Nahamu, Nahamu: Thoughts on Consolation

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Someone has suffered the loss of a loved one. We visit the mourner's home during Shiva to offer words of consolation. Upon leaving, a Sephardic custom is to say "Min haShamayim Tenuhamu," may you be consoled from Heaven. The general Ashkenazic custom is to say a passage that begins with the words "HaMakom Yenahem Et-hem," may the "Place" console you.

The Sephardic reference to Heaven is self-explanatory. But what does "HaMakom" mean? The Bereishith Rabba (68:9) indicates that HaMakom is a name of God. "He is the place of the world and His world is not His place." This phrase seems to mean: God encompasses the entire universe, but He is not limited to it. In Ezekiel's vision, the angels bless God's glory "Mimekomo," from His place. His place is far beyond i.e. in Heaven.

Doesn't it seem strange that when we offer consolation we refer to a very distant, transcendent God? Why don't we invoke a more "personal" name of God?

Our folk practices reflect a deep sensitivity to the reality of mourning. During the Shiva, mourners are fresh in their grief. They often feel alienated from God: why has He taken the life of my loved one? Halakha recognizes this alienation by exempting mourners from prayers and blessings during the period of "aninut" (after death, but before burial). Even during the Shiva period, a sense of alienation from God lingers.

We offer words of consolation in which we refer to God as being distant, out of reach. God in Heaven will console you, God "in his Place" will soothe your grief. We know that right now God seems remote from you. We refer to God in the way that mourners are now experiencing God.

But if God is so far away, how will He be a source of consolation?

The answer is: mourning is experienced in stages. During the first stages, God indeed is experienced as being in Heaven. But as time passes, the God in Heaven will once again come close to you, will bind your wounds. This consolation is experienced incrementally, not all at once. We are reminding the mourners: Right

now, God is in Heaven, in his “Place,” but He is ready to come close, to bring you consolation. As you go through the mourning process, you will again feel God’s immediate presence in your lives.

In his classic book, “I and Thou,” Martin Buber writes of how “primitive” people use language that reflects human relationships. Whereas we tend to speak in abstractions, the “simpler” humans speak in relational terms. For example, we say “far away.” The Zulus use an expression to express this idea: “when one cries ‘mother, I am lost.’”

The Jewish tradition speaks on both of these levels. In offering consolation at the beginning of and during Shiva, we refer to God in abstract terms that describe Him as far away. But we close the Shiva by quoting the prophet Isaiah (66:13): “As one who is comforted by his mother, so I (God) will comfort you, and through Jerusalem you will be comforted.” The God of Shamayim/HaMakom, is now like a loving mother consoling her crying children.

This coming Shabbat is known as Shabbat Nahamu, the Shabbat of consolation. The haftarah opens with Isaiah’s words: “Be comforted, be comforted My people, says your God.” This haftarah begins a seven-week period of consolation, following the three weeks of national mourning between the fast of 17 Tammuz and the fast of 9 Av.

During the period of national mourning, we remember the catastrophes that befell our people during the destructions of the First and Second Temples. How many thousands of our people were murdered, or sold into slavery! How bitter have been the exiles and wanderings over the centuries! When we face the tragedies head on, we feel that God is in Heaven, in his “Place”…but not here. He is far away.

As we experience the weeks of consolation, we are reminded that mourning is a process. It begins with God being in Heaven, but goes on to enable us to restore our relationship with God as being close to us. Isaiah announces to us God’s own promise: be comforted My people. I am here with you. Redemption will come.

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Angel for Shabbat