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The Promise of Redemption

By ABRAHAM UNGER

Within the same Torah portion read on Tisha b'Av, taken from this week's parsha, lies the promise of redemption. The dialectic of faith embedded in the verses predicting the self-destruction of the Jewish people's decline into a state of collective brokenness through idolatry and exile among the nations cascades into a prophecy of triumphant return characterized by territorial sovereignty and spiritual awakening.

In this last month of his life, as he ferociously recounts and expounds upon the Law he hopes the Children of Israel will keep after he dies, Moses to Israel that God will remember us in the midst of our pain so long as He is sought after "with all your heart and all your soul" [Deuteronomy 4:29].

Rashi later explains, when that phrase is applied to the Shema it refers to a fearless declaration of faith in the Oneness of God; that the responsibility to love God with all our heart and soul means to practice the commandments with more love than fear, to embrace God with both our good and evil inclinations, and to be ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, if need be, for this love of God. The search for God means surrender, not a loss of autonomy. It is an empowered choice to look for the Divine after the mourning of Tisha b'Av.

In his classic work using as its title the central clause capturing the redemptive tone of this week's parsha, "U'vikashtem MiSham," which means "From there you will seek out God" [Deut. 4:29], Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik outlines how a seeming giving-over of one's will to God and Torah, out of existential crisis, actually offers a deepened willfulness. Michael Berger, in "Modern Judaism," comments on Rabbi Soloveitchik, "in the end ... man's will unites with the Divine will so that obedience is actually free." Once we recover our spiritual wholeness under the aegis of the Torah, we can truly marshal the best of our own individual and collective promise as the Children of Israel. Moshe Rabbeinu reminds us that so long as we embark on the search, redemption is possible.

Our Haftorah this week, after which this Sabbath is named, offers the hopeful message, "Console, console my people (nachamu ami) says your God" [Isaiah 40:1]. After the tragedy commemorated by Tisha b'Av, comes solace. As God went with us into exile, and cries over our decline, so, too, He partners with us in our return. The Midrash of Pesikta Rabbati states that not even Abraham or Moses can console Jerusalem, only God can, and He will. After all, no matter how far we stray, Jerusalem, symbol of wholeness through the promise of the Temple, awaits once we try to find our way back.

Jerusalem is more than just a place. It's a way of being. The chasidic master Simcha Bunim wrote on the phrase "U'Vikashtem MiSham," that while the "there" may technically be referring to the city of Jerusalem, the real "place" of our journeys is in our hearts, the Jerusalem of our souls.

Recall Rashi's note that heart and soul mean love and readiness. That is what Jerusalem signifies: the resolve to move forward, in spite of tragedy and exile. No wonder, then, that Shabbat Nachamu initiates the liturgical season of preparation for the upcoming Days of Awe.

This is accomplished through a series of Haftarat offering a crescendo of anticipation over the seven Sabbaths prior to Rosh HaShanah.

The dialectical process of faith is thereby captured by the cycle of the Jewish calendar, moving from Tisha b'Av to Shabbat Nachamu to the kinds of serious reflection and return compelled by the High Holy Days season. After the despair of Tisha b'Av, we have, as it were, nowhere to go but up. We begin to seek out God from "there," the remaining holy sparks, or "Jerusalems" inside our spirits, and with a kind of increasing urgency, we make our way back to Torah, not simply to embrace a coercive Law commanded at Sinai, but to reach out for true freedom, when we cleave to a God helping us realize our best selves. The common conviction shared by Rabbi Soloveitchik and Simcha Bunim is that the Law is not the ceiling. It is just the foundation, allowing us to soar.

Shabbat Nachamu prepares us to soar over the next two months as we begin to grope for renewal with the waning of summer and the New Year on the horizon. We are partners with the Divine on this path. He extends His comfort, and, as Moses plaintively described, we do our part by reaching out "from there," from our souls to Heaven. All this, as Rabbi Soloveitchik indicated, to become the most human we can be.

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