



The Darkest Hour

*“The hearts of the people
cry out to the LORD.
You walls of Daughter Zion,
let your tears flow like a river
day and night;
give yourself no relief,
your eyes no rest.”—Lamentations 2:18*

This month, Jews worldwide will observe the darkest, most sorrowful day of the calendar. It was on this day, the ninth day of Av — *Tisha b’ Av* in Hebrew — that the First Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. and the Jewish people exiled to Babylon. Ironically, coincidentally, or providentially — however you choose to view it — the Second Temple was destroyed on this same day by the Romans in 70 AD.

Throughout the course of Jewish history, the day has been marked by other tragedies — the final revolt against the Romans was crushed in 135 C.E.; the expulsion of the Jews from Spain was decreed in 1492; and in 1942, on this day, the Nazis began deporting Jews from Poland’s Warsaw Ghetto to the death camps. *Tisha b’Av* has come to embody all the experiences of suffering that the Jewish people have endured over the centuries.

During the three weeks leading up to *Tisha b’Av*, Jews refrain from eating meat, drinking wine, or wearing new clothes. No celebrations, such as weddings, are allowed during this time. And on the day itself, which begins with a fast, we spend sitting on stools, or the floor, in the synagogue reading from the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah’s heart-wrenching lament after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. The various customs and laws surrounding this observance are designed to create within us the same kind of solemn mood experienced by someone mourning the death of a close family member. We are to vicariously feel the depth of grief and sadness that has marked this day throughout history.

In Jerusalem, thousands go to the Western Wall to pray and read Lamentations. My wife and I will join hundreds others in a place overlooking the Western Wall and the Old City, and we’ll pray and read together. There is a real sense of community, of shared history in being together on that day.

And I believe we gain strength in our own faith and are encouraged to look toward the future with hope by being in community. We remember the words of Jeremiah, also found in Lamentations that speak to a brighter future because of these comforting words: *“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”* (Lamentations 3:21–23).

We, as a people, are reminded once again on *Tisha b’Av*, that although our beloved Israel remains under the constant threat of war and destruction, we should not despair. God has delivered His people in the past, and He will do so again, I believe, with the help and support of our Christian friends.



Thanking God for Broken Things

A psalm of Asaph.

*O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. — Psalm 79:1*

This month, Jews around the world mourn the loss of the Temples in Jerusalem on *Tisha B'Av*, the ninth of the Hebrew month *Av*, the darkest day of the year in Judaism. Psalm 79 speaks to this tragedy, beginning with the words, “*A psalm of Asaph. O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance . . .*”

In Hebrew, the opening verse is literally translated “*A song of Asaph . . .*” The Jewish sages question why this psalm is called a “song.” They say that it seems it should have been prefaced as “*A lamentation of Asaph . . .*” given the somber tone of the psalm.

The rabbis then give us the following analogy to explain the destruction of the Temples, which will help us understand why this psalm is indeed a song and not merely a lamentation.

Imagine an artist is standing on a high cliff painting a huge magnificent masterpiece of the canyon below him. He has been painting for days – really putting his heart and soul into the painting – when a friend comes by to see how he is doing. The friend comes close to the painting and says how beautiful it is. But the artist suggests that the friend take a few steps back so that he can really appreciate the painting. The painting is so large that it cannot be fully grasped up close.

The friend steps backward, and then takes a few more steps, and then a few more. The artist starts to call out that there is a cliff behind his friend, but the friend doesn't hear and thinks the artist is telling him to go back even further. As he nears the edge of the cliff, the artist waves frantically, trying to get his friend to stop walking. Finally, with no choice, he takes his masterpiece and smashes it. That finally gets the friend's attention and brings him back from the brink of death.

Similarly, when God destroyed the Temple, His masterpiece, it was a sacrifice He made in order to save His people. Really, the Israelites deserved to be destroyed, but God took out his anger on the wood and stones of the Temple, sparing the people, and finally getting their attention. It was an act of great mercy and love, which ultimately resulted in the people repenting.

The lesson for us is never to get too upset when physical things in our lives get broken and destroyed. We need to remember that often what looks like a disaster has spared us from something worse. Instead of harming us, God may choose to hurt our possessions instead. Next time a vase falls or the car breaks down, thank God that it's only something material that He has taken. Pay attention to Him and praise Him!



Comfort My People

*Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.* — Isaiah 40:1

At age 109, Alice Herz-Sommer is the world's oldest Holocaust survivor. Her secret to life? "I see beauty everywhere." An interviewer asked her, "What is the secret of you feeling so good at your age?" Alice answered, "Optimism . . . Look for the good. Life is beautiful, extremely beautiful . . . We have to be thankful that we are living. I know about the bad things, but I look only for the good things."

This week's reading from is not connected to the *Torah* reading like the others. Instead, it is connected to the time period on the Jewish calendar at this time of year. This *Haftarah* is always read on the Sabbath following *Tisha B'Av* – the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av – the darkest day of the Jewish year.

On *Tisha B'Av*, many tragedies befell the Jewish people. The First and Second Temples were destroyed, centuries apart; the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492; and World War I broke out on this day, which led directly to the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust. This day is for remembering all these tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people and for crying out to God. It is a day of tears.

The very next day, however, we begin to heal. We do this by drawing closer to God, improving ourselves, and by focusing on the blessings in our lives. The *Haftarah* that we read days after *Tisha B'Av* begins, "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*" The time for hurting has ended. The time for healing has begun.

The Sages wonder why the word "comfort" is used twice. Wouldn't it have been enough to use the word once? One possible answer is that whenever a word is repeated in Scripture, it's to stress the importance of that word. In this case, the repetition of "comfort" tells us that we are commanded to be comforted. This isn't just a suggestion – it's a requirement!

Sometimes when we experience tragedy, we find it hard to get past our misery. Some people wallow in their pain way too long. This is not only unhealthy, but it's also not what God wants for our souls. God wants us to heal and to be comforted. But we have to be willing to move on.

Alice Herz-Sommer experienced the greatest tragedy of our times. She witnessed terrible atrocities and lived through some of the darkest days that this world ever saw. Yet, when the time came, she moved on. She chose to see the good and the beauty in life. She chose to be grateful for her blessings. She chose life.

Comfort, comfort my people. This is what God wants for us. It's time to heal all our brokenness and focus on our blessings. This isn't just a nice option; it's our divine duty.



Speak On Jerusalem

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins. — Isaiah 40:2*

Following *Tisha B'Av*, on which we mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and all other tragedies, we begin our journey toward the High Holy Days. To that end, the *Torah* readings for the next seven weeks are called “The Seven Comfortings,” and all contain messages of comfort and encouragement for the nation of Israel.

Appropriately, this week's reading begins “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God*” (Isaiah 40:1). The next verse begins, “*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .*” However, the literal translation of the original Hebrew actually reads, “*Speak on (the heart of) Jerusalem.*”

Is this a grammatical mistake? In Hebrew, the words “to” and “on” are nearly identical, and indeed, most understand this verse as speaking *to* Jerusalem, not *on* Jerusalem. However, we can learn an extremely important and relevant lesson by taking the words at face value.

Perhaps the prophet is encouraging us to speak *about* Jerusalem, “on Jerusalem.” Let Jerusalem and Israel be the topic of conversation. Let us spread the truth about Israel as well as the needs of Israel. In this way, we comfort God's people greatly.

I can't tell you how many times I have spoken to individuals receiving aid from *The Fellowship* who have said these words to me, “Christians around the world know about us? They care about us? They are providing us with this support?”

So many Jews in Israel, and around the world for that matter, are shocked to know that they are the topic of conversation and concern for many Christians. Their initial surprise melts into comfort and gratitude. Especially in Israel, where much of the world attempts to isolate and vilify us, it is extremely comforting to this war-torn nation to know that there are those who care about us, who stand up for Israel, who provide lifesaving aid to Israel, and who speak the truth about Israel. Sometimes I am left wondering which was the greater gift — the physical support provided by *The Fellowship* or the emotional gift that comes in the form of a virtual hug from a stranger across the globe?

Friends, I invite you to join us in fulfilling the words in this verse. Together, we can comfort God's people. Let's talk about the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Israel who need our help at this time. Let's pray for the peace of Jerusalem and let's speak up for Jerusalem, letting it be known that she is the eternal capital of the Jewish state.



Never Forgotten

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me.’ ‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!’”—Isaiah 49:14–15

Imagine being a young Jew in Europe during the late 1800s. The Holocaust has not happened yet, but pogroms, blood libels, and poverty abound. Life is tough for the Jewish people without a secure homeland. You have read the Bible and learned with the rabbis. You are told that somewhere in the Middle East there is a place for the Jews. You are told about how the Jews once flourished there until they were exiled.

You are promised that someday the Jews will return, and you pray daily for redemption. But it has been 2,000 years. For two millennia Jews have been asking to return to their homeland, and yet, they still are in exile. Is there hope? Will it ever happen? In your darkest hours, you wonder, “Has God forgotten us?”

This Bible verse is the second of seven portions of Scripture that are read between *Tisha B’av*, the day that commemorates a series of tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history, and the High Holy Days, beginning with *Rosh Hashanah*. Appropriately, these readings are called “The Seven Comforts.” They are selections from the prophets that speak about better times for the Jewish people, and they are designed to bring the people from the despair of *Tisha B’av* to the salvation and redemption of *Yom Kippur*.

We read, “*The LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me.*” Just as the Jews must have wondered during the long exile before the miraculous rebirth of Israel, they then wondered if God had forgotten them.

Can you relate? Sometimes we pray and pray for something, and our prayers seem unanswered. When will I find a job? When will we be blessed with children? Sometimes the wait is so long that we feel forgotten. But our Father in Heaven never forgets.

The very next verse reads, “*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast?*” It’s almost impossible for a mother to forget about her dear, precious child. God is just as attentive to us and more so: “*Though she may forget, I will not forget you!*” Even if those closest to us abandon us, God will never forget us. We are His children, His loved ones. We are never forgotten!

Next time you or someone you know thinks that God has forgotten them, read Isaiah 51:3, “*Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.*” After 2,000 years of waiting, God’s promises have been fulfilled in our times. There is joy and singing in Jerusalem once again, just as the prophets promised. Though their wait was long, God never forgot His children, the Jewish people, and He will never, ever forget you.



Clear the Way for God

A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare

the way for the LORD;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.” — Isaiah 40:3–4

We continue with the seven weeks of readings known as “The Seven Comforts.” These portions are read between *Tisha B’Av*, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, and *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. *Tisha B’Av* recounts all the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people and to ourselves as individuals, and these seven readings from the book of Isaiah urge us to move forward, repent, and heal.

With some of the most well-known words of the Bible, the reading begins: “*Comfort, comfort, my people . . .*” (Isaiah 40:1). Two verses later we read: “*A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”* The Jewish sages ask: Whose voice is calling? And what is the message?

One opinion suggests it is the soft, still voice within us that urges us to come closer to God. In Judaism, the desert often symbolizes a place devoid of godliness. On the other hand, the Bible (God’s Word) is compared to water – waters that give life and bring about fruition. A desert results when God’s life-giving waters are not present. Any time we turn away from God or act in sinful ways, we are walking into a spiritual desert.

However, God loves us too much to let us go without a word. It’s as if He calls out to us, “Don’t shut me out! Make space for Me in your life!” Specifically, God says: “*prepare the way*” and “*make straight . . . a highway.*” If we want God in our lives, we have to make a way for Him to enter.

When we want to create a physical path, it requires us to move obstacles out of the way. We have to clear any impediments that block the path. The same is true when we want to get closer to God. We have to get rid of anything that stands in the way. We need to weed out damaging behaviors and roll away inappropriate thoughts.

If we want to turn that path into a highway – one that can be traveled easily and quickly – we need to straighten it out so that we aren’t slowed down by the twists and turns in the road. Bridges are built over valleys and tunnels are bored through mountains to allow roads to advance smoothly. Similarly, when we want to have the ease of access to our God, we need to straighten out our paths. Where do we stray? Where do we navigate down roads we shouldn’t travel? We need to straighten out how we live so that God can work miracles in our lives.

Today, let’s make our paths a little straighter. Clear the way for God, and He will make a way for you.



The Lord Will Be My Light

*“Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the word of his servant?
Let the one who walks in the dark,
who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on their God.
But now, all you who light fires
and provide yourselves with flaming torches,
go, walk in the light of your fires
and of the torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand:
You will lie down in torment.” — Isaiah 50:10–11*

The Torah portion for this week is Eikev, which means “therefore” or “heel,” from Deuteronomy 7:12–11:25, and the Haftorah is from Isaiah 49:14–51:3.

We look at another of the seven readings intended to comfort Israel during this time of mourning and reflection that begins with *Tisha B’Av* and ends with *Rosh Hashanah*. In this reading from the book of Isaiah, the prophet reassured the people that God had neither forsaken nor forgotten them. He affirmed that although the situation looked bleak as they were in exile, everything would turn out right in the end. God would bring them back to Israel and the nation would be restored.

Toward the end of the reading, Isaiah called on Israel to have faith. He proclaimed, *“Who among you fears the LORD . . . Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD, and rely on their God.”*

This reminds me of another time in Jewish history. During the time of the Maccabees, the heroes of the Hanukkah story, there were those in Israel who trusted in God and there were those who sided with the Greek oppressors. The second group of Israelites embraced the Greek culture, although it contradicted the Word of God, and considered themselves “enlightened.” They had Greek art, philosophy, mathematics, and science. Who needed the Word of God?

Mattityahu, the head of the Maccabees, issued this cry: “Whoever is for God come to me!” The time had come to make a choice. Times were dark in Israel. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Who would save them? Would it be God? Would they have faith in Him and trust Him to be their light leading them through the darkness? Or would they side with the Greeks, trusting in that which they could see, instead of having faith in He who is hidden?

The reward of those who sided with the Maccabees is that God led them to victory. The few defeated the many; the weak defeated the mighty. As an additional gift, God took the tiny flask of oil that the Maccabees found in the Temple, and while that light should have only lasted one day, it burned for eight nights until new oil was ready. God was demonstrating that those who let Him be their light will be blessed with everlasting light!

When we go through darkness in our lives, we may be tempted to go against the Word of God. But the prophet continued and wrote that those who made their own torches – their own source of light instead of trusting the light of God – would not succeed.

So let’s establish God as our guiding light today. Make these your verses to live by today: *“Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light”* (Micah 7:8), and *“The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?”* (Psalm 27:1).



Grow Your Heart

*“Enlarge the place of your tent,
stretch your tent curtains wide,
do not hold back;
lengthen your cords,
strengthen your stakes.” — Isaiah 54:2*

As we move toward the High Holy Days, we engage in intense introspection. Our verse helps us do that, but perhaps not in the way you make think: *“Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.”*

On the surface, the prophet Isaiah was speaking to Jerusalem. His message was that the exile was coming to an end, her children were coming home, and she needed to prepare and make room for them. However, an alternate reading suggested by the rabbis is that the verse is speaking to us.

During this time of self-reflection, it’s as if the prophet is addressing us all and encouraging us to *“Enlarge!”* We need to use this time to grow, expand, and become bigger and greater than ever before. Another understanding of this verse is that the prophet is encouraging us to enlarge our homes, expand our minds, and lengthen the cords of our hearts. The greatest thing that we can do to become better people is to extend kindness to others.

Our homes need to be more open, providing hospitality and a place of nourishment — physically and spiritually — for others. Our minds need to expand so that we don’t only gravitate to those who are just like us, but that we have enough room for those who think differently than we do. We need to be able to consider other people’s perspective, becoming more tolerant, sympathetic, and understanding individuals. Finally, we need to grow our hearts larger and reach out our hands more often. We need to cultivate a love for humanity that propels us toward greater giving and caring, even for those we may not know personally.

It is told that years ago in Jerusalem, when people sat down to eat a meal, they would hang a tablecloth outside their homes. It was a sign to all that a meal was taking place in the home and that anyone was welcome to come inside and partake of the family’s food. Imagine if an entire city would observe this custom today! Imagine if the entire world would open up their homes in this way!

As we transition into the holiest time of the year, this reading delivers the message loud and clear that the way to live a life of holiness, connected to God, is to connect with His children. If we want to grow to our fullest potential, we need to begin by enlarging our homes, our minds, and our hearts.