

## D'var Torah Nidhe Israel

Vaetchanan and Shabbat Nachamu: “And I besought the LORD at that time, saying: O Lord GOD, Thou hast begun to show Thy servant Thy greatness, and Thy strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth, that can do according to Thy works, and according to Thy mighty acts?” (Deuteronomy 3:23/24).

This week is Shabbat Nachamu ("Sabbath of comfort/ing) which takes its name from the Haftarah which we shall read this coming Sabbath and of which title comes from the words written by Isaiah in chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah, that speaks of "comforting" the Jewish people for their suffering, “Nachamu, nachamu ami, Console, console my people...”. It is the first of seven Haftarot of consolation leading up to the Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

After the commemoration of the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples in Jerusalem we from this forthcoming week take on the mantle taken on by Jews throughout all of our history, dealing with sadness and then immediately looking forward to being joyous and expressing hope.

The actual Torah portion to be read this week is called Vaetchanan which is one of the most powerful portions in the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses continues to address the people of Israel, whilst he himself getting ready to die and accept his destiny. The name of the portion means ‘and I pleaded with God and imploring Him’. It also includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments and the verses of the Shema, the watchword of the Jewish faith.

There are at least two questions appertaining to this portion. The first could be: why was Moses so insistent for his people to keep the commandments when he himself had a huge dispute going on with God which started when he was originally asked to get his people out of Egypt. Many parashot focus on the battles he had with God where he was often judge, jury and intermediary in respect of the relationship of his people and God.

The second question might be: What did Moses mean by telling the Children of Israel that if They kept God's laws they would be different to others? Different how and why? In the parasha Moses communicates an unshakeable certainty that what has happened to them would eventually change and inspire the world. This was not about being chosen or indeed actually different, but about ensuring that the Children of Israel who even through their numerous quarrels and disagreements and in-fighting nevertheless many and over centuries try to remain ethical, direct, emanating optimism.

The words are very powerful:

“.... Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by miracles, signs and wonders, .....?” (Deut. 4:32-34)

Moses was convinced that Jewish history was, and would remain unique. In an age of empires, a small, defenceless group had been liberated from the greatest empire of all by a power not their own, but by God himself. That was Moses'

first point: the singularity of Jewish history as a narrative of redemption.

His second was the uniqueness of the revelation. We are not just another ethnic minority. We are the people who predicated freedom by teaching our children to love, not hate. Ours is the faith that speaks of responsibilities long before it spoke of rights.

It is therefore important for us to derive from this portion and from the fact that we are reading the Haftarah of Nachamu that hope replaces desperation, needing to ensure our belief in God and that humanity is essentially good, kind and creative, able to overcome and lead us to victory even in the face of most difficult times... in a way, as if we were reading a children's story, where good always wins over evil. It is as said at the beginning of this brief address able and wanting to be "dealing with sadness and then immediately looking forward to being joyous and expressing hope.

Shabbat Shalom  
B'Shalom  
Rabbi Thomas