

Vaetchanan - Shabbat Nachamu

By Dr Annette M. Boeckler

The writing on the Torah Shrine:

Comfort Ye My People! Nachamu! This shabbat is named after its Haftarah and it always follows Tisha beAv. Shabbat Nachamu brings us back to life and torah and opens a series of 7 Haftarat of Consolation (Shiva deNehemta) leading up to Rosh haShana. The curtains, cloths, and ornaments, removed for 9 Av, are now back for those of us who meet in synagogue buildings. I'd like to focus your attention to the very piece of furniture in which we keep the foundation document of Judaism: the torah shrine, the ark, or aron haChodesh.

If you had to choose one phrase to write onto an ark or above it, what would you like to have in front of your eyes the whole time while sitting in shul? Many arks feature: "ידע לפני מי אתה עומד" "Know in front of whom you stand" (cf. Ber 28b plural, vgl. Avot 2:19) with עמל to create an awareness of God to be able to pray with awe and concentration.

I know three unique torah shrines featuring a very uncommon phrase. They are in the room of prayer in Leo Baeck College, in Belsize Square Synagogue, and in the Liberale Joodse Gemeente in Amsterdam. It is no coincidence that these three place share an unusual ark quote: "ודבר אלהינו יקום לעולם" - "But the word of our God will stand forever".

This quotes deliberately from this week's Haftara Nachamu, Isaiah 40:8. All the three mentioned places were founded by refugees from Nazi Germany. What must have been their feelings commemorating Tisha beAv in 1939 and later, images of destroyed "temples" dominating their minds (many synagogues in Germany were indeed called "temple")? The words that this generation chose to write on their ark was not the common "Know in front of whom you stand"—many will have had more doubts about this than knowledge. Instead they quoted from Haftara "Nachamu": "But the word of our God will stand forever". As our Haftarah puts it poetically: "All flesh is grass, all its goodness like flowers of the field: Grass withers, flowers fade ... ודבר אלהינו יקום לעולם but our God's word (or thing or issue) will stand forever." Judaism will not be destroyed. This looks forward, not backwards, and also leads to the tasks, that this week's torah portion formulates: to teach Judaism to our children, to have Jewish values in our hearts and thoughts and on our doorposts.

May this shabbat reaffirm our Jewish identity, to teach this and to live this hope and confidence and to slowly get prepared, full of comfort and trust, for Rosh HaShana and this year's High Holiday season.

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