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## Parshat Va'etchanan Shabbat Nachamu Finding Comfort in Closeness Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter Class of 2016

Just a few days ago, many of us found ourselves seated on the floor in darkened rooms listening to the haunting melody of *Eichah*. Tisha B'Av, the day of mourning serving as the culmination of a three-week period of mourning and fasting for the loss of our sacred Temples, is meant to produce deep feelings of grief within us, ultimately driving us to rise from the ashes with an awakening that the status quo is not enough--that we can and *must* do better with each other. We emerge with an awareness that we are farther than we'd like to be from God, and we lament this distance and yearn for closeness. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in his work *Alei Shur*, describes that Tisha B'av's essence is that it is a *Moed Shel Richuk*--a holiday of distance. While the holidays of Tishrei draw us closer to God, the three weeks mark a period of intentional distance.

We stand at the edge of Shabbat Nachamu remarkably distant from God. We *want* to hear the words of the prophet Isaiah--*Nachamu Nachamu Ami*--a call for the nation to be comforted and for us to draw close again, to resume a healthy intimate contact with the Divine. It is challenging, however, to imagine this reunification. How do I get close after such a rupture? How do I find comfort when God is so distant? This question is further intensified as we read Parshat Va'Etchanan this Shabbat. Moshe Rabbenu tells us in a verse that we recite regularly before reading from the Torah:

*You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the LORD your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor; while you, who held fast the LORD your God, are all alive today.*

עֵינֵיכֶם הִרְאִיתֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּבַעַל  
פְּעֹר כִּי כָל-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הִלֵּךְ אַחֲרָי  
בְּעַל-פְּעֹר הִשְׁמִידוּ יְהוָה אֶלְהֵיךָ מִקִּרְבְּךָ:  
וְאַתֶּם הַדֹּבְקִים בִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כְּלַעַם  
הַיּוֹם:

Here, we explicitly are called to draw close to God. So close that we are almost stuck together. I've always been drawn to this concept of *deveikut*, of cleaving or *deep closeness* to God. There is so much texture in the ways that Chazal understand this concept of *cleaving*. Of course, one can try to understand it in its simple meaning, but many classical commentaries take a metaphoric path. Both the Rambam (Hilchot Deot 6:2) and the Ramban (Ramban Al Hatorah, Devarim 6:13) explain that cleaving to God is a commandment that can be fulfilled by staying close to and supporting Torah scholars. The Gemara in Sotah 14a, however, asks: is it really possible to follow after God? Isn't God described as an *Esh Ochla*, an all-consuming fire that one is unable to approach? No, the Talmud explains. To cleave and the follow God means to **model oneself after the Divine**. Just as God visits the sick, so too we visit the sick. Just as God buries the dead, so too, we bury the dead. *Deveikut*, according to the understanding in Masechet Sotah, means a constant awareness of how we model God's characteristics in our lives. When we want to draw close to Hashem, we look at the way Hashem has been compassionate, and we act in that very manner, hoping it will bring us closer.

On Monday August 7, 2017, we are given the gift of the holiday of Tu B'av (the fifteenth of Av), which the Mishna in Taanit (4:8) records in the following way:

*There were no happier days for the people of Israel than the Fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, since on these days the daughters of Israel/Jerusalem go out dressed in white and dance in the vineyards. What were they saying: Young man, consider whom you choose (to be your wife)?*

The Talmud offers several reasons for the joyous nature of Tu B'av, but one of the most striking ones is that the he Biblical "tribes of Israel were permitted to mingle with each other," namely: to marry women from other tribes (Taanit 30b). Furthermore, the simple white garb the women wore was intended to minimize the importance of socio-economic status in finding a mate. A theme that stretches across this holiday are the possibilities of romantic love, and this is also part of the holiday's modern resurgence into popular observance. It is framed as an exciting day: An auspicious day to have weddings and a popular day for singles events (and dating app promotions--the modern day equivalent of field-dancing) across the Jewish world. The day has become a celebration of the way human beings love one another, and how the expressions of that love can transcend traditional boundaries.

We are faced with a giant boundary after Tisha B'av: the distance between ourselves and Hashem and the challenge of *dveikut*, of being able to draw close. Tu B'av, however, is an invitation to mimic the type of love that we want to be manifest in our relationship with God. If we take a step back, and ask what we're *really* doing on Tu B'Av, whether we're planning the singles event or we're attending one: We are demonstrating how fulfilled and loving human relationships can be an expression of *dveikut*, of modeling the closeness we want God to show to us.

In the next seven weeks, we will read the seven Haftarot of consolation as we approach Rosh HaShanah. Right now, we may still feel far away from the Holy One, and we need to be brought back slowly and gradually. Tu B'av is the day we get a taste of what we are drawing towards--a relationship with Hashem characterized by deep closeness, reciprocity, and love.



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