

# Nachamu: From Darkness to Light

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We are all familiar with the concept that the tefillah of Ashrei, which we recite three times daily, is comprised of pesukim that begin with all the Hebrew letters in corresponding order. All of the letters, that is, except one. There is no posuk in Ashrei that begins with the letter nun.

The source of this appears in the Gemara Brachos (4b): Rabi Yochanan taught that the reason there is no posuk in Ashrei beginning with the letter nun is because that letter is used to depict the defeat of Klal Yisroel, for the posuk states (Amos 5:2), “Noflah, she fell, and will never be able to get back up, the girls of Yisroel.”

The Gemara (ibid.) says that in Eretz Yisroel, the posuk was read to express a positive message. They read it like this: “Noflah, lo sosif, kum besulas Yisroel – She fell, but not for long, rise up the girls of Yisroel.”

The Vilna Gaon asks how the Gemara can go out of its way to explain the posuk with a positive connotation when it appears among the harsh prophecies that Amos Hanovi envisioned for the Jewish people? A posuk with a comforting prophecy clearly doesn't fit there.

He explains that this awful prophecy contains a happy prophecy as well, as it foretells that the Jewish people will fall to such a low level that they will not be able to fall any lower. Therefore, the way the people of Eretz Yisroel read the posuk is justified, for the posuk fits in with those surrounding it. “Noflah lo sosif, Klal Yisroel will fall so low that it will not be able to fall any lower.” First, the posuk speaks of the terrible times. Then it says, “Kum besulas Yisroel,” meaning that since they will have fallen so low, the only place for them to go from there would be up.

With this, the Vilna Gaon explains another Gemara that deals with prophetic curses. The Gemara in Chagigah (14a) states that Yeshayahu Hanovi cursed Klal Yisroel with 18 curses, but he wasn't pacified until he recited this posuk (Yeshayahu 3:5): “The youth will behave with arrogance, raising themselves above their elders, and the low people will behave this way with those who are deserving of respect.”

He asked why Yeshayahu would be pacified by this prophecy. He did not hate Am Yisroel. Rather, he was the prophet of consolation. In fact, the seven haftaros of nechomah that we read for the next seven weeks are all prophecies of Yeshayahu. Why would this terrible prophecy bring Yeshayahu happiness?

He answers along the same lines with which he explained the Gemara in Brachos. Yeshayahu understood that the Jewish people would not commence their upward climb until they had fallen to the lowest level possible. When constructing a new building to replace one that was destroyed, it is necessary to clear away the entire building until its foundation or the new building will fall.

When Klal Yisroel sinks to this level of chutzpah and insolence, it will be a sign of ikvesa d'Meshicha, for they will have fallen to the lowest levels of human behavior, and from there the only way to go is up, and the process that will lead to Moshiach can begin.

Thus, Yeshayahu, the novi of nechomah, was happy when he foresaw that the people would sink to such a low level, because he knew that the geulah would then begin.

This is what took place when Hashem redeemed the Jews from Mitzrayim. Chazal teach that they had sunk to the 49th level of tumah when Hashem took them out of Mitzrayim. They sunk as low as it was possible to sink and still be saved, and therefore Hashem took them out. Reaching the lowest level of tumah is what brought about their redemption.

We can also understand the words of the Tur and Bais Yosef in Hilchos Tisha B'Av (siman 557), which discusses when on Tisha B'Av we recite the prayer of Nacheim, which refers to a consolation for Klal Yisroel following the awful churban. The Tur cites his father, the Rishon, known as the Rosh, who questions why Nacheim is only recited at Mincha and not at Maariv and Shacharis.

The Bais Yosef, in his commentary, quotes the Gemara where this issue is first discussed and the disputes that followed as to when the consoling prayer of Nacheim should be recited. He writes, "It appears to me that the reasoning for the shitah that says to only recite Nacheim at Mincha is because the Bais Hamikdosh was [fully destroyed and] set on fire towards evening. Therefore, [in the tefillah which is recited] at that time, we mention the baseness of Yerushalayim and its mourning and daven for its consolation."

With the answer of the Vilna Gaon, we can understand the Bais Yosef, for when the Bais Hamikdosh was totally destroyed, it was evident that Yerushalayim was at its lowest and there would be no further destruction. From that point, they would begin their upward trajectory and work to bring back that which had been lost. This is the time to offer and accept consolation, because it will not get worse; it will only get better. That is why we wait until the time when the Bais Hamikdosh was totally destroyed and set ablaze to recite Nacheim.

This concept is found in previous sources, such as the Abarbanel (Bereishis 5:2), Maharal (Netzach Yisroel 26), and Rav Tzadok Hakohein of Lublin (Tzidkas Hatzaddik). They state that we learn from the way the world was created, night before day, that with everything that happens in the world, darkness precedes light and emptiness comes before growth.

This is apparent when a seed is planted. Nothing grows from that seed until it rots away into nothingness, and when that happens, it begins to sprout.

This also explains why Rabi Akiva smiled when he viewed the Har Habayis where the Bais Hamikdosh stood and saw a fox exit from the place of the Kodosh Hakodoshim. He explained that when he saw that the prophecy that the holy place would be totally destroyed came to pass,

he knew that the prophecy about Yerushalayim being repopulated and the Bais Hamikdosh being rebuilt would also be realized.

The utter destruction comforted him, because out of desolation comes growth.

The posuk (Micha 7:8) states, "Ki eishav bachoshech Hashem ohr li." This is commonly understood as "When I sit in darkness, Hashem provides me light." Rav Tzadok explains it differently, writing that it expresses the thinking of people of faith: "When I am surrounded by darkness and experience loss, and it appears as if Hashem is hidden, I know that Hashem will shine His light upon me and I will find salvation."

For such is the way of life. Success and light follow darkness and failure.

So often in life, people experience a downturn, and it seems as if Hashem has forgotten them and allowed them to fail. But those who maintain their faith and a positive outlook are able to regroup, rebuild, and succeed where they had failed.

Following the Holocaust and its tragic losses, people who lived through unimaginable human tragedy and misery were shattered and devastated. When the war ended, they had a choice, a very difficult choice, so difficult for us to conceive in the comfortable golus we now find ourselves in. They could either give in to the sadness that overwhelmed them and become lost in the darkness, devoid of faith in Hashem and the future, or they could gather themselves together, and understand that Hashem would rescue them from the depths of devastation if they would look ahead to a better future. They went on to rebuild what they had lost and gave birth to new families and communities where they flourished.

We find ourselves now in a time of darkness. Iran and its proxies seek our destruction. The nations of the world detest, condemn, and torment us. The socialist Jew-haters are gaining, and it is difficult to trust that should they grab the levers of power, they will look kindly to our interests and to Israel. In Israel, at the same that the country fights for its very survival, the left has launched a war against the institutions of Torah and those who dedicate their lives to its study.

For many, it is a fearful time, and people fret about what the future will bring. Will the forces of morality and decency win, or will the others? How strongly will Iran attack Eretz Yisroel and its inhabitants? Will the small country be empowered to repel the evil empire and its proxies? How many will die in the effort?

The novi Yeshayahu calls out to us in our darkness, in the depths of golus, and says, "Nachamu, nachamu," it is time now to be consoled. Be comforted in your sorrow and fears. You are suffering. Am Yisroel is suffering. But you must know that the sadness and deprivation indicate that recovery and redemption are on their way.

Nachamu. The pains are birth pangs, indications that we are in ikvesa d'Meshicha, the period leading to the arrival of Moshiach, which will herald the end of the golus and the onset of the redemption.

Nachamu. When we see the yeitzer hora seemingly empowered to tempt and corrupt people through more vices and devices, when we see the forces of tumah and evil on the march, when inflation climbs incessantly and we are unable to keep up, we should know that these are further signs of the imminent nechomah and geulah.

Nachamu. When we see the faithless anxious and fearful over what the next day will bring, when we see those who deny Hashem's existence battling Torah, its students, and its followers, know that if you remain strong and dedicated, things will turn around and the yeshuah will surely arrive.

Nachamu. Monday night and Tuesday morning, we sat with lights dimmed, on the floor, reciting painful lamentations and hearing the plaintive wail of Eicha. This Shabbos, we will lain Parshas Va'eschanon and identify with Moshe Rabbeinu's desperate desire to behold the Land, to touch its soil, and to fulfill its special mitzvos. And then the pleasant chords of Nachamu tug at our souls, as we echo Moshe Rabbeinu's prayer with much eagerness.

Nachamu. Our nation has endured much suffering and hardship. We have had periods of great tragedy, losses, and sadness. Our parents and grandparents, and their parents, suffered through the awful pogroms in der heim. They were poor and hungry, freezing cold during the winter and boiling hot during the summer. Then came the Great Depression and the terrible Holocaust. They hit rock bottom. From there, it was only uphill. Their lives were spared, their souls restored. They found homes and jobs. Communities began to blossom and haven't stopped growing. Shuls, schools and yeshivos were opened and haven't stopped expanding. There are more people studying Torah than ever before. There have been bumps along the way, many bumps, but each failure, each regression, each period of weakness was followed by even more success and growth.

Nachamu. The darkness surrounding us in this period of golus underscores how close we are to the coming of the geulah. The darkness will give way to a great light that will shine upon the world when Hashem returns His Shechinah to the Har Habayis, which is now utterly defiled. The Bais Hamikdosh will soon be rebuilt, and sadness and grieving will be replaced by sasson v'simcha with the arrival of Moshiach, speedily in our days.