

Sermon/Drasha Shabbos Nachamu: Comfort & Consolation

Are you introverted and suffering from low self-esteem? Chances are, you like rock & roll and heavy metal-music. Are you creative, intelligent and have a high sense of self-esteem? You very well may be a jazz or classical music fan.

Does the playlists lurking on your iPod -- or the 33 1/3 rpm album on your Victrola turntable -- reveal information about your personality? Two recent studies sing out (pun intended) an emphatic "Yes!"

Research conducted in 2006 by two psychologists suggests that knowing the type of music you listen to can actually lead to surprisingly accurate predictions about your personality. And another study looked at more than 36,000 participants from all over the world. Participants were asked to rate more than 104 different musical styles in addition to offering information about aspects of their personality.

Here's a taste of the good news -- or bad news -- depending on your favorite genre:

Any Rap/ Hip Hop fans here? I didn't think so. But if you have a nephew who likes Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre, the stereotype that rap lovers are more aggressive or violent doesn't seem to play out. Researchers have found, however, that rap fans do tend to have high self-esteem and are usually outgoing.

Do you prefer to listen to the top 40 hits? Pop music lovers are hard-working and have high self-esteem, though researchers suggests that they tend to be less creative and more uneasy.

Would you rather watch CMT instead of MTV? Country fans are typically hardworking, conventional and outgoing. Country songs are often centered on heartbreak. Maybe you've heard this one: How many country singers does it take to change a light bulb? Ten -- one to change the bulb, and nine to sing about how much they miss the old bulb! But research shows that people who gravitate towards country music tend to be very emotionally stable.

Regardless of your favorite type of music, I've never met anyone who doesn't like *some* type of music.

And though music that speaks to one person may confound or even annoy another -- in very personal ways we respond to our music on a deep emotional level. Music touches us in places words can't seem to go, and is often simply *comforting*. Comforting is what we often need, particularly after Tisha B'Av and today on Shabbos Nachamu, the Shabbos of comfort and consolation.

Every Jew has an obligation to comfort mourners, whether he is related to them or not, and whether he is a close friend or a passing acquaintance. In Judaism, exercising compassion by paying a condolence call is a mitzvah, considered by many to have an explicit source in the Torah where we see that G-d comforts mourners.

It's our duty to imitate Hashem: Just as Hashem comforts the bereaved, so must we do likewise. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the decimation of the Jewish people, Isaiah proclaims (in this week's Haftorah), "Comfort, comfort My People -- says your G-d."

This isn't simply a recommendation from on high, but a specific mandate obliging the prophet to bring consolation to his people. We need comfort, consolation and support when a variety of life's challenges come our way; bereavement, illness, financial distress, tzuris with family, discouragement and other moments of heartbreak and sadness.

How do we fulfill this great mitzvah? Let us examine two approaches.

In the Marines, they teach the soldiers to make a fox hole big enough for two when preparing for combat. There's nothing quite like fighting a battle with support. Having a friend with you gives you extra strength and keeps you from panic in battle. And the buddy system works in every aspect of life, not just combat. Your difficulties will eventually overwhelm you if you try to handle them by yourself. We all need someone to lean on -- particularly when times are tough.

When a person has lost a close relative, the fundamental purpose of the condolence call during shiva is to relieve the mourner of the intolerable burden of intense loneliness. At no other time is a human being more in need of such companionship. Friends in your life are like pillars on your porch. Sometimes they hold you up, and sometimes they lean on you. Sometimes it's just enough to know they're standing by.

Recognizing this state of mind -- the troubled loneliness and isolation the mourner feels -- the visitor comes to the shiva house, silently, to join the mourner in his loneliness, sorrowfully to sit beside him or her, and justto be there. The warmth of such human presence is inestimable. And we learn this approach from the Almighty, Himself.

And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that G-d blessed Isaac, his son (Gen. 25:11)

No mention is made (in the above passage) of the specifics of G-d's blessing to Isaac. Rashi explains that Hashem blessed Isaac with *tanchumei aveilum* - a blessing for mourners. Presumably, it was simply the presence of the Almighty that eased Isaac's pain from the loss of his father. Knowing G-d was with him offered comfort.

To share a personal story, following the funeral of my dear father, z'l, ten years ago, I flew mid-week from Los Angeles to St. Louis. Rosh Hashana would begin in a few days, and I was returning to complete the *shiva* before Yom Tov. Shortly after taking my seat by a window, a woman of about my age sat down in the aisle seat in our row of three. As the plane taxied down the runway, I noticed she had a *siddur* (prayer book), and was praying.

Struck by the unlikelihood of being seated next to an observant Jewess on a domestic flight from Los Angeles, I waited until she had completed her prayers and asked her what her destination was. The woman remarked that she had traveled to Los Angeles for her father's funeral -- which had taken place on the same day as my father's funeral -- and that she was returning to Baltimore and her family before the beginning of Rosh Hashana. We suddenly realized that we were both *aveilim* (mourners) -- I, with my torn shirt, she with her torn sweater. As we exchanged more information, we learned that we came from similar Jewish backgrounds, had both been married for about the same number of years, and had approximately the same number of children.

At that moment, mid-air on the way to St. Louis, I was enveloped and deeply comforted by the stunning awareness that G-d had pulled quite a few strings to arrange these very special traveling arrangements for the both of us so soon after our respective losses. Hashem comforted us simply by allowing us to feel His Presence.

Woody Allen once said that 80% of life is just showing up. I'm not certain that idea applies across the board in most situations. When it comes consoling others, however, we can offer tremendous support and comfort just by showing up.

A second thought:

The story is told of a newspaper cartoonist who amused himself one summer day by sending telegrams (remember those?) to 20 acquaintances selected at random. Each message contained only one word: Congratulations. As far as he knew, not one of them had done anything in particular to be congratulated for. However, each took the message as a matter of fact and wrote the cartoonist a letter of thanks. Everyone who received the message had done something that they regarded as clever and worthy of congratulations.

Actively supporting those in pain is a necessary complement to "just showing up." There are two ways of supporting those suffering a loss.

First:

The parents of twin 10 year-olds were worried that their boys had developed extreme personalities — one was a

total pessimist, the other a total optimist — their parents took them to a psychiatrist.

First the psychiatrist treated the pessimist. Trying to brighten his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with brand-new toys. But instead of yelping with delight, the little boy burst into tears. "What's the matter?" the psychiatrist asked, baffled. "Don't you want to play with any of the toys?" "Yes," the little boy bawled, "but if I did I'd only break them."

Next the psychiatrist treated the optimist. Trying to dampen his outlook, the psychiatrist took him to a room piled to the ceiling with horse manure. But instead of wrinkling his nose in disgust, the optimist emitted just the yelp of delight the psychiatrist had been hoping to hear from his brother, the pessimist. Then he clambered to the top of the pile, dropped to his knees, and began gleefully digging out scoop after scoop with his bare hands. "What do you think you're doing?" the psychiatrist asked, just as baffled by the optimist as he had been by the pessimist. "With all this manure," the little boy replied, beaming, "there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

We're obligated to share a positive, optimistic perspective to a friend in need. While being careful to avoid being preachy or overly Pollyanish, a gentle 'cup-is-half-full' view can be so helpful to a discouraged friend.

And second:

The story is told of a talking rabbit being chased by a dog through the countryside that was observed by a crowd enjoying a family picnic. They cheered for the rabbit as he swiftly hopped from side to side, masterfully eluding his attacker. Then the rabbit pulled away from the dog a great distance, looked at the crowd and said, "I appreciate your encouragement and support ...but couldn't one of you just grab the dog?"

Words of encouragement are nice. But if there's something you can do to tangibly help someone in distress -- help them! Make a phone call, go shopping, forward a resume, drive carpool, go shopping, or do any one of an almost unlimited number of things to ease their burden in their hour of challenge or despair.

The power of encouragement and assistance is limited only by its lack of use. How many people do you know who could benefit from a sincere "congratulations" or "things will work out" or possibly even, "I'm with you"? Silent encouragement doesn't mean much. Let others know your positive regard for them. And if there's something you can do for them, by all means, do it. You never know when a gesture or a few sincere words can have an impact on a life

In conclusion:

A student once asked a professor, "Would it be possible for all the people of the world to live in the state of Texas?" The professor thought for a little while, estimated the size of the state and the number of people in the world, and answered, "Yes, it would be possible if they were all friends."

We began our remarks with a discussion of music. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Many people die with their music still inside them." Music is many things, but to most of us music is *comforting*. It is inevitable that at different times in our lives, we will be in pain, suffer difficulties, be discouraged, and mourn a loss. Share your music with others, just as the Almighty comforts and consoles His people

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