

We have reached that liminal time of the year when we begin the 7-week countdown to Rosh HaShanah and the new year. Two weeks ago we read the final chapters of our trek through the wilderness to the borders of the Promised Land, and last week we began to read Moses' final entreaties and warnings before he passes the mantle of leadership to the next generation. Like our ancestors, we too, have had a long trek through a year filled with unexpected and often frightening events, especially since the advent of COVID-19. Perhaps our own experiences in these uncharted waters make it easier for us to understand their fears and their reluctance to trust Moses. Our world seems to be upside down right now. Will I or my loved ones get the virus? Will we recover? Whom can we trust? Will things ever get back to normal? What is normal, and do we want to go back there? Yes, we are in the midst of a monumental crisis, perched on the edge of the unknown, just like our ancestors. This is hardly the first crisis, nor is it even the first pandemic; and it will certainly not be the last. In the ebb and flow rhythm of history there have been many eras like ours, variations on the themes of war and peace, slavery and freedom, poverty and wealth, and affliction and wellbeing.

In the Jewish calendar, we have just emerged from the three weeks *bein hametzarim* – between the straits. Beginning with 17. Tammuz and ending with Tisha b'Av, we remember the countless misfortunes that have taken place during this time. From the incidents of the Golden Calf and 12 scouts through the destruction of both Temples, the expulsion of the Jews from England, France and Spain, to the outbreak of World War I and the initiation of the Nazi's "final solution," this has been an especially tragic time. As Moses explains throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, our behavior has been, and will be, the source of many of these calamities, but we also know that many have simply been thrust upon us through no fault of our own. We mourn them all – the lost lives, the lost opportunities, the senseless waste.

But if our mourning is to have meaning, it must ultimately lead to efforts to help prevent future tragedy. That is why Tisha b'Av services end on a positive note, and we arise with renewed hope and resolve to help make things better going forward. Both our parashah and its accompanying Haftarah lead the way. This is Shabbat Nachamu, so named for the opening words of the Haftarah, the first of the 7 Haftarot of Consolation that follow the 3 Haftarot of Rebuke. *Nachamu, nachamu ami* – (you – plural) comfort, comfort My people, says your God. The verb *nachamu* is addressed to us all, instructing us to offer support to our fellow humans. Moses emphasizes this by reiterating what we call the Ten Commandments, our succinct instruction manual for leading a good life. Moses too, is going through a very painful time, as the opening words of our parashah state: *Va'etchanan* – and I entreated HaShem ... to let me cross over and see the good land ... but HaShem was angry with me on account of you ... Moses is deeply sorrowful, and somewhat resentful (which makes him all the more human!) that his life, and his leadership, are ending. Yet he alternately cajoles and encourages the people, reminding them of their eternal covenant and what they must do to uphold their part of it. And he continues with the words that are the quintessence of Judaism, words most of us learn as children, and many of us repeat at least twice a day: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad* – Listen (intently), Yisrael (you God-wrestlers – *yisra-el*), Adonai your God, Adonai is one/unique/all-inclusive. And then, addressed to each of us individually: You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And out of this love, you shall repeatedly instruct your children so that they are able to perpetuate these teachings. The operative word here is *love* – and love implies compassion – which brings us to *nachamu* – and our collective duty to bring comfort not only to our fellow humans, but to our entire earth. Moses' anguished plea for mercy *va'etchanan*, which derives from the same root as the words for consolation, compassion, and grace, gives way to an eloquent plea addressed to each one of us: Let your love for HaShem guide you to love your neighbor as yourself, as we are told to do way back in Parashah Kedoshim. HaShem is holy, and we are to emulate this holiness in our human fashion by approaching our world with love. This too, is addressed to each of us individually. There is a profound message here: The collective is only as good as the individuals which comprise it. We each carry the burden of responsibility – for ourselves, and ultimately for our world. We have mourned collectively, we have arisen collectively, and together we are emerging from the brokenness of Tisha b'av, albeit into a still uncertain world. But strengthened and encouraged by our love for HaShem, and by the promise of our eternal covenant, let us try to view our world – and also ourselves – with love and compassion as we progress through the next 7 weeks to Rosh HaShanah.

Shabbat shalom!