

Ever since *Tish'ah B'Av*, seven weeks ago, we have been building toward this moment. We spent three weeks hearing gloom and doom, then we commemorated a day of repeated tragedy in our long history. Then, we emerged, if not unscathed, then at least alive enough to receive comfort. These last six weeks, the words of the haftarah have been prophetic efforts at reassurance. Sometimes we struggled to appreciate the sentiment, as in, "Zion says, 'The LORD has forsaken me'" (Isaiah 49:14), or "Unhappy, storm-tossed one, uncomforted!" (Isaiah 54:11). But the prophet was persistent, and this week the haftarah is the culmination of a journey toward comfort.

In this haftarah for *Nitzavim*, we find three powerful images of rebirth, all of which are cause for celebration. Rabbi Laura Geller wrote of these images in an essay in *The Women's Haftarah Commentary*. Firstly, there's the image of new clothes. "I greatly rejoice in the LORD/My whole being exults in my God/For He has clothed me with garments of triumph/Wrapped me in a robe of victory/Like a bridegroom adorned with a turban/Like a bride bedecked with her finery" (Isaiah 61:10). Consider the beauty of this image. "This is 'power dressing' at its best, yet with a loving, intimate touch," Rabbi Geller writes. "God is fixing our hair, adjusting our dress, wrapping us in beautiful clothes, and fussing over us to help us look our best" (p. 240). The combination of power and intimacy in God's giving us new clothes—that's a strong dose of comfort.

The second image is that of a new name. "And you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow... 'Forsaken' and 'Desolate' give way to 'My Delight is Her' and 'Married'; the people Israel will be called "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD," and Jerusalem will be called "Sought Out, a City Not Forsaken" (62:2, 4, 12). We know the power of a name change in the Bible—think of Avram to Avraham, Sarai to Sarah, and Ya'akov to Yisrael. In each case, the new name means a new, intensified relationship with God. As Rabbi Geller notes, "In our haftarah, the name comes from God's own mouth, like a kiss." Again, power and intimacy.

The third image is perhaps the most intimate. "As a youth espouses a maiden/Your sons shall espouse you/And as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride/So will your God rejoice over you" (62:5). The Hebrew word *yiv'al*, here translated as espouses, could mean either "marry" or have "intercourse with." Can't get more intimate than that! Of course, in the proper, sanctified relationship, that act is known as "making love." The exclusivity, holiness, and intimacy of this love is so cherished by our tradition that the phrase is part of *Lekha Dodi*.

It is only fitting that these three images—new clothes, new name, new or renewed love—always ring in our ears on the final Shabbat of the Jewish year. They are meant to serve as a challenge and inspiration. We may not get these directly from God as the prophet imagines, but the tradition affords us an opportunity for renewal through these and other vehicles.

Here's a personal example. It seems comical in retrospect that I bought new dress shirts and ties in late February, just in time to have no good reason to wear them. The good news is that my dry-cleaning bill is way down since COVID times began. But Rosh Hashanah gives me, and all of us, an excuse to dress up again, to remove the plastic cover from the shirt that sits idle in my closet. Even if we will be connecting to services virtually, sanctify the occasion with dignified dress. Hey, you may even want to buy something new to wear for the holidays. Renewal is good for the soul, and you know that when you wear a new piece of clothing for the first time, it's reason to say *Shehehiyanu*!

It's also a good season to strive for a new name—not literally, of course. Ask yourself: What three words best described you in 5780? Maybe you can add a new word, or swap one in for a word you would rather not be known by? And what of the loves in your life, like your partner, other family members? How can those relationships be renewed? No doubt we can all benefit from some renewal as we exit this year. What shape will your renewal take?

The final haftarah of the year reminds us that God loves us enough to dress us, give us new names, and show us intimacy. I find those words comforting, and much needed at this time of year. Especially this year. Renewal is within reach. God will help us. That is cause for rejoicing!

Shabbat Shalom!