

David Curwin



Vision and Comfort

The Shabbat before Tisha B'Av is called *Shabbat Chazon*, and the Shabbat following Tisha B'Av is called *Shabbat Nachamu*. Both are named for the opening words of the *haftarah* read that week. Let's look at those two words.

Chazon

The word *chazon* means "vision," from the root *chaz* - "to see." Hebrew has a number of verbs that express vision, including the most common, *chaz*, as well as *chaz* and *chaz*. Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 1:3) provides different meanings for each verb. He writes that *chaz* - "to see," is something that is experienced by people in general, via sight. The root *chaz* - "to look at," indicates turning and paying attention to something in particular. And finally, he says that our root, *chaz* - "vision" is often used in a more figurative sense, to express what the heart (or mind) perceives.

This distinction is borne out by linguistic evidence as well. Beyond the meaning "to see," *chaz* often means "to perceive," "to predict" or "to prophecy." In Arabic, the cognate word means "astrologer," which also expresses this sense of seeing beyond what the eye can detect.

Several other Hebrew words derive from this same root, but much of the supernatural connotations of the words have been replaced with more secular meanings in Modern Hebrew.

For example, a synonym for *chazon* in Biblical Hebrew is *chazon*. When G-d reveals Himself to Avraham, he does so in a *chazon* (*Bereishit* 15:1). In Modern Hebrew, however, a *chazon* is a drama or play (literally something watched).

Another set of words that have gone through a similar transformation regard a different type of prediction. While we don't have prophecy today, we do predict the weather. So a forecast is a *chazon*, and a weather forecaster is a *chazon*.

In *Yeshayahu* 28:15, we find the word *chazon* in a unique context: *chazon* *chazon* *chazon*. This is generally translated as, "we have made a pact with the grave." However, commentaries such as Ibn Ezra point out that the word is connected to the root *chaz*, and so say it means a "covenant made by (Divine) prophecy." Some scholars point out that prophets were asked for their advice before treaties were made. Today a *chazon* refers to any kind of contract.

There is one word in this family that moved in the opposite direction - from the secular to the religious. According to some theories, *chazon* originally meant "overseer" (from *chaz* meaning "to see"). This could be the overseer of any project or group. But later it came to mean specifically the one directing or leading the prayer service - i.e. the cantor.

Nachamu

Nachamu means "comfort," as found in the opening words of the *haftarah*:

Nachamu nachamu - "Comfort, oh comfort My people" (*Yeshayahu* 40:1).

However, the root *nacham* has multiple meanings, some seemingly contradictory. For example, when Noach was born, his father gave him that name because he prayed that, "this one will provide us relief [*nacham*] from our work and from the toil of our hands" (*Bereishit* 5:29). But a few verses later, we see the root again. When G-d saw how wicked humanity had become, he

"regretted [*nacham*] that He had made man on earth" (6:6).

How did the same root come to mean both comfort and regret? One theory says that *nacham* is related to the root *nach* ("to rest"), and so one who is comforted is rested from their anger or sadness. Similarly, regretting an action, either a beneficial one like creating humanity or a punishment, as when Moshe asks G-d to "renounce [*nacham*] the plan to punish Your people" (*Shemot* 32:12), involves putting the plan to rest.

Another theory relies on a different etymology for the root. These scholars claim that *nacham* is related to *nacham* - "to sigh, moan." They point out that in Arabic, *nahama* is used to refer to the panting breaths of a horse. So according to this approach, *nacham* first meant "to grieve, be sorry." Feeling sorry for oneself or others led to the sense of "comfort," while the result of feeling sorry can lead one to "regret" or "repent." We see the same phenomenon in English, when saying "I'm sorry" can either express regret or an effort to comfort someone.

Whatever the origin of the word, may G-d renounce any bad plans He has for us, and provide us all with the comfort we need.

David Curwin is a writer living in Efrat, and the author of the Balashon blog: balashon.com.

