

*Shabbat Nahamu. Some Comments on Seeing and Comforting*  
*Rabbi Eliot Malomet July 29, 2023 11 Av 5783*

עלה ראש הפסגה ושא עיניך ימיה וצפנה ותימנה ומזרחה וראה בעיניך... דברים ג:כז	<b>Go up to the top of the Pisga [Range] and lift up your eyes— toward the sea, toward the north, toward the south, and toward sunrise; see [it] with your eyes... Deut. 3:27</b>
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Let's put this verse in context. In his final speeches to the people, Moses recounts how, sometime after he hit the rock instead of speaking to it, God told him that he would not enter the land with them. Though he beseeches God to change his mind, God is resolute in his decision. Moses was not going to go into the land. Moses was the leader of the liberation but not the leader of the conquest. The Torah concludes outside the land with Moses' death. We are always left imagining, What if? Would it have been better for Moses to go into the land with them? But embedded in God's refusal to grant Moses his request, is a piece of wisdom that is being transmitted to us through Moses' example: acceptance. *Accept that you mortal. Accept that you are a physical being with vigor, but that your life eventually will come to an end. This is the lot of all huma-nity. Accept that you are suited for the role of liberator rather than that role of conqueror. Accept that you are defined by your generation and your geography, that your life has a set of boundaries. When you were born, you were taken out of one river, and now on the eve of your death, you will not set foot in another. But here is the consolation. The land that you so desperately want to enter, you will be able to see from a distance. It is not the same as going there, but at least you will be able to go up to the top of the mountain and look at it, with your own eyes.*

There is something just a little odd about the way God says this to Moses. We are familiar with the expression *to lift up one's eyes* - שא עיניך. There are plenty of examples to choose from: Abraham *lifts up his eyes* and sees the place where he will sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:4). Isaac *lifts up his eyes* one afternoon and sees the camel train with his future wife, Rebecca (Gen. 24:63). Jacob *lifts up his eyes* and sees Esau coming to greet him. (Gen. 33:1). But, in none of the instances of *lifting up your eyes* do any of the texts add the extra verb that we have here, namely: *וראה בעיניך-and see with your eyes*. Why does this text add this seemingly superfluous detail, *וראה-see*? Analogy: In the pre-photography era, in order to depict a landscape, you had to write about it in words. (Landscape art did not develop until the Renaissance and viewing it was limited.) This *gorgeous* paragraph is how John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) describes the Grand Canyon in 1875: *The whole scene for a thousand miles is wild and grand beyond description. The region is of rock -- of cliffs and crags, and pinnacles and gulches, and gorges and canyons. ... The rocks are red and gray and chocolate, lying in stripes and patches, and on them rests a light of wondrous beauty.* Great descriptive writing creates vivid

visual and even visceral images. When you read it (or listen to it) you see something in your imagination. But having never been to the Grand Canyon, I imagine that seeing it with your own eyes is of a different spiritual order of magnitude than picturing it in your imagination. And that's the point. To *see something with your own eyes* is to be wowed by it. It's to experience wonder and transcendence. Moses will not have the experience of walking the land, touching its soil, or breathing its air. But God is giving him the experience of *seeing it with his own eyes* and responding to it in the expected way that one would respond to seeing something that they have only imagined. Malbim says this nicely: *שתראה בעיניך הגשמיים לא בעיניך הרוחניים - you will see it with your physical eyes and not with your spiritual eyes*, meaning, this will be a real event for you and not an imaginative event for you.

Some interesting comparisons: Bilaam *lifts up his eyes* (Numbers 24:2) while standing on his summit overlooking the people of Israel. The view inspires him, and he waxes poetic. When Moses goes up Mount Sinai, he cannot see anything below because of the thick smoke! The only thing he experienced was sound. On the last day of his life, God takes Moses up Mount Nebo and shows him the entire land. It must have been a clear day because he was able to see for miles and miles. But we notice that upon seeing it, **he said nothing**. The only thing we know from that moment is what God said: *This is the land that I swore to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Yaakov, saying: To your seed I give it! I have let you see it with your eyes, but there you shall not cross!* (Deut. 34:4).



Perhaps that is the point. On Mount Sinai he could see nothing but was immersed in sound. On Mount Nebo he could see everything but was immersed in silence. It is left to us to imagine what he thought.

**נחמו נחמו - Nahamu Nahamu** For many of us, it's hard to read the first verse of this haftarah without hearing Safam's beautiful melody (composed by Joel Sussman and Robbie Solomon, and sung by former Highland Park resident, Dan Funk, son of our beloved Rabbi Julius and Pearl Funk, may their memories be a blessing) in our minds



What does **נחמו נחמו-Nahamu Nahamu** actually mean? **נחם** means *to comfort* someone. **להתנחם** means *to be comforted* by someone or *to comfort oneself*. **נחם** means *Comfort!* - a command in the second person **singular** and **נחמו** is the *Comfort!* command in the second person **plural**

form. **נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ** therefore, is a doubled second person plural command: **Comfort you! Comfort you!** With these two words, Isaiah is relaying a divine imperative to comfort God's people. **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.**

But who is Isaiah talking to? Who is the audience for Isaiah's command? It's not clear. Our *Etz Hayyim* commentary says that Isaiah is addressing **heavenly messengers, instructing them to bring God's word of comfort to Zion.** That depicts Isaiah as a dramatic orator speaking to the heavens, but it doesn't seem like a plausible explanation of what is going on here. Why would God turn to the prophet Isaiah, to turn to the heavenly angels, so that they, in turn, would turn to the exiled Judeans to comfort them?

Malbim has a more compelling explanation. Isaiah is turning to a **group of prophets:** **אַתֶּם, הַנְּבִיאִים, - You, you prophets, you comfort my people.** This presents Isaiah as a leader, a master-prophet as it were, who is instructing his team of disciple-prophets to go out and be agents of comfort to the people. That is a compelling explanation



because it conforms to the reality of the biblical era that novice prophets were mentored by older prophets just as novice scribes and wisdom teachers were mentored by their elders. And it works well as an interpretation because in general, **people are more likely to be comforted by other people,** especially people who have a certain spiritual depth to them, like prophets, rather than by angels who (let's face it) have no way of understanding what it means to be a human being. If Malbim's understanding is correct, here Isaiah would be turning to his disciples and saying to them, **Here is your task: "Comfort, comfort my people," says God. Go out and comfort them. That's what God is telling you to do. Do whatever you can to ease their pain. Be with them in their hour of darkness. Hold them. Offer them wisdom. Kind words. Perspective. Hope. Humor even. Offer them the tools to piece together their lives.** And then he says, **על לב ירושלים, דברו - literally upon the heart of Jerusalem** as opposed to **אל לב ירושלים** which means **to the heart of Jerusalem.** **Speak tenderly** (JPS) is an adequate English translation, but it does not quite convey the emotional intimacy and physical proximity that the phrase **על לב** suggests. Ironically, the team of prophet-disciples that Isaiah is addressing is in exile with him in Babylon. Thus, when he says to them, **Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her** he is saying, **make it known wherever we are, no matter how far we are away from Jerusalem, that Jerusalem's moment of desolation is over. That her term of service is over, that she has paid her price, that her iniquity is expiated, that she can start over, For she has received at the hand of the LORD, double for all her sins. That the desolation she has experienced has**

**been more than she can bear.** Isaiah's statement is not only a command to comfort then, but a Proclamation. This is a **Proclamation of the Cessation of the Era of Punishment:** the period of punishment is over. It is a **Proclamation of the Commencement of the Era of Restoration.** The people will return to Zion and rebuild their city. They will restore their lives there. And why the doubling, yea the doubling, of **Nahamu Nahamu?** We of course would answer that the doubling of a verb in biblical Hebrew **magnifies** and **intensifies** its meaning. But the biblical commentator Moshe Alshikh, (born in the Ottoman Empire, 1508, died in Safed, 1593) would argue that:

**ואשר אמרתי נחמה כפולה באמרי "נחמו נחמו", כי בעונש לקחה כפל נחמו נחמו - Isaiah's doubled Nahamu Nahamu statement corresponds to the doubled punishment. [Because you received a double portion of punishment I (God) will symbolically deliver to you a doubled form of comfort]** But then Alshikh adds this very powerful psychological insight:

**כי עקיצת האהב קשה לאדם ממכת חרב האויב, וזהו "כי לקחה" - במה שהיא "מניד ה'", שהיא אביה תרחמן - כפליים בכל חטאתיה", כי הרגישה כפליים ממה שהייתה מרגשת על ידי זולתו.**

**We have to consider that the sting of someone who loves you is felt much harder on a person than the strike of the enemy's sword. That's what Isaiah meant by "ki lakhashe took" - that which she took from the hand of God, who is her compassionate father, "was double because of her sins" meaning that the impact of what she experienced (from someone who loved her) was double what she would have felt were it inflicted upon her by someone else.** It's one thing when the person who assaults you is a stranger. But it's quite another, when a parent or loved one strikes you. In fact, it's doubly painful. This is what makes Isaiah great. In just two lines he has compressed his entire emotional and spiritual project. He implores a team of disciples to go out and comfort the people. Their job is to console them, hold them, give them words of wisdom, allow them to express their pain and interact with them with deep empathy and understanding. To Alshikh this means that those prophets have to understand the double nature of the people's pain, that it was inflicted upon them by no-one else but God, a loving Parent. We might be tempted to go a step further. They have to offer a **double comfort** to the people: **comfort** for the physical destruction and dislocation, and **comfort** for the emotional devastation and desolation. The people have both physical and emotional pain here. One **Nahamu**-for the physical, one **Nahamu**-for the emotional. One **Comfort!** in the form of the restoration and reconstruction of Jerusalem, and one **Comfort!** in the form of a renewal and reconstitution of the relationship between them and God. Isaiah understands that this new era requires a double measure of comfort. **As does our own.**

**Shabbat Shalom!**

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