

We have emerged from the three weeks of rebuke with all their graphic portrayals of the calamities we will experience if we do not honor our eternal covenant with HaShem. Although Moses will present many more in his discourses, our Haftarat offer a seven-week crescendo of consolation leading up to Rosh HaShanah. For this, and many other reasons, Shabbat Nachamu enjoys near-festival status, with some commentators even advocating especially lavish meals in its honor. It takes its name from the opening words of the Haftarah: *nachamu, nachamu ami* (comfort, comfort My people), words many of us know from the recitative preceding the tenor aria at the opening of Handel's Messiah. In biblical Hebrew, repetition is always a highly significant form of emphasis. Here, it alludes to both spiritual and physical comfort, or, as our mystics teach, to HaShem's transcendent, "fatherly" comfort as well as the earthly, "motherly" comfort of the *Shechina*, the female aspect of HaShem that accompanies us in our realm. Of course, the number 7 is also rife with meaning: 7 days in a week, 7 weeks between Pesach and Shavuot as well as between Tisha b'Av and Rosh HaShanah, and 7 years between *Shmittah* years, to name a few. In addition, the repetition of the "Ten Utterances" and the opening paragraph of the *shema Yisrael* underscore the overarching twin messages of the Haftarah: the strict prohibition against idolatry (Isaiah 40: 19-20) and the uniqueness of HaShem (Isaiah 40:25). Indeed, the reasons for singling out Shabbat Nachamu are manifold, made all the stronger through another pair of attributes that define our parashah: love and joy. Love is the guiding theme of the first paragraph of our *shema Yisrael* (6:4-9), a love so powerful that it engages our entire being, from heart (our reaching out to HaShem), to soul (the divine spark within us), to strength (our physicality). It is a reciprocal love intended to honor and parallel HaShem's love – that eternal love that continually upholds our covenant and renews all of creation. We rejoice as we remember our ancestors hearing the "Ten Utterances" for the first time and then gradually learning how to enact them, a process we set forth every time we study a bit of Torah, exercising our immense privilege while acknowledging our equally enormous obligations. But why this repetition? Wasn't the first time, with all the ensuing laws and statutes enough? The science of Biblical criticism notwithstanding, Deuteronomy, falling where it does in the year (at least in our northern hemisphere), seems like one more summer rerun. But lest we view it with that sort of indifference, let us consider Moses' audience. The generation that experienced the miracles of the exodus and learned firsthand about what this entails has grown old and died. Their progeny, ranging in age from near 40 to newborn, have had precious little time to grow and develop, and with few exceptions, they have also had some abysmal role models. Emotionally, they are teenagers at best, and we all know how difficult both being a teenager and dealing with teenagers can be. A few years ago, I prepared a cousin for his Bar Mitzvah, which happened to be on Shabbat Nachamu. He was romping through his Torah reading with monotonal speed, until I asked him a pertinent question: How do your parents speak to you after they have repeatedly told you to do something and you still have not complied? His response had the urgency of high drama seasoned with considerable exasperation. After having first complained about Moses making us slog through the whole story again and again, he suddenly understood. Getting the message across to people who are still emerging from dependence and learning by fits and starts how to become responsible adults is a daunting task that requires both patience and continual reinforcement, the latter often juxtaposing graphic images of reward and punishment. Moses is doing exactly that; but first, he reiterates his accusation that he will not be able to enter the Promised Land because of them. At first glance this looks like sheer pettiness, but I believe he is using it as a powerful teaching moment, pointing out not only that he too makes mistakes, but also that he is just as prone as they are to engage in very immature wheedling. Challenging HaShem in defense of the people, as he did most notably after the incident with the golden calf, is a noble form of chutzpah, but begging and pleading in his own cause is most certainly not, and he emphasizes this to the people: "But the Lord was angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me, and the Lord said to me, 'It is enough for you; speak to Me no more regarding this matter.'" (3:26) Having highlighted his own failings, he is on far better footing to deliver his messages, not from his exalted position as their direct link to HaShem, but rather, from his very human position as one of them. Acknowledging his own human foibles, he is able to speak to his people in terms they will more readily understand. Perhaps because he had been too preoccupied with leading the people to engage with his own sons as a father should, he takes great pains to emphasize the necessity of inculcating the Torah's lessons into the next generation until it reaches their DNA level and can be passed on through the generations. The urgency with which he drives this message home speaks volumes, not only about himself, but also about his profound trust that his people will continue to exist. Shabbat Nachamu is truly a magnificent Shabbat, a Shabbat of consolation, of love, and of hope.

Shabbat shalom!