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Nahamu, Nahamu

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Be comforted, be comforted My people, says the Lord…Oh you who tells good tidings to Zion, get up onto the high mountain, lift up your voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid…” (Isaiah 40: 1, 9).

During the three weeks between 17 Tamuz and 9 Av, the Jewish people experiences a period of mourning. We reflect on the tragedies of the past—the destructions of our First and Second Temples in ancient Jerusalem, the spiritual dislocation caused by prolonged exile, the physical toll of death and travail that have afflicted Jews through the centuries. We fast, we pray, we cry.

This year, the three weeks have been made heavier by the anxiety of the State of Israel being at war with Hamas terrorists, facing ongoing missiles from Houthis, and dealing with threats from Iran. We praise the amazing heroism of the Israel Defense Forces and the great strength demonstrated by the people of Israel during these dangerous times.

The Jewish people are resilient. We haven’t wended our way through 3500 years of history by accident. We have found the strength, courage and optimism to persist. One of our secrets is our ability to remember, to mourn past tragedies. Another of our secrets is our ability to think beyond tragedy and to look forward to the future.

On Tisha B’Av we fast, we chant dirges and the book of Lamentations. But in the afternoon of this most somber day, we declare “Nahamu,” be comforted. On the Shabbat following Tisha B’Av we chant Isaiah’s beautiful words of consolation and we begin a seven week period of consolation. Tragedy is part of life; but so are consolation and redemption. Sadness is part of life; but so are joy and peace. We never lose hope for a better, happier future, for ourselves

and for all humanity.

Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, a great rabbi of the 18th century, cites a rabbinic observation that the Hebrew words Nahamu Nahamu have the same numerical value as the name of Isaac (208). Our forefather Isaac is, thus, identified with the consolation of the people of Israel. What does Isaac have to do with consolation?

Rabbi Azulai refers to Shabbat 89b where the Talmud imagines a future conversation between God and our forefathers. God will come to Abraham and Jacob and tell them that the people of Israel have sinned. Abraham and Jacob seek to excuse Israel's sins and ask God to be merciful. When God approaches Isaac with the words, "your children have sinned," Isaac replies boldly: "Are they my children but not Your children?" Isaac then negotiates with God and expresses his willingness to accept responsibility for half of Israel's sins if God will accept responsibility for the other half.

Isaac becomes identified with the consolation of Israel because he speaks out strongly for his people. He does not simply bow his head and ask for mercy. Rather, he stands tall and shows his willingness to shoulder responsibility for his people. Because of that spiritual courage, Isaac is also identified with the quality of "gevurah," heroism. He is a lion in defense of the people of Israel.

Consolation is connected to strength. Consolation calls on us to rise from mourning and declare "Nahamu Nahamu," we will be consoled, and we will offer consolation. We will identify with each other with the same sense of responsibility that was demonstrated by our forefather Isaac.

An ancient rabbinic teaching has it that only those who mourn for the sadness of Jerusalem's tragedies will ultimately rejoice at Jerusalem's redemption. On Tisha B'Av we cry for the tragedies that have befallen our people; but we also proclaim Nahamu Nahamu. We arise from our mourning. We cast our eyes forward to a happier and better time.

May the Almighty Who creates the harmony of the heavenly spheres bring harmony and peace to us, to all Israel, and to all good people everywhere.