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## SHABBAT SERMON – 1 AUGUST 2009

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We turn a page of the Bible and we are confronted with a question and a cry – Eichah, How? How desolate is the city! How could such a destruction have happened? We turn another page of the Bible and read an imperative addressed to an unknown group of people – ‘Nachamu’ – ‘Comfort! Comfort My people!, says your God.’ Who are the ones being addressed? How are they to offer comfort? Perhaps they are the prophets, but if so, according to one Midrash, they will have a difficult time. In *Pesikta Rabbati* (Piska 29/30b), one by one ten of the so-called ‘minor prophets’ come to Zion with words of comfort. But each time their own earlier prophecies are thrown back at them with the words: Yesterday you came to us with words of threat and punishment! Today you come to us with words of consolation! Which of your words are we supposed to believe? In the end God is forced to say, ‘Come with Me and I will comfort Zion’, as it says ‘Be comforted! Be comforted, My people!, says your God.’

For Jewish tradition both the warnings of the prophets and their words of consolation are to be accepted, but each in their appropriate time and place. On Tisha B’av we remember the warnings of the prophets that were ignored and the destruction that followed. So we are forced to ask ourselves the question – what do we know now about our own failures and mistakes that we are unwilling to acknowledge and correct. How do we prevent the next potential catastrophe? However on this Shabbat, Shabbat Nachamu, we receive each year the words of consolation and comfort. They promise that the exile will soon be over and we can return home. The punishment was severe but it is now past. But where is home for us, if exile is not a place but a state of soul?

Next year we will experience both occasions again, and again and again, perhaps throughout eternity. Or at least for as long as the Jewish calendar determines the pattern of Jewish life, and the landmarks of Jewish identity and Jewish purpose. Moreover, Shabbat Nachamu is not really the end of something but only the beginning. It is the first of seven such Shabbats where we read prophetic words of consolation leading us to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It is as if we need to be strengthened and encouraged that at least for these few weeks our Jewish life is securely anchored before we face once again the annual judgment and calling to account of the penitential season. The pattern continues in its eternal cycle.

It is said that unless we have truly experienced the tragedy of Tisha B’av, we cannot truly experience the consolation and comfort of Shabbat Nachamu. We have to have gone into the depths of that horror and pain and suffering to appreciate the comforting that comes after. Moreover, if we find it difficult to empathize with the destruction of the First, or Second Temple, there are any number of tragedies in Jewish history, from the remote past to the near present, that can speak to us directly and evoke that same horror and pain, if we so wish. If we so wish.

There is, of course, another reality. Tisha B’av is pretty much neglected in Jewish life today. Shabbat Nachamu is a synagogue event, so only relevant, if at all, to those who regularly attend. In fact both dates underscore the split that runs through the very heart of our Jewish life. We live according to two

parallel timelines – the religious and the secular calendars. The former is a cyclical pattern of fasts and festivals, as familiar as the ever-recurring Shabbat, and as exotic as the once in a lifetime opportunity to recite the blessing of the sun. In the past it was this pattern of days and dates that determined the rhythm of our lives, as individuals and communities. We wept unselfconsciously on Tisha B'av because we had experienced the destruction of the Temple as if in our own day. In anticipation we marked the first breach in the walls of Jerusalem; the special melodies used in the synagogue prepared us for it and then we experienced the destruction itself in liturgy and in the detailed behaviour appropriate for the day. These were the emotions and understandings that we carried into the daily life around us, measuring, interpreting and judging that seemingly artificial temporal reality against the true eternal reality of the cycle of the Jewish year, the Jewish time in which we were fully immersed.

Today, for most of us, the situation is reversed. Our secular time is the true reality, and we have to snatch days out of that secular time to create, sometimes quite self-consciously, the religious moments. Moreover, we have to draw on our own personal experiences, derived from our daily life, so as to find the appropriate emotions and ideas that link us with the festivals and fasts themselves. What the tradition can no longer automatically provide for us, we have to provide for the tradition. We skip or we stumble between these parallel universes in our quest for a Jewish life.

How far does this split in our consciousness go? The thrust of Eicha and of Tisha B'av is to tell us that we could have done something to prevent the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. In the Biblical view it was our sins, our disobedience of God that provoked God's anger and the punishment that came upon us. In one rabbinic view it was needless hatred that provoked a series of events that led to the destruction of the Second Temple. Both assume that we exist in a logical universe of cause and effect. Right behaviour will restore the broken relationship with God and then the material world will be repaired, 'our days will be renewed as of old.'

But it is possible that the distancing from Tisha B'av in our time is not only a matter of assimilation to our non-Jewish environment, or the change from our collective Jewish identity to our more individual existence. For implicit in Tisha B'av is always another possible reading of what happened. The First Temple was destroyed because of faulty political alliances that drew down the wrath of the Babylonian Empire. The Second Temple was destroyed because of a serious miscalculation about the power of the Roman Empire. And one by one each of the tragedies associated with the day can be given their socio-political basis. Precisely because Tisha B'av is associated with so many disasters, it carries this other message as well. They happened because they happened, and because they happened they will happen again. That is how the world functions. That is what life is actually about: Jewish life in particular, but the life of human communities throughout the world. The beginning of Eicha describes the desolate city but only identifies it after verse 2 as Jerusalem. The images of destruction, the desperate situation of people starving in the streets, these are the commonplaces of our daily experience, beamed into our homes from around the world. Eicha is universal, as tragic and incomprehensible as any report in the daily news. Only Tisha B'av is personal and particular to the Jewish people, our own attempt to acknowledge its unwelcome truth.

Why do we bother with Tisha B'av? Because we don't want to live in a world without meaning, a world of the random coming together of tragedies and disasters. The problem arises when we try to pin down and define what is the meaning. Where is God to be found in what happens to us and to others? There is little help to be found in past theologies and theodicies, or in the contradictory words of the Biblical prophets. They never quite fit the facts; they rarely satisfy our need to understand; they seldom speak to our pain. They explain but do not solve the riddle of suffering and bloodshed and destruction. So we repeat Tisha B'av each year because the questions it poses are not yet answered. God, at least for us, remains the question.

And Shabbat Nachamu too has its place, together with the weeks that follow to Rosh Hashanah. Its message? Grasp these moments of comfort and consolation where you can, because tomorrow it all begins again.