

**High Holy Days 5782/2021**  
**Rosh Hashanah Sermon**  
**Cantor Harriet Dunkerely**  
**Temple B'nai Chaim**

## **Rosh Hashanah Shacharit 5782 – The Many Faces and Spaces of Comfort**

My maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Rice Gellman, *zichrona livracha*, lived to be 104 years old enjoying, for most of her life, robust health and a mind as sharp as a tack. In her last days however, she was hospitalized as her body and organs began to reject the idea of continuing any longer. My parents and my uncle and aunt (my mother's brother) gathered at her hospital bedside sensing that her remaining days in this world were coming to an end. During this last week of her life, they were visited daily by the head chaplain at the hospital, a young Orthodox Rabbi who identified himself as such during his first visit. My mother, a lifelong Reform Jew, was immediately skeptical, perhaps even defensive at the thought that this Orthodox Rabbi could possibly provide any comfort. And yet, he returned each afternoon to offer a prayer and some conversation. In the course of his visits, my mother's initial skepticism softened, and she asked him one afternoon how he had come to be an Orthodox Rabbi. He was so passionate about Judaism and so committed to his faith that she was both moved and curious. He didn't seem to fit the image in her mind of an Orthodox Rabbi – an image that for many Reform Jews, myself included – may limit our ability to connect meaningfully with individuals from that community – especially clergy.

It turns out that this Rabbi was raised in a culturally but not religiously Jewish home, and it wasn't until he went to college and noticed many of his Christian friends carrying around Bibles that he became interested in learning more about Judaism. He was taken by the depth of his friends' faith and wondered if his own traditions offered any such anchor. He told my mother that once he started studying, he couldn't stop. He became deeply involved in and committed to a Jewish practice that had been absent all his life. Their conversation so moved my mother (and my uncle) that she found herself, somewhat reluctantly, comforted and looking forward to his daily visits. During this time, my grandmother was in an unconscious state, and as Rosh Hashanah was nearing, one day the Rabbi came in with a Shofar and asked if he could blow it for her. "Maybe she will hear it and maybe she won't" he said. "Perhaps it will stir something in her, move her in some way." And although it didn't appear that the call of the Shofar that afternoon had any effect on my beloved grandmother, it certainly moved and consoled my mother. She remains comforted by it still nearly 11 years later.

In the world of the Reform Jew, daily visits to the bedside of your dying mother by an Orthodox Rabbi or the blast of the Shofar may seem unlikely sources of comfort. But given the right circumstances, I would argue that comfort can take many surprising and unexpected forms. Let's look for a moment at what may seem like a contradiction – the blast of the Shofar – a wakeup call for humanity demanding attention and action – and the concept of comfort. Some may think that to be awake is to be in pain, to taste the bitterness of sorrow, to know the

despair of loss, to feel deeply the trials and challenges that life brings – especially now. It is easy to feel powerless under the weight of the endless cycle of horrific news that barrages us daily – the latest catastrophic weather events – fires, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods, the endless pandemic surges and debates over vaccinations and masks, senseless death and destruction in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria, Israel, Gaza and the West Bank... It may feel like too much. Forget the Shofar! We may be tempted to beg instead, “Comfort me by letting me sleep. Being awake is too much, too hard. Let me remain asleep, unaware and blissfully ignorant.”

To this refrain I respond, Judaism calls us each week, every Shabbat, to awaken to the soul’s song and seek freedom from our habits and routines. Even more so on Rosh Hashanah, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. Shabbat urges us to be present and connected to our souls. It offers us a weekly dose of comfort and redemption from the pit of our suffering – an opportunity to wipe our slates clean and be blown clear of any distractions, delusions, discontent and absent mindedness. The very song of Shabbat, L’cha Dodi is a comforting pastiche of verses from the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), especially Isaiah, containing many words aimed at awakening the beloved, the queen, the bride, Jerusalem, and the people Israel. In L’cha Dodi, being awake is linked with pure joy, and surely inside of joy one is wrapped in comfort – the warmth of a smile, the ecstasy of a dance, the simple lift that one feels in the presence of a giggling child. This is what it is to be awake and alive – the ultimate soothing of the soul!

I suggest that comfort has nothing to do with being comfortable. Rather to be truly comforted is to be fully awakened, and Shabbat is a perfect example – an island of peace and stillness, of candles, song and joy – a veritable matrix of comfort and delight that is experienced fully only when one is awake to it. In the words of Rav Kook, the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century sage, “to be awake is to realize everything sings, celebrates, serves, develops, evolves, uplifts, aspires to be arranged in oneness.” To be awake according to my teacher Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg is to “grasp a light beam that shines through this finite body toward an infinite creation. To be awake is to yearn for the awakening of all beings and to grieve for the suffering born of our failure to see how deeply connected we are to one another.” Our task as human beings is to wake up and in so doing, through our patience and example, awaken and comfort others.

Just a few weeks ago on Shabbat Nachamu, we read in the book of Isaiah 40:1-2, “*Nachamu, nachamu ami, yomar Eloheichem. Dabru al lev Yerushalayim.*” – Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem. “*Shabbat Nachamu*” or “Shabbat of Comfort” falls just after Tisha b’Av, the observance on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av that marks the destruction of both Temples and has come to commemorate all the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. It is the first of the “*Shiva d’nechamata*,” the 7 Sabbaths of Consolation so named for the Haftarat that accompany them – the “Seven (Prophetic Readings) of Consolation.” Our Sages, in establishing the weekly Torah and corresponding Haftarah readings, recognized the fundamental need for comfort that all human beings share, and attempted to address it in part through the yearly ritual reading of our most sacred texts.

For many, pouring over the teachings in N’vi’im, the books of the Prophets, may seem like the last thing that would provide any comfort. Yet, studying or reading them in *hevruta* – with a

friend or partner – can be incredibly insightful, inspiring and yes, comforting. Paramount to this comfort is partnership with another human being. Human connection is the key – the basic solace that comes when one knows and experiences the feeling of being accompanied – the reassurance that is felt when we suddenly understand that we are not alone. I witnessed this myself in the summer of 2016 when I worked as a Clinical Pastoral Education chaplain in training at St. Luke’s and Mt. Sinai West Hospitals in NYC. I was terrified when I began my internship and had little idea of what to say or how to interact with some of the patients on my floors, particularly those who had suffered debilitating strokes. I recall vividly sitting with one such woman who had been particularly hard to reach after losing the ability to speak and walk. I asked her if she would like me to read to her from the book of Psalms. A slight nod of her head indicated yes. As I began to recite, she reached for my hand, and a few moments later, tears began streaming down her face. In the space of a few moments, the cloud of grief that surrounded her seemed to lift and I sensed in her the same deep comfort that I myself felt. Sometime later while visiting her, I met a couple of her family members. It became apparent during our conversation that we shared little in common. In nearly every way, we were opposites, from religious beliefs to political leanings, to heritage and familial backgrounds, yet none of that mattered in the unexpected moments of human connection that the patient and I shared. Nor did it matter at all with her loved ones. They showed only gratitude that she seemed to have shifted to a better place and was no longer enveloped in such deep sadness. In another space and time, it may not have been possible, yet in that moment, as in the time the young Orthodox Rabbi spent in my grandmother’s hospital room, the words spoken and the human connection that grew out of a desire to and a need for comfort, transcended barriers that may otherwise have kept us apart. The result was an awakening to comfort for both of us.

Still, there are times when words, whether spoken from the heart or written in Tanakh, fail us, when the teacher, the spiritual guide, the rabbi, the cantor cannot find words that might offer hope or comfort. Such was my experience this year as I sat down time and again to begin writing my sermons for these High Holy Days. I sat for long periods staring at a blank screen, scouring texts and articles for inspiration only to find myself paralyzed with the weight of offering words of comfort at a time when each news broadcast adds to the feeling that our world is fracturing around us. How does the comforter presence hope or relieve suffering when she herself is crying out for the Shofar’s call?

Unsure of where to turn I found myself dwelling on Judaism’s mourning rituals. The customs and mitzvot concerning Jewish practices of mourning offer perhaps the ultimate guide to comfort and consolation. The fundamental purpose of the condolence call during shiva for example, is to relieve the mourner of the intolerable burden of intense loneliness. There are few instances when a human being is more in need of such company. To console in general is considered a God-like action, and exercising compassion by paying a condolence call is a mitzvah, considered by some of our greatest scholars to be biblically ordained – the evidence being God’s visit to bless and comfort Isaac upon the death of his father Abraham in Genesis 25:11. To accompany the mourner is a sacred obligation incumbent upon every Jew, regardless of relation to the bereaved.

Recognizing the mourner's bereft state of mind, the visitor traditionally comes to her house silently to join in her loneliness and sorrow, sit alongside her and accompany her in thought, lingering on the loss she has suffered. Words are not required in these moments. The simple warmth of the human presence in the depths of such despair is comfort beyond measure. When practiced as tradition prescribes, true consolation is the distillation of empathy. In this sense, heartfelt compassion is communicated through presence and silence. The simple eloquence of human closeness fulfills both the mourner's desperate need for companionship and privacy while lessening the sharp sting of tragedy. So much is communicated just in the expression on the face of one who has come to offer comfort. This is true human connection – the ability to feel, give, and receive compassion in the absence of a single spoken word.

It is said that death is the great equalizer. No one is above it. No one can escape it, regardless of religious faith, political views, or life path. In the house of mourning, this fact is clear, and so the deep comfort of human connection is perhaps easier to taste. It bubbles at the surface, within easy grasp for any who are longing for solace. It is freely given and gratefully received. And comfort is not reserved only for those steeped in grief or weighed down by profound suffering. It is rather a true gift, given by God and accessible to all. Comfort wears many faces and is found in all kinds of spaces, many of them unexpected and wonderful. Our job is simply to open our hearts to receive it – something that is often easier said than done. Let us then use these Days of Awe, the sound of the Shofar that we will hearken to in a few minutes as our wakeup call to comfort. "Maybe we will hear it, and maybe we won't. Perhaps it will stir something in us." Friends, unlike my grandmother on that September day 11 years ago, the choice for all of us here and for those joining remotely, is ours to make. May you choose wisely, and may you be comforted.

Shanah Tovah...