

We have emerged from the narrow places of mourning into Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation. In 7 weeks, we will greet a new year, full of new opportunities to learn and grow. This year, Shabbat Nachamu falls on 15. Av, or Tu b'av, a minor Jewish holiday called *chag ha-ahavah*, holiday of love. During the Second Temple period, it marked the beginning of the grape harvest, which concluded on Yom Kippur. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur." He explained that on both days, the unmarried girls of Jerusalem dressed themselves in white garments that they borrowed from each other, and went to dance in the vineyards. "Why were they borrowed? So as not to embarrass one who did not have her own white garments. ... And what would they say? 'Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself for a wife. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but toward a good family ...'". In other words, beauty is fleeting, but good values form a solid foundation. Ta'anit 30b-31a cites a number of reasons that Tu b'Av is as joyous as Yom Kippur, the day of pardon and forgiveness and the day on which the last pair of Tablets were given (Ta'anit 30b:9). Heading the list is the lifting of the ban on intermarriage among the tribes which was instated in the wake of the complaint lodged by the relatives of Zelophehad's daughters (Parashah Massei, Numbers 36:5). "They derived from the verse that this matter shall be practiced only in this generation, when Eretz Yisrael was divided among the tribes ... On the day this barrier separating the tribes was removed, the sages established a permanent day of rejoicing." (Ta'anit 30b:10) Hence, Yom Kippur and this interpretation of Tu b'Av denote release and new opportunities, because they both mark turning points.

In our parashah, Moses and the people are also at turning points. Moses has learned that his life will end before the people cross the Jordan into their new land, and he is trying for one last time to teach them how they must behave if they wish to thrive. Knowing that they are still not ready for the momentous change they are about to undergo, he takes them back to the dramatic events of the day they stood at the mountain and heard the words of the Ten Commandments, issuing a series of predictions and warnings, reiterating these 10 precepts, and reminding them of their covenant. This part of his speech culminates in the words we recite at least twice a day: *shema Yisrael ... hear, Israel. Shema* is a deep form of hearing, an understanding that leads to commitment. The continuation of the verse, *Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad* – Adonai (is) our God, Adonai (is) one/unique/all-encompassing, is the closest thing we have to a credo. Because we worship an invisible God, our relationship to the Divine has always been aural rather than visual. We are forbidden to make images of HaShem, and even the names we use are euphemisms. But because HaShem is *echad*, there is no need for images. HaShem is everything. For this reason, we worship HaShem solely by hearing and heeding the words of our Torah. Moses makes this abundantly clear in his elaboration of the 10 Commandments. We are not allowed to worship what we see, neither nature, nor the works of human hands. And in order to sharpen our hearing and instill a desire to obey, Moses tells each of us individually, "And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength. "With all your heart" in the biblical sense means with all your thoughts and with all your feelings. Our commitment has moved from the realm of the intellect to the realm of emotion. "With all your soul" means with the very essence of your being. Of the 3 words for soul, *nefesh* refers to the vital spirit of all living beings; we don't have a *nefesh*, we are *nefesh*. Our commitment has become part of our DNA. "With all your strength" is likely an addition in order to form a neat triad to help illustrate what this love entails. It does not appear in the repetition in the second paragraph of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). This is the enactment of our love for HaShem; our commitment manifests in our behavior. It begins with instilling the commandments in our children. The word *v'shinantam* is derived from the same root as words for sharpening, and for teeth. We are to use these words, when we are at home and when we are underway, when we lie down and when we arise. This encompasses all that lies between the 2 extremes of these pairs – i.e., continual repetition forms habits. Finally, we are to wear them as tefillin when we pray, and display them on our doorposts as mesusot for all the world to see. These written manifestations of commitment extend from our private communication with HaShem to the public acknowledgement of our Judaism. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l said, "In Judaism faith is a form of listening: to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says time and time again ..." We have come through mourning into consolation, and we are two weeks away from the month of Elul, the month in which we take stock of our lives before the new year. If we listen as Rabbi Sacks suggests, we will hear the words of HaShem, appreciate the miracles of HaShem's creation that continually renews to sustain us, and then in love, honor our commitment to observe the Commandments to the best of our ability.

Shabbat shalom!