

The "Seven *Haftarot* of Consolation" begin with *Hashem* urging *Am Yisrael* to seek consolation for their tragic loss of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and their exile from *Eretz Yisrael*. "*Nachamu*, *nachamu ami*." The *haftarot* of the following weeks record the failure to find consolation, until *Hashem* promises "*anokhi*, *anokhi hu me-nachemkhem*" – "I will console you."

Indeed, consolation, *nechamah*, is the Divine prerogative. Only *Hashem* can bring consolation to one in despair. For instance, the tragedies that afflict Iyov are analyzed by his three friends, Eliphaz, Beldad, and Tzofer, but none of his friends are able to offer *nechamah*. They engage Iyov in a theological discussion to in order to refute Iyov, who in despair concludes that chaos rules this world. Iyov's friends, on the other hand, affirm that our world is ruled by *Hashem*, who determines the fate of individuals and nations. Their words hardly serve as *nechamah* to Iyov for the death of all his children and the loss of his wealth. It is only at the very end of the book of *Iyov*, after *Hashem* rewards Iyov "twice as much as he had before" (42:10), that "his brothers and sisters came to him to comfort him over all the tragedies that *Hashem* had brought upon him" (42:11). Why now, when Iyov is once again blessed with children and wealth, do his brothers and sisters come to console him? Why not before, when the tragedy befell him?

Iyov's siblings understood that there are no words of consolation to make Iyov "feel better" – to console him for the death of all his children. Whispering "*ha-Makom yenachem etkhem be-tokh she'ar aveilei Tzion vi-Yerushalayim*" can hardly be considered words of consolation! They are simply words of prayer for *Hashem*'s help in coping with the tragic death of a parent, child, or sibling. Just as *Hashem* helped *Am Yisrael* to cope with the immense tragedy of *churban* (destruction), so may *Hashem* help the mourner cope with this tragedy.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 5b) recalls the behavior of R. Yochanan. When visiting a mourner, R. Yochanan showed the mourner a fragment of bone, and related "this is a bone from my tenth dead son." The intent of this behavior surely was to convey "somehow I survived this terrible tragedy, may *Hashem* enable you to do likewise." Along the same lines, how does a Holocaust survivor whose entire family, wife, children, parents, and relatives, were brutally murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators and is now a successful business man with a new wife and new children view his life? All is fine now? Hardly so. In the still of night, he mourns his family that once was.

To illustrate this point, let me recall my encounter with R. Yosef Kahaneman, the Ponovitzer Rav, *zt"l*. His success as a "*marbitz Torah*" was unparalleled. He founded a great yeshiva, a "*Talmud Torah*," girls' seminary, and more. He earned the love and respect of world Jewry. In 1969, he came to Mt. Sinai Hospital, terminally ill, for palliative surgery for an intestinal obstruction due to a neoplasm. One early morning, R. Dovid Lifshitz *zt"l* called me to request that I immediately travel to the hospital because there was trouble with the Ponovitzer Rav. It was 1:30am – hardly a time to visit a patient. I entered the hospital at 3am to find an angry nurse and anesthetist in the Rav's room. Because of extreme anemia due to blood loss, the planned surgery required that he be transfused. The Rav had asked if the blood was "Jewish blood." When informed that it was from the general blood bank, he refused to permit the transfusion. My urging to the Rav that he should accept the blood was

to no avail. I contacted "Doc Horowitz," professor of physical education at Yeshiva College, who was in charge of the annual blood donor drive. The Rav's blood type, B-, was a rare type not common in America. Only eight students who were in our Yeshiva had this blood type, four of whom were in our dormitories. I awakened all four, drove to the hospital for blood typing. Two of them matched the Rav's blood, and he was transfused, and prepared for surgery. The anesthetist suggested removing the four natural teeth of the Rav while under anesthesia so that he would be more comfortable during his post-surgical care, which would require a ventilator. The Rav refused, and the surgery was successfully performed. The Rav was transferred to a facility on Ft. Washington Ave., near the Yeshiva. I visited daily, to encourage him to improve his food intake. When it seemed appropriate, I asked him to explain his refusal to accept the blood from the blood bank. He laughed and said, "You think non-Jewish blood is *treif*? No. The reason I refused to accept it was that they murdered my children. I will not reward them with the *mitzvah* of saving a Jewish life!" Clearly, despite all of his post-war successes, and all the Torah he had spread, the Rav had at that point not been granted *nechamah* from his experiences in the Holocaust. His success in the post-war years did not console him for the loss of his children. Just as the siblings of Iyov had understood that the adulation of society, and success in all endeavors, are not "payback" for the death of one's wife, children, and family, so too the Ponovitzer Rav had sought the *nechamah* that only *Hashem* can provide. It is only with the *nechamah* of *Hashem* that somehow life continues constructively after loss.

May we be *zokheh* to be granted the ultimate *nechamah* speedily in our days.

Postscript: When asked why he had refused the advice to remove the four natural teeth, the Ponovitzer Rav responded, "I am a *kohein*. *Mashiach* will soon come. A *kohein* who is toothless cannot serve in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*!"