

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה' וַיָּמָתוּ.
 וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן אַחִידָה וְאַל יָבֹא בְּכָל עֵת אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ...

God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they came-near before the presence of God and died; God said to Moses: Speak to Aaron your brother, [so] that he [does] not enter, at [just] any time, the Holy-Shrine...

Familiar to us from Yom Kippur, this portion describes the rituals that were to take place in the Tabernacle on that day to purge it of sins and cleanse it. But rather than explore them here, I would like to focus on the lines above. There is nothing altogether startling about the phrase, **וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה**-*And God spoke to Moses*. This phrase occurs 92 times in the Torah; similarly the expression **וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה**-*And God said to Moses* occurs 67 times.

		Gen.	Exod.	Lev.	Num.	Deut.	Total
וַיְדַבֵּר ה'	<i>God spoke to Moses</i>	0	14	34	43	1	92
וַיֹּאמֶר ה'	<i>God said to Moses</i>	0	42	2	21	2	67
Total		0	56	36	64	3	159

Moses doesn't appear in Genesis and Moses does most of the talking in Deuteronomy. Exodus and Numbers are almost inversions of each other in terms of the way that God communicates with Moses; God hardly **"says"** (**אמר**) anything to Moses in Leviticus but is constantly **"speaking"** (**דבר**) to him. Is there a difference between **"speaking"** and **"saying"**, **לשון דבור** and **לשון אמירה**? To the rabbis, **דבור**-**speaking** is generally thought to be harder, more abrupt and pointed than **אמירה**-**saying**, which is considered softer. **דבור** is more **"transactional"** and **אמירה** is more **"conversational."** We could conclude that God is more **"conversational"** with Moses in Exodus, and more **"transactional"** in Leviticus and Numbers; Exodus has more narrative, and Leviticus and Numbers has more legislation. When God communicates with Moses at the beginning of our parasha, it says, **וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה**, which is the more **"transactional"** formulation, and then it says, **וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה**, which is the more **"conversational"** formulation. When God **speaks** to Moses here, after the death of Aaron's sons, it then says that God **says** to Moses, **אֶל אַהֲרֹן אַחִידָה**-**Speak to Aaron your brother**. This at first, doesn't appear to be too unusual. Except that it's the only time (of the eight times that God tells Moses to **speak** to Aaron), that God says, **דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן**-**Speak to Aaron your brother**. **Speak transactionally to him. Give him a set of instructions pertaining to the important procedures for purging the Tabernacle of sins on Yom Kippur, the Day of Purgation.** But as usual, the rabbis see more going on here. They want us to observe the fact that this is the first time that Moses and Aaron are interacting with each other since the catastrophic deaths Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu. To tease out the emotional complexity of this moment, the rabbis tell us that while on the one hand Moses is to **speak "transactionally"** to Aaron, that is, give him a set of instructions, on the other hand, he should comfort him, since Aaron was still grieving

at the loss of his two sons. When the Torah says **אֶל אַהֲרֹן**-**Speak to Aaron your brother**, it means that he must pay attention **to the way he speaks to him** and before giving him instructions, he must speak to him with words of comfort. We read in midrash Vayikra Rabbah 21:7:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן
 אָמַר רַבִּי אַבִּינּוּ: אָמַר לוֹ לֵךְ נַחֲמוּ בְּדַבְרֵימֶיךָ,
 כְּמֵה דַאֲתָּה אָמַר: דַּבְרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם. (ישעיה מ:ב)

*And God said to Moses, Speak to Aaron your brother.
 R. Avin said: God said to him, Go comfort him with words. Just as it says, (in the book of Isaiah): speak to the heart of Jerusalem (Isa. 40:2).*

When R. Avin cites the beginning of the verse **דַּבְרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם**-**speak to the heart of Jerusalem**, he is relying on the familiarity of his audience to fill in the rest of that verse, the same way, for example, if we were to quote the first word in the Beatles' song, *Yesterday*, we would all automatically hear the rest of the line in our heads: **all my troubles seemed so far away**. When R. Avin says Isaiah's, **דַּבְרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם**-**speak to the heart of Jerusalem**, everyone hears the rest of the verse in their minds:

דַּבְרוּ עַל לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַיִם
 וְקִרְאוּ אֵלֶיהָ
 כִּי מִלְאָה צָבָאָה
 כִּי נִרְצָה עֲוֹנָהּ
 כִּי לָקְחָה מִיַּד ה'
 כְּפָלִים בְּכָל חַטָּאתֶיהָ.

*Speak to the heart of Jerusalem,
 And declare to her
 That her term of service is over,
 That her iniquity is expiated;
 For she has received at God's hand,
 Double for all her sins.*

R. Avin's drash is very meaningful on many levels. Aaron has just suffered a **double** catastrophe. He has lost two sons. Therefore, he needs to be **doubly** comforted. What better text to cite for a **double** dose of comfort than Isaiah 40:1-2, where Isaiah begins with the words, **בֵּה נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ**-**be comforted, be comforted**, a **doubling** of comfort! A synagogue-going audience, such as R. Avin's would have been familiar with not only this text but all of Isaiah's signature word-doublings, because every year between Tisha B'av and Rosh Hashanah they would have heard all the haftarot of consolation which are replete with them (**עֲבְרוּ**, 52:11, סוּרוּ סוּרוּ, 52:1, **עוּרֵי עוּרֵי**, Isa. 43:25, **אֲנֹכִי אֲנֹכִי**) (**עֲבְרוּ**, 62:10). What emerges from this seemingly innocuous reference to God's instruction to Moses to talk to Aaron is a story of comfort, reconciliation, and the power of words to bring that about. R. Avin's drash, **לֵךְ נַחֲמוּ בְּדַבְרֵימֶיךָ**. Go, comfort him with words, is not a throwaway one-liner, but a very powerful saying to have in our minds especially in difficult moments when we are called upon to bring comfort to others. How do you comfort with words? What do you say? Especially in the face of tragedy? We often find ourselves in these situations, and we resort to saying something like, "What can I say?" or "There are no words." We say those things not because are wordless, but because we are so afraid of saying the wrong thing, or



causing more pain, or embarrassing ourselves, or breaking down emotionally because the situation may be so overwhelming. So we resort to saying, "There are no words" as a defense mechanism. Jewish wisdom is quite helpful in these circumstances. Rabbi Maurice Lamm z'l, (1930-2016) is known to many of us as the author of the important book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Dying*, the first major compilation of Jewish mourning practices in English. Originally published in 1969 and updated in 2000, it is still widely used as a practical guide for all the rules and customs around loss and mourning. But in one of his lesser-known books, *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*, he continues to offer guidance and Jewish wisdom on the subject of loss, comfort and consolation.

נְחָמוּם בְּדְבָרִים - *comforting with words* is complicated. He has a suggested list of *Do's and Don'ts* which begins with this:

Allow mourners to begin the conversation and set the tone at all times. This is a religious must.

The classic source for this tradition is in the Talmud, Tractate Mo'ed Katan, 28a.

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: אִין מְנַחֲמִין רִשְׁאִין לִימַר דְּבַר עַד שִׁנְפַתַּח אַבְל שְׂנַאֲמַר: "וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אֹתוֹ לְאָרְצָא שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְשְׁבַעַת לַיְלֹת וְאִין דְּבַר אֱלִי דְבַר כִּי רָאוּ כִּי גָדַל הַכְּאָב מְאֹד). אַחֲרֵי כֵן פָּתַח אִיּוֹב אֶת פִּיהוּ" וְהָדַר: "וַיִּשְׁעוּ אֱלִיפֹז הַתִּמְנִיטִי".

Rabbi Yohanan said: The consolers are not permitted to speak words of consolation until the mourner opens and speaks first. As it is stated: *And they sat down with him upon the ground for seven days and seven nights and none spoke a word to him; for they saw that his suffering was very great. After this Job opened his mouth (Job 2:13–3:1). And afterward: And Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said...* (Job 4:1).

Seven days is a long time to go without speaking. Quite literally it is a shiva. Symbolically, like all shiva's, it is a zone of transition (or "re-creation") from Job's previous life, which had been utterly destroyed to his new life which is now just beginning. As far as mourning and comfort is concerned, Rabbi Yohanan's point is that it is *only after he begins speaking that his friends respond to him*. Most people cannot sit in the presence of others for seven minutes, let alone seven days, without speaking. The tradition teaches us that *we are always to take our cue from the mourner. Never try to probe too much but to follow the mourner's lead*. Rabbi Lamm continues:

Be an open listener. Allow mourners an opportunity to express all of their feelings in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere so they can break through their loneliness and share their pain and loss for a short time.

Listen attentively, not casually.

Silence is best. We are advised to say nothing at all, especially at the outset, rather than to be endlessly talkative.

Our conversation should not be distracting but therapeutic.

Speak of the departed. This may appear hurtful at first, but in fact helps mourners unburden themselves. We should feel free to recall events in the deceased's life.

Use humor wisely. Light-hearted or humorous anecdotes of the deceased, spoken respectfully, are quite in place.

Do not dwell on your own mourning experiences. Mourners are at the center of our concern everything else should be peripheral.

Rabbi Lamm is careful to note that while we can do our best to listen and speak comfortingly to mourners, with words of comfort, ultimately consolation comes from God. We usually do not know when that will come, but we have faith that it will. The ability of human beings to survive all loss, especially tragic loss, is one of the great miracles of life. It is, in a subtle and yet direct manner, a type of divine revelation. Words of comfort help. Rituals help. Community helps. Individuals help. Visits help. A daily rhythm of activity and purpose helps. But when all those things are combined, it is nothing short of a miracle.

This parasha is called *Aharei Mot* which literally means, *after the death*. It always follows Passover just before Yom Hashoa. Most of the time it is joined with parashat *Kedoshim*. My late mentor Rabbi Israel Silverman z'l, used to point out that after the Holocaust, we are all living in the era of *Aharei Mot-Kedoshim*, the era *after the death of the kedoshim*, the *martyrs of our people*. It is hard not to approach Yom Hashoa this year without thinking of the events of October 7, in which 1200 people were killed in what was intended as nothing short of a prequel to another genocide of Jews. **We lament the fate of 133 hostages still being held captive, now in their 211th day, praying that they are still alive and that they will come home soon.** Silence

gives us space to grieve. Words open for us the gates of comfort. The resolve that we witness from our brothers and sisters in Israel, to embrace life, to rebuild, to create, to marry, and to bring children into the world, are all signifiers of the miracle of divine consolation. We might add that on this side of the ocean, in the current spasms of Jew-hate across college campuses, we are seeing with complete clarity, the evil and malevolence of those who are allied against us, including those with whom we once stood in their struggles. But more importantly, we are also recipients of tremendous love and support from those who are shocked by the ugliness unfolding right before their eyes and who have come to rally beside us and support us. They have given us **נְחָמוּם בְּדְבָרִים**, **comfort with words and deeds**. We thank them. May God bless them. **שְׁבַת שְׁלוֹם**

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