

TIMELESS∞TORAH

Summer Reflections

PARSHAT VAETCHANAN - THE ENDURING SPIRIT OF COMFORT AND RENEWAL

The Enduring Spirit of Comfort and Renewal

This Shabbat, following the fast of Tisha B'Av, is known by the name of Shabbat Nachamu – the Shabbat of Comfort. As the Haftarah opens with the moving and hopeful words, 'Nachamu, Nachamu Ami – Comfort, comfort My people', we are gently guided away from the depths of national mourning towards a message of solace and renewal.

How does comfort truly manifest in the face of profound loss? How do we transition from moments of deep sorrow to the imperative of rebuilding? Where does that remarkable inner strength, that persistent drive to begin again, originate within us and our collective history?

To help answer these questions, let me share with you a truly extraordinary piece of writing I encountered several years ago, a letter that beautifully encapsulates the enduring strength of the Jewish spirit. It was penned by Don Yitzchok Abarbanel, a figure of immense stature – a brilliant Torah scholar, a respected statesman, and a leading Jewish personality of the Spanish Golden Age. The letter is published in 'Letters of Jews Through the Ages' (ed. Franz Kobler, 1953, p.325)

Let us transport ourselves to that pivotal moment in history: the year 1492, specifically Tisha B'Av, the very day the decree of expulsion forced the Jews from Spain. Abarbanel, who had served as a trusted advisor to the King and Queen, a man of considerable wealth and intellectual renown, was

presented with an offer to remain, to convert, to retain his esteemed position. With unwavering conviction, he refused, choosing instead to cast his lot with his brethren. He became a refugee, compelled to leave Portugal, then Spain, eventually finding sanctuary in Italy.

Years later, in Venice, at the age of seventy, Abarbanel composed a letter that is remarkable for its candidness and human vulnerability. He describes himself as 'advanced in years,' noting that his 'hands are heavy from old age,' and his 'eyes are not with me.' He expresses a poignant regret that he has 'no one to assist me' and acknowledges that 'the vicissitudes of these days have, however, discouraged me.' He even reflects with a sense of 'guilt that in the vanity of my youth I spent much time on the natural sciences and on philosophy', rather than dedicating himself solely to Torah study.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the weight of these words. This is not the simple regrets of an ordinary individual, but a towering rabbinic sage, a man who had navigated the corridors of power, a scholar whose intellect illuminated generations. He is an elderly man, displaced from his home, dispossessed of his fortune, grappling with the burdens of his past and the uncertainties of his present.

Yet, what was Abarbanel's response? He did not succumb to despair. He chose to rebuild. He chose to continue. If his path could no longer be in Portugal or Spain, then it would be in Italy. In those 'last years of his life,' he embarked on new intellectual endeavours, composing some of his most



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engaging in extensive correspondence with scholars across the Jewish world, and pursuing his studies with an undiminished passion. He exemplifies the spirit of resilience, rising above adversity to continue contributing immensely to Jewish life and thought.

This narrative offers a profound and timeless message for each of us today. We often hear people express sentiments like, 'I'm too old to start something new,' or 'I wish I had pursued that dream when I was younger'? But when we look to the example of the Abarbanel, we see a powerful counter-narrative. He achieved remarkable things despite immense personal and communal upheaval. His story reminds us that we, too, possess the capacity for renewal and continued growth, regardless of our circumstances or age.

This, I believe, is a core aspect of the enduring comfort the Jewish people have always known: the inherent ability to transition from moments of profound challenge to periods of active rebuilding, often with a remarkable sense of continuity. Consider a powerful, more recent illustration: a mere three years after the gates of Auschwitz were finally opened, David Ben Gurion stood in Tel Aviv and proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. If that moment of national rebirth, rising from the ashes of unspeakable tragedy, is not a miracle, if it is not a profound expression of 'nachamu', then what truly is?

The Jewish people possess a unique and enduring capacity to rebuild, a pattern woven throughout our history. It is not

merely a historical observation; it is a sacred responsibility for each generation to connect with this ideal, to draw upon this inherent wellspring of resilience that defines us. And like Don Yitzchok Abarbanel, we are called upon to never allow ourselves to believe that it is too late to begin, too late to learn, too late to contribute, or too late to grow.

The comfort of Nachamu, according to this, is not a passive feeling; it is an active force, a Divine reassurance that even in our deepest despair, there is a path forward. It is the understanding that our connection to the Almighty and His eternal Torah provides an anchor in a world of constant change. This comfort empowers us not just to survive, but to thrive, to find meaning in adversity, and to transform sorrow into strength. It reminds us that our collective journey is guided by a higher purpose, and that every challenge overcome adds another layer to the rich tapestry of our enduring heritage.

Ultimately, therefore, the message of Shabbat Nachamu, illuminated by the life of Don Yitzchak Abarbanel and the resilience of our people, is a call to action. It urges us to embrace our heritage not as a static relic of the past, but as a dynamic, living force that empowers us to face the future with courage and conviction. It is a reminder that our greatest strength lies in our unity, our unwavering faith, and our commitment to the values that have sustained us through millennia. May we all draw deeply from this time of comfort and renewal, and in doing so, contribute to the ongoing vibrancy and eternal legacy of the Jewish people.