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Shabbat Nachamu
July 27, 2007
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
In memoriam Rabbi Carole Meyers, Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine

Nachamu, nachamu, My people! Says your God [Isaiah 40:1, beginning of Haftarah for Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath after Tisha B'Av

"They" say that this haftarah was chosen to come on this week in particular – this Shabbat after Tisha b'Av, after the day of communal mourning for all the losses the Jews as a people have suffered. Chosen to come to us this day for its opening words – words that give name to this special Shabbat – Shabbat Nachamu.

Nachamu, nachamu, My people! Comfort, comfort, My people says God – suggesting that the days of mourning are over, that the seven weeks to come until Rosh Hashanah will carry us up off the ground, out from our grief and mourning and toward the renewed relationship with people, with God, with Judaism promised by the Days of Awe.

But I think it has more to do with a verse a few lines later: The Presence of God shall appear
And all flesh, as one, shall behold—
For God's own mouth has spoken:
V'niglah k'vod Adonai--
V'ra'u khol-basar yakhdav –
Ki pi-Adonai dibeir
[Isaiah 40:5]

Why this verse? Because it speaks to a concern of our Torah portion – va'etkhanan – an insistence by Moses and God that at Mt. Sinai "we heard the sound of words, but perceived no shape – nothing but voice." [Deut. 4:12]

Last night at Torah study we talked about this verse: How does one know if we hear God's voice? Or see God, for that matter? Those of us who have sensed God's presence – either always in our lives, or some time – at some profound moment – believe it – believe that it was God's presence presenting to us somehow, some way – in words we heard, in events that followed, in a feeling in our stomachs or hearts or heads. But how do we know that's God's presence, and does that mean that those of us who perceive no such presence are bereft? Deprived of God by God? Those of us who deny the existence of God – can God deny us too? Do we not sense God's presence because God is hiding from us or because God is not there?

I need Nachamu, nachamu this week – still grieving over the death of my Aunt Harriet last week (at 98, she was the last of her generation), yesterday I learned of a sadder death, my friend and study partner, Rabbi Carole Meyers, died yesterday of cancer, diagnosed only 10 weeks ago. She was only 50 and leaves behind a husband and two young sons.

And this morning I learned of the death of an early BCC member, Michael Ben-Levi, also of cancer. And last Shabbat another rabbi died, someone I never met, even though - as I just learned (from his obituary) – he was gay. I live in such a bubble I still think I at least know of all the gay rabbis. Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, sadly killed in a car accident in Morocco, was 79 years old, his partner, Richard McMains, was injured in the crash as well. If you've heard the name Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine it is almost certainly because he was the founder, in the 1960s, of The Society for Humanist Judaism, and

even appeared on the cover of Time magazine as "The Atheist Rabbi." He coined the term "ignostic" – with an I-G – "to denote a type of atheist who suspends belief in divinity until it can be empirically proven. Humanistic Jews instead place their faith in the power of people to solve problems and shape the world." [from Elaine Woo's LA Times Obituary, Thursday July 26, 2007, p.B8]

If that's the definition of humanistic Judaism – "people who place their faith in the power of people to solve problems and shape the world," then, even though I believe in God, I think I'm also a Humanistic Jew. I would guess most of us are.

And maybe we should at least occasionally – on the occasion of Rabbi Wine's death at least – introduce some of his writings into our services. For example, instead of another verse from this week's Torah portion, v'ahavta et Adonai elohekha You shall love Adonai your God, the reading in Rabbi Wine's Friday night book says, "You shall love the best in man," okay, I'd change it a little – "you shall love the best in human beings."

In 2001, months before 9/11, Rabbi Carole Meyers made a huge change in her life. In an article that BCC's own Ellen Jaffe-Gill wrote about Rabbi Meyers in the Jewish Journal, Carole gave "up a job she loves — rabbi of Temple Sinai in Glendale — to devote the bulk of her time to another job she loves, being mom to her two sons: Joe [, 8,] and Gus [, 3]."

The boys are now 14 and 10 as they bid farewell to their mother. One of my other colleagues / teachers once told a group of rabbinical students that in all his years as a rabbi, all the deathbeds he had sat by, he had never once heard a person say, "I wish I'd spent more time at my job." Carole had only 6 short years to spend more time with her family, but she did so with incredible devotion, and managed that way too not to leave Judaism behind. She remained a teacher and leader in the Jewish community.

Ironically, in that same interview with Ellen Jaffe-Gill, Carole tells us that She "lived and breathed" Jewish communal life from childhood, she said, and became interested in the rabbinate after her father died when she was 13 and her stepfather died when she was 19.

"What really convinced me that I wanted to enter the rabbinate was the combination of community support and the precious nature of the rituals involved in grieving, which saved my life," she said. "And I knew at a very young age that I could do that with people and for other people, and help them through."

Accordingly, she said, "That's been a big part of my rabbinate: reinvigorating the observance of shiva, teaching the critical importance of attendance at shiva minyans, helping people understand that they are mourners for close to a year, and urging people to take advantage of that time to do the grief work that they need to do in order to come fully back to life."

Sounds kind of humanistic, doesn't it? "community support," "the precious nature of the rituals," the awareness and insistence on people being there for one another, and also allowing one another the "time to do the grief work that they need to do in order to come fully back to life."

In our haftarah, one verse after God says, nachamu, comfort, comfort O My people, Isaiah tells us: Kol Korei – a voice rings out

And what voice is this? ask the commentators.

Rashi says it was the Holy Spirit

Ibn Ezra says "it was the voice of the messengers" [See Etz Hayim commentary p.1033 note 3,6]

Divine or human, this week I believe their words, and at the last take some comfort in their sobering proclamation:
Kol ameir k'ra A voice rings out: "Proclaim!"
V'amar mah ekra? Another asks, 'What shall I proclaim?"
[And a voice answers:]
All flesh is grass,
All its goodness like flowers of the field:
Grass withers, flowers fade
When the breath of God blows upon them.
Indeed, humans are like grass:
Grass withers, flowers fade—
But the word of our God lasts forever. [Is. 40:6-8]

Perhaps – with or without empirical evidence – the message of the portion and of this week and of these marvelous lives we've just now lost is just that the words some of us attribute to God – about how we are to live as human beings, how we are to comfort one another in our griefs and how we are to join together in community to better this world – perhaps the message is simply that these words of God will last forever - so long as we bring them to life by living them, by doing them, in the company of one another.

And I take some comfort too in the words Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine used to end the eulogies he wrote for countless Jews over the several decades of his rabbinate:
"Zay-kher tsad-deek-keem lee-v'ra-kha -
The memory of good people blesses us." ***1.***

Shabbat shalom

Note: Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine's "Meditation Services for Humanistic Judaism" (published in 1976) he wrote: "The past is unchangeable. What happened yesterday is beyond our control. We can cry and shout. We can scream and complain. But the events of just a moment ago are as far from our reach as the farthest star. The fool never forgives the past. He devotes every present moment to worrying about it, scolding it, and wishing it were different. The wise person releases the past. He does not need to assault what cannot be altered. He simply accepts what he is not able to change. Since the future is open to human decision, he turns his energies forward and chooses to create rather than to regret.... "People of self-respect do not dwell on helplessness. They do not arrange to be impotent. Since the past is dead, they bury it and turn to the living."

1. In the words of Sherwin's 'Siddur' from rabbi Hillel Cohn's azkara for him on HUCALUM