

## **FROM THE RABBI'S DESK**

### **Sermon Va'Etchanan ~ "Lucky Man" 8/5/17**

This Shabbat, which follows Tisha B'av, is famously called Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation, receiving its name from the first words of the Haftarah, the prophecy of ישעיהו, "Nachamu Nachamu Ami", "My nation", God decries, "be consoled, be consoled". The custom, derived from the פסיקתא דרב כהנא, is that every summer we have 3 Shabbatot of tragedy, תלתא דפורענותא, followed by שבעה דנחמתא or 7 weeks of consolation, leading up to Rosh Hashanah.

Many people ask me about משיח during this time of year. What will it be like during the time of משיח? Will I see my loved ones? Will Starbucks and Whole Foods continue to operate? And of course, the age-old question, when is משיח coming already? The only honest answer I can give to these questions is "I really don't know!", because by design, we are not supposed to know. As we have frequently discussed, "Malchut" or God's trait of "Kingship", which corresponds to the era of משיח, must emerge spontaneously. For example, the language of שום תשים עליך מלך that you shall place a king upon yourselves, is not so much a commandment as much as a fact that will simply occur naturally. The emergent era of משיח is therefore inherently unpredictable in every aspect. Nonetheless, if it makes any difference, I am extremely confident that it will be a wonderful time for everyone, and whether we will enjoy the Messianic Era is not something we need to be concerned about.

Going through this process, year after year, is not easy, and it at times feels monotonous and uselessly repetitive. I frequently tell the now well-known story about the summer camp where the camp administration wanted to make Tisha B'av vivid, to have their campers experience the loss we suffered 2,000 years ago.

They asked the kids to build a model of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the campers poured their heart and soul into this project and completed it after several weeks of hard work. Then on the night of Tisha B'Av, a fire was "accidentally" started that burned the whole thing down. According to staff members I spoke to, the part of the story that was untold was that some kids were so distressed, the camp had to bring in mental health professionals to provide trauma counseling for them. Is this what we must come down to, in trying to teach ourselves and our children to appreciate the loss of our Temple?

I have always believed that the loss of the Beit Hamikdash can be conveyed without resorting to such desperate measures. We ALL experience loss – it is inevitable. Every single one of us will eventually experience a devastating loss in our individual lives – the

loss of a relative, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job. The list goes on. We don't need to go back in time 2,000 years to experience heartbreaking loss.

If we are honest and treat the Torah as something real, we will understand that every time we lose something precious, it is the natural, inevitable outcome of being in Exile. I'm not saying that life will be perfect when משיח comes, for the Rambam rules according to the opinion that it will not be perfect at all. Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that being in Exile means that God is hidden from us, and bad things will occur. It means that the Jewish people are not in a good place, individually and collectively. The purpose of this time of year is to teach us that loss is an inescapable aspect of our lives and to show us how to grapple with it.

The introductory 3 תלתא דפורענותא, Shabbatot of tragedy, mean that first, we must accept our loss – face it and mourn for what we've lost, as we do on Tisha B'av. Only then can we move on to the next phase, which is Nechama/consolation -- picking up the pieces and forging ahead. We only have 3 weeks of tragedy, but 7 weeks of consolation, perhaps because after mourning, it takes much longer to move on and return to our productive lives. That's why the word "Nechama" has a double meaning: It also means "to change your mind", to reconsider. As when the Torah declared "וינחם" that God changed His mind and decided not to destroy the Jewish nation after the Golden Calf, or when He regretted creating Man, "וינחם ה' כי עשה את האדם בארץ" and so He brought the Flood. In other words, changing the way you think is the essence of consolation. Ironically, we oftentimes become stuck in a certain way of thinking until we experience a terrible loss. So even though we certainly don't want bad things to happen, at the end of the day, loss can pave the way to life-changing accomplishments.

On this note, I would like to share news with the congregation that some of you already know. Some years ago, I was diagnosed with Young Onset Parkinson's Disease, which you may recall is the same malady that actor Michael J. Fox has. For a long time, I kept this information private, because I was concerned that people would see me differently or even pity me. Some of you may have personal experience with Parkinson's, or for TV addicts, you may be familiar with Louis Canning from "The Good Wife" or Terry from "Ray Donovan". If not, Young Onset Parkinson's disease is a long-term degenerative disorder of the central nervous system that mainly affects the motor system. It is known as a movement disorder and produces a long list of symptoms. Barring a medical breakthrough, my current physical condition is the best I will ever function at and currently there is no cure.

At the same time, I personally find deep inspiration in Michael J. Fox, as well as from my Rebbe, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel of blessed memory, with

whom I was serendipitously very close. Rabbi Finkel zt'l suffered from late stage Young Onset Parkinson's Disease for most of his tenure, when he led the prestigious yeshiva during its most prolific period, as it became the largest yeshiva in the world. Both of these incredibly accomplished individuals never lost focus and committed to becoming even more accomplished with this disease than they had ever imagined prior to their diagnosis.

Following their example, I intend to continue working to achieve aspirations I have for myself personally, as well as for our Mekor community. As I discussed in the dvar Torah, I will try to continually accept this diagnosis, and move on to the stage of Nechama, so that I can change my situation into something positive.

I want to primarily thank my wife Miriam, who has been a one- person support system from the outset of my diagnosis. She ensures that I do not stagnate, which is a vital component of Parkinson's treatment. I would also like to thank my family, the Mekor Board of Directors, and everyone both within and outside the congregation who have staunchly supported me, including by respecting my privacy, no matter how curious they were or how much concern they had. I hope that you will continue to support me in this manner and remember that while Parkinson's disease will affect my life in many ways, it will never define me. I feel privileged to serve our amazing, flourishing Mekor community, and with the help and love of God, I will continue to believe, as Michael J. Fox expressed with the title of his bestselling memoir, that for everyone and everything I am blessed with in my life, I consider myself to be a "Lucky Man". Shabbat shalom.