

A Place Among the Mourners of Zion*

DANIEL S. NEVINS



1

Stepping back from the grave of my mother, I accepted words that I have often offered to others: *Hamakom yinaheim ethem b'tokh sha'ar aveilei tzion viyerushalaim, May God [literally, the Place] comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.* Over the course of *shivah*, as this curious statement was repeated, I began to wonder about its origins. I knew that it wasn't a biblical verse, nor was the expression found in the Talmud or Midrash. A comprehensive search revealed that this common expression of comfort is not found even in medieval codes or commentaries. Reference books on mourning rituals such as *Gesher Ha-hayyim* and *Kol Bo Al Aveilut* do not address its origins. Rabbi Shmuel Glick traces the development of bereavement customs from talmudic until modern times. Words of comfort were meant to convince the mourner to accept God's justice, and also to ease his suffering. Yet our expression was not among the traditional formulae used for these purposes.¹ Professor Daniel Sperber's seven volume study of Jewish customs is silent about the phrase, and it is not part of Sephardic custom at all. Where does it come from, and what does it mean?

* Dedicated in loving memory to my mother and teacher, Phyllis B. Nevins, Pesya bat Yitzhak Halevi v'Rachel, May her memory endure for eternal blessing.

The closest we get to a biblical source is Isaiah 61:2. Here the prophet announces his mission *to comfort all who mourn, to provide for the mourners of Zion, to give them a turban instead of ashes*. . . . In this message of national restoration, the prophet of exile envisions a return to Zion and the rebuilding of her ruined cities. Isaiah's image of redemption is comforting in the grand scheme of history, but what does it offer to a bereaved person who mourns for a parent, spouse, sibling or child? In the raw moments of burial and then *shivah*, what comfort is there in a millennial hope for the rebuilding of Zion? Moreover, why was this sentiment transformed and expanded into our familiar words of comfort?

In Mishnah Middot (2:2), we learn about an ancient Temple-era custom of comforting the mourners:

All who entered the Temple Mount came in on the right side, circled, and exited on the left side, except for one who had suffered a loss, who circled from the left. [Others] would ask him, "Why are you circling from the left?" "I am bereaved," [he would reply. They then said,] "May the One Who dwells in this house comfort you."

This custom is explained with variations in two other early rabbinic texts, Midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* (17), and the minor tractate of the Talmud, *Sofrim* (19:9). In both places, King Solomon is credited with having had Temple gates designated specially for grooms and mourners. On Shabbat, people would sit between these gates in order to congratulate the former and to comfort the latter. Thus was kindness integrated into the very architecture of God's house.

The midrash concludes, "Once the Temple was destroyed, the Sages decreed that bridegrooms and mourners should go to synagogues and houses of study. The local people would see the groom and rejoice with him. Seeing the mourner, they would sit on the ground with him so that all Israel would fulfill the obligation of kindness."² Yet what would the people say to mourners in the synagogue? Could the Temple-period expression, "May the One who dwells in this house comfort you" be employed in the synagogue or study hall? Does God dwell in our miniature sanctuaries?

This question is addressed in the fifteenth century *Sefer Maharil: Minhagim*, a compendium of German-Jewish customs written by Rabbi Jacob Moelin.³ He relates a debate within German Jewry about whether it is appropriate in synagogue to use the Temple-era expression, as some appar-

ently continued to do. Interpreting Deuteronomy 33:12, Moelin states that ever since the Temple was destroyed, God's presence has never dwelled anywhere else. If so, then it would seem inappropriate to say in synagogue, "May the One who dwells in this house comfort you."⁴ What then shall we say to the mourner? Rabbi Jacob Moelin cites in the name of his father, Rabbi Moses Moelin, that we say, *Hashem yinaḥemkha im sha'ar aveilei tzion*—*God shall comfort you with the other mourners of Zion*.

While this expression is not identical to ours, it is quite close. Rabbi Jacob ben Moses refers to God as "*ba'al haneḥamot, the Master of consolation*."⁵ At some point the phrase evolved further, opening with the divine appellation, *Hamakom* (the Place), perhaps influenced by the talmudic "*Hamakom yimalei ḥesronkha*—*May God fill your void*."⁶ To Zion was added its twin, Jerusalem, yielding our current usage. In a responsum written after the death of his father, Rabbi Eleazar ben David Fleckeles prays that God "shall comfort me among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."⁷ Thus, by the early nineteenth century, our standard expression of comfort has taken shape and become prevalent in Ashkenazi circles. But what, precisely, does it mean?

2

The few discussions of our phrase in rabbinic literature have addressed a technical problem with this practice. Following the example set by Job, Jewish law forbids one to speak to a mourner until he or she opens conversation. This allows the mourner to set the tone for the visit, and prevents visitors from rushing to fill the painful silence with inappropriate patter. Yet Jewish custom encourages us to offer this standard expression already as the mourners file between us at the grave. Why?

One unsatisfying answer is that the very act of walking away from the grave between two lines of friends may be viewed as an act of dialogue initiated by the mourner, thereby liberating his friends to start engaging him with words of comfort. Yet Rabbi Moshe Feinstein argues that walking from the grave is not a statement, nor is our expression the substance of comforting the bereaved, any more than is the talmudic era "may you be comforted from heaven."⁸ Rabbi Feinstein states that none of these formulae fulfill the mitzvah of *niḥum aveilim*. That mitzvah requires patience, to wait for the mourner to break the silence, and only then to speak to the heart until his spirit is stilled.⁹

If the expression *hamakom yinaheim etkhem* is not even fulfillment of the mitzvah of comforting the bereaved, then why do we offer it? One possibility is the power of the opening appellation for God, *HaMakom*, *the Place*. Jeremiah 13:17 makes an opaque statement that there is a hidden place of weeping due to the pride of Israel. In Talmud *Ḥagiga* 5b, Rav Shmuel ben Inya explains in the name of Rav that this is a hidden place within God. Rav Shmuel bar Yitzhak adds that there is weeping in this place over the lost glory of Israel. In a recent responsum, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg expands this thought, saying that hidden within God is a place of sorrow for the suffering and dispersion of the people Israel. Only when the exiles return and the pride of Israel is restored will God be comforted.¹⁰ Rabbi Michael Graetz suggests that *yinaheim* could plausibly be read as a passive *nifal*, and *etkhem* could be vocalized *itkhem*, yielding “*God shall be comforted together with you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*”¹¹

As it were, God projects a joyous exterior; yet within, God shares fully in the pain of Israel and refuses to be comforted until the time of redemption. In a similar fashion, the mourner harbors a secret place of sorrow in the heart, even when presenting a happy exterior to the world. This expression validates the enduring place of pain over the death and assures the mourner that God shares in his sorrow. This explanation is beautiful and compelling. It indicates that the mourner is joined in sorrow not only by the community of other human mourners, but even by God. If so, then our expression is not so much the substance of *niḥum aveilim*, the comforting of the mourner, as a *heiter aveilut*, permission to join the company of sorrow in heaven and on earth.

3

Having explored the origins and current explanations of our standard expression of consolation, I would like to offer several additional interpretations.

HaMakom—The Place

In Exodus 20:20, God instructs Moses that an earthen altar may be built “in the place (*hamakom*) where I shall mention my name.” Rashi explains that God gives the priests permission to enunciate God’s explicit name only

at the altar, i.e. the place where the *Shekhinah*, or divine presence, hovers. If so, “the place” refers not only to the locus of human worship but also to the divine presence summoned by our service.

“The Place” is frequently cited by the Rabbis in contexts where God’s *presence* is keenly felt. As a name for God, “the place” is invoked to console a person for the loss of property (Berakhot 16b), in thanksgiving for delectable food (Berakhot 40b), and to ask mercy for a patient to recover (Shabbat 12b). In the latter context, the Hebrew term “*hamakom*” is equated by Rabbi Elazar with the Aramaic “*rahmana*,” meaning Merciful One. Perhaps there is something particularly merciful about this description of God? It seems that to describe God as “the place” is to say that despite God’s transcendence and eternity, there is nevertheless a point of access at which a mortal, dependent, vulnerable human can address and even reach God. In other words, “the place” is God’s portal of prayer.

When the rabbis claim that Abraham established the morning service, they cite Genesis 19:27 for support: “Avraham rose early in the place (*hamakom*) where he stood there facing God.” Something about the place allows Abraham to connect with God. For Abraham, the place is not merely a physical site, but a point of connection to God.

This brings us back to the grave. The Rabbis are concerned that mourners will be tempted at the grave to deny the justice of God. For this reason we fill the cemetery with special prayers. We recite *tzidduk hadin* (the justification of God’s justice), tear a garment and praise God as the true Judge (if we haven’t already), and of course, recite the Kaddish, the ultimate affirmation of God’s greatness.

Yet perhaps this anxiety is misplaced. Perhaps the grave is “the place” where people become most aware of their dependence upon God. There in the cemetery, surrounded by mute testimony to human mortality, we are startled into recognition of our limited term on earth. Our prayers are intensified by this awareness, allowing us finally to recognize the words: *lekha Adonai hagedulah v’hagevurah v’hatiferet v’hanetzah v’hahod—Yours, O Lord, are greatness, might and glory, and triumph and beauty!*¹² This place, the cemetery, is a place of terrible power, and we have no alternative but to turn to God for comfort.

Yinacheim etkhem—shall comfort you

What does it mean to comfort a person? A beautiful demonstration is given by Joseph in the closing lines of Genesis. After the death of Jacob, his other sons fear that Joseph will exact revenge for their earlier betrayal. Joseph reassures his brothers, telling them not to fear, that he will provide for them and their children. *And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts* (50:21). Deutero-Isaiah echoes this sentiment in his famous proclamation, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people . . . speak to the heart of Jerusalem . . .” (40:1–2). The act of comforting requires recognition of the source of sorrow as well as an alternative emotional path.

This is a lesson that the brothers urgently require. Earlier in Genesis, Jacob’s sons presented him with false evidence of Joseph’s death, but he refused to be comforted. His children offered superficial and self-serving expressions of comfort, but he stated, *I will descend to the grave grieving for my son* (Genesis 37:35). For Jacob to have accepted their guilt-ridden expressions of sympathy would have been inappropriate, whether or not he divined that Joseph was truly alive.¹³ To be comforted is to change one’s thinking from denial to acceptance. What the children presented to their devastated father as comfort was incomplete and unacceptable.

True expressions of comfort demand understanding of the nature of the sorrow. One who accepts comfort must agree to let go of a measure of anguish and accept the previously unthinkable new reality. The activity of comforting requires change within both the comforter and the comforted.

The most curious case of comfort comes yet earlier in the book of Genesis, when God apparently regrets creating humanity. In Hebrew, God’s regret is described strangely as comfort: *Vayinaheim Adonai ki asah et ha’adam ba’aretz, vayitatziv el libo—The Lord regretted having made Adam on earth, and it anguished His heart* (Genesis 6:5). This sentence is problematic on several levels. Does God experience regret?¹⁴ And, if so, why is God’s regret described as comfort? Rashi uses this verse to explain the phenomenon of comfort with great sensitivity:

Another explanation of *vayinaheim*—the thoughts of God reversed from the attribute of mercy to the attribute of justice. It rose in thought before Him what should be done with this

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Adam in the land. And so whenever the language of *niḥum* is used, it refers to reconsideration of what to do.

Rashi conveys us to the essence of comfort. To be comforted is to accept a different perspective, to release some of the pain and denial, and to come to grips with the new reality. Even God experiences this dynamic of response to the reality of flawed people, shifting between mercy and justice depending upon the situation. To be comforted is to discover an alternative option for a disappointing situation. So too must humans modulate their emotions after death from intensive grief to a form of sorrow that accepts memory in place of the physical presence of their loved one.

B'tokh sha'ar aveilei Zion viyerushalaim, Among the Other Mourners of Zion and Jerusalem

Now, who are they? Isaiah mentions them almost as if they are an organized group. Indeed, later in Jewish history, there emerged groups of mourners identified as *Avelei Zion*. After the Second Temple was destroyed, pious Jews would engage in excessive fasting in order to demonstrate their yearning for the restoration of Zion.¹⁵

Throughout the Middle Ages, there were Jewish groups in Jerusalem and across the diaspora who established ascetic societies of mourners. This stance was controversial, since the Talmud warns mourners not to grieve excessively. Moreover, some of these ascetics were apparently Karaites. Still, the practice persisted. There is a note of defensiveness in the 9th century Midrash *Pesikta Rabbati* (34) that explains that only because of the unending prayers and fasting of the mourners of Zion will the Messiah appear.” This midrash may reflect the pressure felt by *Avelei Zion* to moderate their mourning for the destruction of the Temple. Like Jacob, they refused to be comforted, even as others encouraged them to acclimate to the new reality.

In the special version of *Birkat Hamazon* said in a *shivah* house, we alter the paragraph “rebuild Jerusalem,” with an extended description of the mourners of Zion. Either these people who felt the national calamity so intensely came to be viewed as role models of what an ordinary mourner should experience, or perhaps our phrase developed as a warning to the mourner not to become like the “mourners of Zion,” a group that grieved

obsessively over the ancient destruction of Jerusalem. Jewish law viewed excessive mourning for the dead as unhealthy. Mourners returning from the cemetery are required to eat a *se'udat havra'ah*, revival meal, and to avoid the cemetery during the week of *shivah*.¹⁶ Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav warns not to mourn excessively. Three days were considered appropriate for intensive weeping, seven for eulogizing, and thirty for external signs of grief such as not grooming or ironing clothes.¹⁷

Perhaps the juxtaposition of “the place” comforting “the mourners of Zion” is itself a corrective. Do not focus your grief excessively on the physical site of the Temple. As Rav Ami teaches, God is the place of the world; the world is not the place of God.¹⁸ Likewise, you should not mourn without limit for the physical presence of the person you loved. The ultimate place, God’s *Shekhinah*, is the source of comfort at this very moment.

Betokh—In the Midst

Our expression of comfort reminds the mourner that he is “*betokh*”, in the midst, of others who grieve. Perhaps a hint is embedded in this simple word. After all, it is this word which serves as the key for determining the number ten as our quorum for prayer. In Berakhot 21b, we learn by *gezera shava*, a decree of equivalence, that Leviticus 22:32, *I shall be sanctified in the midst of Israel*, is to be read in light of Numbers 16:21, *separate from the midst of this evil group*. Just as it was ten there, so is it ten here. Matters of holiness, including the Kaddish, require a minyan. While it is true that only the mourner knows his own grief, this microcosm of Israel, this community of comfort, will allow him to escape isolation.

The requirement of minyan for the recitation of Kaddish is a mechanism to combat depression and endless sorrow. Community comes to the mourner, and then the mourner must seek out community, identifying him or herself as emotionally wounded by the loss. To stand in the midst of a congregation and recite Kaddish is to invite comfort and to embrace healing. If God is sanctified in the midst of Israel, then Israel is comforted in the presence of God.

Zion and Jerusalem

For much of the past twenty-five centuries, Jerusalem has been a symbol not of current glory, but of memory and yearning. While the city as we

know it is beautiful, it is not the Jerusalem of today which brings us repeatedly to its walls. To enter Jerusalem is to escape the ordinary bounds of time. Here the presence of past generations is keenly felt. Here the future redemption is experienced not as idle fantasy but as urgent desire. Jerusalem is a place where the present moment feels just like that—a fleeting idyll between *hurban v'tekumah*, destruction and reconstruction.

To link one's loss with Jerusalem is to proclaim the enduring power of the life lived by one's relative. While their body may be buried, their presence persists among the living, just as David and Solomon and all the ancient prophets and pilgrims of Israel are still experienced in modern Jerusalem. But this linkage also reflects a millennial perspective. Just as Judaism views Jerusalem as destined for renewed glory, so too does it offer faith in bodily resurrection, in the ultimate renewal of life.

To be comforted among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem is to expand one's consciousness beyond the bounds of the current painful moment. Reality is not only what we see and experience today. Reality includes the past and future. Our loved ones may seem out of reach, but if equipped with the proper perspective, we may yet feel their continued power of anchoring our past and guiding us toward a better future.

As a pulpit rabbi, and as a son, I have found burial to be the emotional tipping point. It is then that the finality of death is felt most powerfully. At that moment we are forced to accept the impermanence of our physical selves. Yet in the cemetery, we may perceive a greater place, an eternal presence that is not within the world, but which contains all that was, is, and will ever be. Lifting our gaze from the grave, walking between our friends, we are invited to join the company of all mourners in Zion, seeking solace in the infinite mystery of God.

NOTES

1. Shmuel Glick, *Or ve-nihumim: Le-hitpathutan shel minhage "nihum avelim" be-masoret Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Keren, Or., 1993) chap. 6.

2. This passage is cited in medieval sources such as *Rosh Moed Katan* III:46, *Sefer Eshkol Moed Katan* 216:1, and *Tur YD* 393.

3. 1365–1427, *Laws of Bereavement*, 14. I thank Elie Kaunfer and his father Alvan Kaunfer for directing me to this source and helping parse it. Alvan also shared a discussion of this subject in *Netiv Binah* by B.S. Jacobson, Section 1, pp. 67–68.

4. This claim is odd given other midrashim (e.g. Mekhilta, Bo, *Pisha* 14, s.v. Miketz; Vayikra Rabbah, 32:8) which assert that God's presence went into exile with the Jews. Moreover, in Avot 3:6 we learn that wherever Jews gather to study Torah, the *Shekhinah* is present. In Eikhah Rabbah (1:32–33) we read that the *Shekhinah* did not go into exile until the children were exiled.

5. Born 1423 in Hoechstadt, Bavaria. *Sefer Leket Yosher*, Yoreh Deah II: 85.

6. Berakhot 16b.

7. Prague, 1754–1826. *Teshuvot MeiAhavah*, I:172.

8. Semahot 4:13.

9. *Igrot Moshe*, OH 5:21.

10. *Tzitz Eliezer*, 17:7.

11. Personal communication.

12. I Chronicles 29:11.

13. This is the comment of Tractate Sofrim 21. One is not comforted over loss of the living, but the dead are eventually forgotten by the heart (Psalms 31:13). But as Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer teaches in Mishnah Avot (4:18), *do not comfort your friend when his dead lie before him*.

14. God is described as reversing or regretting a decision in Exodus 32:12–14, and again in Samuel 15:35, regarding the coronation of Saul. Yet just a few verses earlier (v. 29), Samuel declares that God does “not regret, for He is not a man to regret.”

15. See Bava Batra 60b, v.3, p. 946.

16. Shulhan Arukh, YD 388.

17. Moed Katan 27b.

18. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 68:9, among other places.