

Parshas Vaeschanan 2010
Shabbos Nachamu

“When your child asks you in the future¹, saying, ‘What are the testimonies and the decrees and the laws that Hashem, our Gd, has commanded you?’ You shall say to the child, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...”

(Deuteronomy 6:20-21)

The dialogue between parent and child in this week’s Parsha, at once, seems both familiar and incongruous.

Familiar: both because it mirrors a similar future conversation as related in Parshas Bo (Exodus 12:25-28), and because it is the question as articulated by the Chachom (Wise Child) at the Pesach Seder.

Incongruous: because in Parshas Bo it is apropos to the events at hand; we were about to leave Egypt and Gd informed the nation as to how to deal with a future nation with no personal affiliation to the Exodus. In Parshas Vaeschanan, however, no such easy correlation seems to jump out from the text. Here, it is in the midst of Moshe’s description of our inheriting the Land, our future rebellion and ultimate return that precedes the dialogue. No mention of the Exodus.

Furthermore - and perhaps a more difficult distinction between the dialogue in our Parsha and that of Bo – in the verses in Exodus, Gd was informing a nation who had experienced these events *first hand* on how to raise children who had not to have shared values, whilst here, in our Torah portion, the nation Moshe was talking to was the *second* generation of the desert (all, or most, from the previous generation had to pass on before the nation could enter the Land)... *they* were the children Gd was talking about in Parshas Bo! Now we are to accept that they become faced with a problem of a *future* generation’s un-relate-ability?!

I feel Rabbosei that these questions and the answer I will soon suggest speak greatly to Shabbos Nachamu.

¹ Some translate the opening word as “If” not “When. Also, see Rashi who understands “tomorrow” as a “future” tomorrow, meaning after some time.

First, a story:

Sitting in the Warsaw ghetto were a father and son. It was Pesach. They were having a Seder. Both were frail and ill and longing to discover new hope amidst the familiar pages of the Haggada. It was time for the Four Questions. The boy asked them beautifully. The father was about to turn the page when suddenly the boy said, "*Tatty, I have one more Question*". "*Go ahead my son*", the father hesitantly replied. The child continued, "*Tatty, my 5th question is the following: can you promise me that you will be alive next year to answer my Four Questions?*" Pause. "*Can you promise me that I will be here next year to ask them?*"

And, as the angels themselves were silent and peering down at this holy feast, the father paused and said, "*Mein Teyera Kynd (my precious child), I can not lie. While I hope, along with you, that you and I will survive this hell for another year, a promise I cannot make. But here is a promise I can provide you with: maybe you will live maybe not, maybe I will live maybe not, but I promise that next year and in all future years there will be a child somewhere asking his father the Four Questions. I promise that we as a Torah nation will never perish*".

Look closely at our Parsha. There is a theme, it seems: ***To Reconsider***.

Moshe seeking to have Gd change his mind about his entering the Holyland (3:23-25); the Jews changing their ways against Gd (4:25-28) and, better yet, soon after reconsidering yet again, only this time toward self improvement (4:29-30); the Jews desiring to hear Gd at Sinai and their reevaluation after the experience (5:21-24); Gd, then, too reassessed² their words proclaiming "that they said well (a good argument)" (4:25-28).

Reconsideration is also at the heart of the Haftrah of Nachamu itself. It opens with those heavy words, "*Nachamu, Nachamu...*" ("*Comfort, Comfort...*"). Now, we just fasted and mourned for three weeks, were reminded of the brutal events from our history and the fear and vulnerability for our future. Yet immediately after seeping ourselves in such morbidity we are told, "Be comforted"?! How? Indeed, the entire institution of Nechama, comforting the bereaved - be it during a Shiva or from basic despair - needs to be explained. Does it not flirt with a perceived dutiful denial?

² The concept of Gd "changing His mind" is vigorously investigated and discussed in the classic Jewish texts, however it is beyond the scope of this Drasha.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab O.B.M. explains the word *Nechamu*'s etymology as being shared with the term as it is used in Parshas Bshalach (Exodus 13:17), "*Pen **YiNachem** HaAm...*". Gd led us in a circuitous route lest the nation "***reconsider***, *when they see war, and they will return to Egypt*".

To comfort is to cause someone to reconsider, to change their vantage point, their prism and state of mind. *Yes, your dear relative died but you are not alone, that you must reconsider, for we are here; Yes, you are sitting Shiva, but your mourning is not for the departed soul per se for it is in a better place, rather you are sad for what was lost to you, not the despair of the deceased.*

Moshe informed the nation of a great future spiritual decline. But how, they wondered, can they be assured that enough religious energy will be intact hundreds of years hence to allow for a return? How could Moshe invigorate them, cause them to reconsider a natural reaction to a prophesy that lends itself to forlorn? - By telling them that their children will still be asking questions. For no matter how dire the situation, he *can* promise us that somewhere a child will always be asking the Four Questions. This was the connection the dialogue had to our Torah portion. And, aside from its majestic idea of our hope in survival through the Torah and questions of children, is the running theme of the Parsha, the ability to reconsider how we perceive things.

The Chasam Sofer explains the difficult reference to Tisha Bav in Megillas Eichah as a "...*Moed*", a festival, as not just a hint to a future time when that day will be transformed into a holiday³ but an allusion to the present as well: the fact that after 3000 years from the sin of the spies and two millennia from the destruction of our Temples we are still mourning, still feeling effected, is reason to reconsider how we view this day, even to - to some degree - refer to that very marvel as a festival. That we are still willing to see Jewish misfortune not solely as existential problems that arose in a vacuum, or exclusively review them through the cold prism of political and geopolitical studies but as, too, the continuation of our story as a nation... this is reason to reconsider the day in a more positive light. The prophet, in choosing to utter "Nachamu" twice is reminding us that while complete comfort is still pined for, some is already here, in the present, for the taking. We just have to open our eyes to the positive.

Perhaps this was the idea of Moshe, while having his prayers to enter the Land rejected, being commanded (3:27) to view Israel from the crest of a mountain. Gd was allowing Moshe a different "view", a new vantage point

³ Midrash and codified by Maimonides.

so as to reconsider that this punishment may be best what is best for him and the nation.

Perhaps, if we can show Gd our ability to reconsider that which we are so sure of, if we can find the strength to reevaluate our negative assumptions about people and even ourselves, then, maybe, just maybe, Gd too will reconsider us and this long exile.

May we merit Nachamah in its truest sense and celebrate Tisha B'av next year in Jerusalem.