

## **Footsteps of Joy**

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

I sit here on Sunday afternoon staring at the empty computer screen in front of me. There was a place I wanted to be, but I stayed home to write my weekly column, and now I sit here with nothing to show for it. It is the first day of “shovua shechal bo Tisha B’Av,” the week of Tisha B’Av, but the date of publication is Erev Shabbos Nachamu. As I sit here thinking of churban and sadness, I wonder what I can write that will have meaning.

Torah and its mitzvos guide our days, and as its calendar directs our moods, it brings peaks and valleys and days of happiness and days of sorrow. The Three Weeks and Nine Days represent the period of the most intense sadness of the year. They are followed by Shabbos Nachamu and seven weeks of consolation and happiness.

The comforting expressions begin on Shabbos with those most famous words of Yeshayahu, “Nachamu nachamu ami.” If we pay attention to the novi Yeshayahu’s words of consolation, they can energize us for the next six weeks. There are very few periods that contain the unique healing properties of the Shivah Dinechemta. These seven weeks represent Divine whispers of consolation to the Jewish people as expressed by the novi Yeshayahu.

Open the sefer Yeshayahu and read its most beautiful words. They are guaranteed to affect you as you study them. One posuk is more beautiful than the next, not only for what they say and convey, but also for the way they are written.

For poetry is the language of the soul. The saddest, most tragic occurrences are more easily explained and understood when expressed in poetry rather than in prose. Poetry affects our emotions and touches the neshomah.

With but a few succinct words, they awaken dulled senses, while hundreds of sentences may only scratch the surface. Poetry finds beauty where none is obvious, reason where it appears to be lacking, sympathy when all are indifferent, love in loneliness, and light in darkness.

Poetry is music to a soul lost in exile. Poetry is the response to those who cannot find words to express their pleasure, disdain, joy or sadness. Ideas and concepts that defy lengthy explanations can often be summed up in a few words strung together adeptly.

Many years ago, I wrote of the time when I sat with friends in stunned silence as we watched Abie Rotenberg sing his extraordinary composition, The Man from Vilna. We had all heard it many times, but this time it was different. We were a small group, sitting at a table. We were at the bar mitzvah of his grandson, Nochum Levitan. It was Shabbos Nachamu. The mood was joyous and festive.

As it happened to be, on one side of Mr. Rotenberg sat an elderly relative from Lithuania, who had lost everything in the Holocaust. On the other side of the master composer and lyricist sat his grandson, the bar mitzvah bochur.

The song is mournful and happy, as it portrays Simchas Torah in the city of Vilna right after the war. The survivor sat there, listening to the song for the first time, and you could see how he was transported to a time we never knew. He

was in a trance, reliving it all over again. The rest of us were watching him, though thankfully there was no way we could imagine what was going on in his mind. It was a simcha, it was Shabbos Nachamu, and we were humming along as Abie sang the words about a man from Vilna.

We danced round and round in circles as if the world had done no wrong

From evening until morning, filling up the shul with song

Though we had no Sifrei Torah to clutch close to our hearts

In their place we held the future of a past so torn apart...

Though we had no Sifrei Torah to gather in our arms

In their place we held those children, the Jewish people would live on...

Though we had no Sifrei Torah to clutch and hold up high

In their place we held those children, am Yisroel chai

We have lost so much. So many are gone. There is so much pain. So many tears. A golus like no other. Today, the great Jewish metropolis of Vilna basically consists of a couple of cemeteries and empty shuls.

The Simchas Torah after liberation, people broken in body and spirit, lonely and alone in this world, clawed their way back home, looking to see if anyone had survived and what was left.

When they entered the bloodstained shul, there were no Sifrei Torah, but there were two small children, sitting on the floor in a corner, crying. And when they found those children, they found solace. They saw that there was a future. The Jewish people would survive. In a place of utter destruction, they found nechomah. The children would grow and so would they. They had each other and they had the children. Am Yisroel Chai. They scooped up the children and danced the night away.

As Abie's words sunk in on that Shabbos Nachamu in a Monsey hall, the bar mitzvah bochur, the survivor, the friends and the family felt tragedy and comfort, destruction and rebuilding, churban and binyan, ovar and osid, past and future. The simple poetry hit its mark.

And then we sang and danced as if the world had done no wrong, knowing that the pain and torture would soon end. Loneliness would be a thing of the past. Tragedy and suffering would be transformed into a joyous, bright future.

There are many problems in our world. Jews in Eretz Yisroel are at each other's throats, and there is way too much strife and sadness. Too many people are having a hard time making ends meet.

And then we come to shul on Shabbos morning and look around us, and we begin to appreciate the good we have. Laining is over and the words of the haftarah, though read softly, ring out loudly, proclaiming that we calm down, smile a bit, and know that the end of our tzaros is near. Nachamu nachamu ami. It is time to take comfort.

The haftaros of the Shivah Dinechemta contain lyrical words and buoyant assurances that can touch any neshomah, bringing joy and consolation, as they convey their deep messages.

Yeshayahu prophesized assurances of the future glory, and though he also delivered prophecy about impending doom if the people would not repent, he is the eternal novi of nechomah and consolation.

Imagine being alive at the time of the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh. It appeared that all was lost. Life, as the Jewish people had known it, was over. They were driven from their ancestral land, sold into slavery, mocked and vilified, and unwanted by all, seemingly by Hashem as well. Hashem told them that He no longer had any interest in their korbanos and no desire for His dirah betachtonim. The place that was the depository of Jewish hope, connection, greatness and holiness was gone. The Jewish people were lonely and forsaken, unable to go on living.

At that juncture, the novi Yeshayahu offered a nevuah of comfort. He declared, "Nachamu nachamu." He told the Jewish nation that Hashem still views us as His people. "Ami. You are still mine. Be comforted. Nachamu nachamu ami. All is not lost. Happier times will come. There is still reason to smile."

Last week, we featured a touching interview with a survivor. Think about his feelings at the end of the war. Think of what was going through the minds of other people who survived. Think about the people who hadn't been in those countries that were overrun by the Nazis and think about their thoughts when the war was over and the enormity of the loss was being felt. It wasn't all that

long ago that people were ready to give up and declare that our way of life had ended, r"l.

But then they heard the calls of Yeshayahu and the other nevi'im. They heard the pleas of the rabbonim and rebbes and Jews in whose hearts burned the story of Jewish survival, the promises of Hashem, and the force of faith, and they arose from the ashes and began to put themselves together, rebuild and live.

The pesukim of Yeshayahu are more than enlightened poetry. They are the blocks of binyan, forming the design with which we forge on through golus until the great day comes. While they foretell a brilliant future, they also invest the present with much meaning. Golus is not a dead end. It is part of a Divine plan, where there is room, purpose and a destiny for every Jew.

People with sensitive neshamos feel the message of these prophecies and pesukim, experiencing their relevance.

Rav Moshe Shmuel Shapiro, rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva Be'er Yaakov, lived with nechomah, expressing it during every stage of his life. He once shared with his talmidim how he learned to live with that vision.

He related that he became engaged to his wife in 1946, at a time when Klal Yisroel was in the throes of mourning and shock following the Holocaust. After the engagement, the young chosson and kallah went for a walk on the grounds of Yerushalayim's Reich Hotel.

The young couple strolled for a while, oblivious to their surroundings. Suddenly, they looked up and saw a most distinguished-looking Jew watching them.

“That distinguished looking man is the Ponovezher Rov,” the chosson whispered to his kallah.

Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman had lost to the Nazis most of his own family, his yeshiva, his town, and almost everything else he had ever known and owned. If there was someone who should have been shattered by tragedy and distress, it was the Ponovezher Rov. Yet, despite it all, he was consumed by his ambitious plan to rebuild the yeshiva he had lost. He stood in the yard of Pension Reich with a wide smile on his lips, as his eyes followed the chosson and kallah on their blissful walk.

He called out to them, “Freit zach kinder. Freit zach. Rejoice, children. Rejoice. For as much as you will rejoice with each other, the Ribbono Shel Olam will rejoice with us. That’s what the posuk tells us: ‘Kimsos chosson al kallah, yosis olayich Elokayich. Like a groom rejoices in his bride will Hashem rejoice over you.’

“You are the moshol, the metaphor, for Hashem’s eventual delight in us. Freit zach kinder. Freit zach!”

The Rov walked on smiling, having reassured himself of a bright future and providing the future rosh yeshiva and his rebbetzin a memorable insight into life, as well as a new appreciation for the poetic words of the novi.

A few years before that walk took place, two yeshiva bochurim were hiding in an underground bunker. They knew that being found would mean a certain and cruel death.

The two young men, prize talmidim of the glorious yeshiva of Telz, had been on the run for very long and experienced much inhuman suffering and torment. Now, as they sat in an awful, cold, dark underground bunker seeking momentary salvation, they once again sensed impending danger.

They heard loud footsteps of murderous soldiers on top of their heads, pounding out a tune of sadism and brutality.

With those steps ringing in their ears, Rav Chaim Stein looked at his friend, Rav Meir Zelig Mann. "Meir Zelig," he said, "you have musical abilities. Can you compose a niggun to the words 'Mah navu al hehorim raglei mevaser tov'?"

In the footsteps of murderers, the future Telzer rosh yeshiva heard a herald of the raglei mevaser, the footsteps of the one who will come bearing the most joyous tidings in history.

The pesukim of the haftarah that we read during these summer months are laden with promise and hope. They offer us a means of endurance in the darkness of the exile until the day of redemption arrives. They provide a glimpse of the bright future and grant significance to the bumpy road we are on, assuring us that there is a plan unfolding and that we are a part of it.

They tell us that instead of seeing darkness, we should see the light beneath it. Instead of seeing obstacles all around us, we should sense holy struggles that

will lead to our redemption. Instead of lamenting the uphill climb we face, we should see the ladder to everlasting joy, the contentment awaiting us when we reach the top of the mountain.

May that happen speedily in our day.