**The Stream of Longing**

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**R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel**

During the early nineteen-fifties my *nona*, my maternal grandmother, yearned to move from Egypt to Israel. My grandfather, *nono* (as we call him), however was not (yet) ready to make such a life-changing move. According to family legend, my grandmother responded with a weekly fast (on Mondays and Thursdays) that lasted a number of years, and concluded with the family’s arrival in Israel in 1956 (after Egyptian authorities expelled them from the country). My grandmother, a devout and pious woman, often explains that fasting became a personal way to express her deepest yearnings and prayers. As a child I once asked her: “*Nona*, how did you keep fasting on such a regular basis?” “I don’t know, but it sure kept me slim!” was her answer.

The move to Israel certainly altered my grandparents’ lives. Like many immigrants of *Sefardi* backgrounds, their relocation was fraught was challenges and upheavals. At times, when speaking of life in Egypt my *nona* would sound a familiar trope. In her lament, I could hear the complaint of the Israelites in the desert. Yet my *nona* never truly wanted to go back to Egypt. If anything, she would become profoundly upset each time she had learnt that one of her many grandchildren dared to visit the Sinai desert. How could they, her own descendants, go back to the place from which our family was ejected?

In truth, my grandmother did not long for Egypt. She longed for the Promise Land. She didn’t long for what was, but rather she continued to long for what could be. Yes, even after she arrived in Israel, in my mind, she continued to long to merit entering a land full of promise.

Though she moved to Israel, she never stopped dreaming about entering the Promised Land.

My paternal grandparents moved to Israel from Romania in 1961. My father was ten years old at the time. My grandparents tried immigrating to Israel years earlier but the communist Romanian authorities revoked their exit visas for close to ten years. Only six years after arriving in Israel, in 1967, my paternal grandfather, *nono* Marcel, a man who spent the years of the Shoah in a labor camp in Romania, and one of the most ambitious, charismatic, and passionate people I have ever known, participated in the six day war. As the Israeli army conquered Gaza, Judea and Samaria, my grandfather joined army units as a senior, civilian supervisor to ensure proper etiquette by the younger Israeli soldiers. I have often thought of this particular arc in my grandfather’s life – his survival in Romania, his escape from communism, his participation in a war that liberated ancestral lands and saw our people’s return to Yerushalyim. My grandfather must have felt like he was truly entering the Promised Land.

In the last years of his life, my grandfather joined an Israeli political party as a volunteer. Now in his early 80s, my *nono* went knocking on neighbors’ doors, ambitiously employing his businessman skills, his passion and charisma, to sell a political dream and acquire the confidence of potential voters. Years after moving to Israel, years after participating in the six day war, my grandfather continued to fight and long to merit entering a land full of promise.

Though he moved to Israel, *nono* never stopped dreaming about entering the Promised Land.

If those who entered the Land, still long to enter its full promise, then we, who are not yet in Israel, must certainly long for it every single day.

As many of you know, I was blessed to be born in Israel. Through the circumstances of my parents’ life, and then those of my own life, I have come to inherit the longing of my grandparents. Every piece of news from Israel, and certainly every visit to Israel, opens an unhealed wound of longing in my heart.

Though I moved away from Israel, and even as I continue to fervently build my home and our community here in Berkeley, I never stop dreaming of entering the Promised Land.

According to Rav Neria, the educational founder of the Bnai Akiva youth movement in Israel, longing for the Land of Israel is a critical feature of our religious life. He offers an amazing teaching in the name of the great Rav Kook:

**והנה רצה הקב"ה לפתוח שערי מידה חדשה, להעמיק בלב האומה הישראלית, מידת געגועים לארץ ישראל,** שגם בהיותם על אדמת נכר, תהיינה עיניהם נשואות לציון, וליבם יהיה מלא המיה לארץ אבותיהם, ועמד ופתח מידה זו על ידי רעיא מהימנא, השליח הראשון אשר נשתלח לגאול את ישראל.

“The Holy and Blessed One wanted to open the gates for a new religious disposition, to deepen in the heart of the Jewish nation, the attribute of longing for the Land of Israel, so that even if they find themselves on foreign lands, their eyes will always lift up towards Zion, and their hearts will fill with longing for the land of their ancestors. And this was achieved through [Moses] the loyal shepherd, through the very first messenger sent to redeem Israel.

"ואתחנן אל ה'... אעברה נא ואראה את הארץ הטובה" (דברים ג', כג-כה) - **שיטח משה רבנו תחנונים ותפילות** כמנין ואתחנ"ן, **והרחיב והעמיק רבות רבות בהפצרותיו,** ככל המבואר בספרי הקדמונים, ובמיוחד ב"מגלה עמוקות", ובתחנוניו - תפילותיו המרובות של משה רבנו, נפתח מעין עמוק ביותר של געגועים לארץ ישראל שכוחו המרווה יפה לכל הדורות. ומאז כל השואב ממעיינו של משה רבנו, גם אם הוא נמצא במרחקים, מתגעגע הוא לארץ ישראל, ואין סוף לצימאון, ואין גבול לכמיהה, כי גדול המעיין ועמוק הוא.

Moses pleaded before God to enter the land....And Moses’ multifold prayers opened a deep spring of longing for the Land of Israel, its satiating powers bountifully available for all generations. And since that time, whoever draws from the spring of Moses our Teacher, even if that person is far away, even so, that person will continue to long for the Land of Israel, and there is no end to that thirst, and no limit to this longing, for the river is great and profound.”

Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our greatest of teachers, was purposely not allowed entry into the Land of Israel, not because of his failure as a leader as the Torah explicitly purports, but rather in order to instill in our hearts a longing with no end and no bounds for the Promised Land. This religious or spiritual value is so great that Moses’ own desire and need to enter the land was sacrificed on the altar of longing. Indeed, Moses’ yearning for the land was so strong that it continues to not only reach those who are not yet in the Land, but it also touches the hearts of even those who in fact merited entering Israel.

Rebbe Natan, the great student of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the Hassidic Master, also drank from Moshe’s great stream of longing. Based on his teacher’s instructions, Rebbe Natan composed a book of prayers and poems all expressing longing and desire to enter the Promised Land. In one of those poems, Rebbe Natan draws a critical connection between the concept of Teshuva (repentance) and our longing to enter the Land.

21. **וְהִנֵּה עַתָּה, אַחֲרֵי כָּל מַה שֶּׁעָבַר עָלַי מֵעוֹדִי עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, וְכַמָּה סִבּוֹת סִבַּבְתָּ עִמִּי, וּבְכַמָּה גִּלְגּוּלִים גִּלְגַּלְתָּ עִמִּי כְּדֵי לְקָרְבֵנִי אֵלֶיךָ וּלְהַחֲזִירֵנִי בִּתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ**, וַעֲדַיִן לא עָלְתָה בְּיָדִי לִזְכּוֹת לִתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה כָּרָאוּי, וְלא דַי שֶׁלּא זָכִיתִי לִתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה אַף גַּם פָּגַמְתִּי הַרְבֵּה מְאד בְּכָל עֵת וְעַתָּה אַחֲרֵי כָּל אֵלֶּה, אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ עַתָּה שׁוּם דֶּרֶךְ בֵּית מָנוֹס מִמֶּנִּי, וְלא שׁוּם עֵצָה וְתַחְבּוּלָה, כִּי אִם עוֹד רוּחִי מְקַשְׁקֵשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי, עוֹד קוֹל דּוֹדִי דּוֹפֵק בִּי, וּמְעוֹרְרֵנִי וּמְזָרְזֵנִי בְּתוֹרָתוֹ הַקְּדוֹשָׁה לִנְסעַ לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, אוּלַי אֶזְכֶּה לָשׁוּב מִכְּסִילָתִי וּמִמַּעֲשַׂי הַפְּגוּמִים, אוּלַי אֶזְכֶּה לְהַתְחִיל לִחְיוֹת חַיִּים אֲמִתִּיִּים, אוּלַי יָחוֹס אוּלַי יְרַחֵם וְאַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ עצֶם רִבּוּי הַסְּפֵקוֹת שֶׁיֵּשׁ לִי בָזֶה בְּלִי שִׁעוּר וְזֶה עִקָּר הַמְּנִיעָה שֶׁלִּי, בְּצֵרוּף שַׁאֲרֵי מְנִיעוֹת מֵחֲמַת מָמוֹן וְרִחוּק הַדֶּרֶךְ וְשַׁאֲרֵי מְנִיעוֹת רַבּוֹת אֲבָל בֶּאֱמֶת אֲנִי מוֹדֶה לְפָנֶיךָ בּוֹחֵן לִבּוֹת וּכְלָיוֹת, שֶׁעִקַּר הַמְּנִיעָה הִיא מְנִיעַת הַמּחַ מֵחֲמַת כַּמָּה סְפֵקוֹת וּבִלְבּוּלִים, שֶׁמְּבַלְבְּלִין אֶת דַּעְתִּי וּמוֹנְעִים אוֹתִי מִלְּהִתְגַּבֵּר וּלְהִתְחַזֵּק לַעֲסוֹק בָּזֶה לְהָכִין לִי הַדֶּרֶךְ לִנְסעַ לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל **וְאַף עַל פִּי כֵן בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הָרַבִּים אַתָּה מְרַמֵּז לִי בְּכָל עֵת לְהִשְׁתּוֹקֵק לָזֶה לָבוֹא לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַד אֲשֶׁר לא אוּכַל לָנוּחַ וְלִשְׁקט מִלִּכְסף לָזֶה לֵילֵךְ וְלָבא לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל** כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי רַחֲמֶיךָ לא כָלִים, כֻּלֵּי הַאי וְאוּלַי תְזַכֵּנִי לָבא לְשָׁם בְּשָׁלוֹם, וּלְהַמְשִׁיךְ עָלַי שָׁם קְדֻשַּׁת אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל בֶּאֱמֶת בְּאפֶן שֶׁאֶזְכֶּה לְהִתְחַכֵּם מֵעַתָּה וּלְהַשְׂכִּיל עַל דְּרָכַי, וּלְבַעֵר הָרָע מִקִּרְבִּי, וּלְבַטֵּל הָרוּחַ שְׁטוּת מִמֶּנִּי, וְלִזְכּוֹת לִתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה בֶּאֱמֶת, אֲשֶׁר לָזֶה לְבַד כָּלְתָה נַפְשִׁי, כִּי זֶה כַּמָּה נִכְסוֹף נִכְסַפְתִּי לָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ, וּכְבָר גִּלִּיתָ לָנוּ גדֶל רַחֲמֶיךָ וְעצֶם חֲנִינוּתֶיךָ בְּכָל עֵת, וְרַב טוּבְךָ בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה צוֹפֶה לָרָשָׁע וְחָפֵץ בְּהִצָּדְקוֹ, כִּי לא תַחְפּץ בְּמוֹת הַמֵּת כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדְּרָכָיו וְחָיָה, וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תְּחַכֶּה לוֹ, "תָּשֵׁב אֱנוֹשׁ עַד דַּכָּא" עַד דִּכְדּוּכָהּ שֶׁל נָפֶשׁ:

“Despite everything I’ve gone through, from the time of my birth to this very day, despite the many circumstances that turned me around again and again, despite all that You God have done to draw me near and help me repent fully…despite all that, I still have not yet managed to merit complete Teshuvah (a wholesome repentance). And not just that, but despite all of that, I continue to cause harm and damage….And yet even so, You God, with abundant mercy, continue to hint at every moment for me to yearn to enter the Land of Israel, so much so that I cannot find any rest from this yearning...With that, perhaps I will merit to gain wisdom to change my ways, to scorch all that is bad from my midst, to nullify the foolish spirit within me, and to earn a true Teshuva….for my longing for You God is that great…”

For Rebbe Natan, the Promised Land is not only a geographical location. The Promised Land is a psychological and existential destination that continuously calls upon each one of us. When we say Israel, we don’t only mean a place on the map, which it must be, but we also express a primary and essential aspect of our spiritual and perhaps subconscious conception of what Home (with a capital H) means to each of us as human beings. And as human beings, specifically because we are human beings, we can never stop yearning to be Home.

According to Rebbe Natan, that very insatiable yearning to be Home is God’s great gift to humankind, for that vey longing animates our desire to better our ways, to mend our wounds, to heal this world.

This Yom Kippur, many of us find ourselves outside the Promised Land.

On a national level, I think of my brothers and sisters in Israel – quite literally, my own brother and my own sister, who both live in Israel.

This Yom Kippur, perhaps more than ever, I know that no matter where we fall politically, many of us are deeply concerned about Israel’s welfare and Israel’s future. Whatever our stance might be on Iran, or on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or on religious and civil rights within Israel, be it for Jews or for Arabs, I believe that we can all agree, that despite our entry into the Land, we have not yet fulfilled its promise.

So at this time, in the spirit of Rebbe Natan, in the spirit of Rav Kook, and in the spirit of Israel’s anthem *HaTikvah* (The Hope) – I urge you to continue to drink from Moses’ spring of longing. *Od lo avdah tikvateinu* – our hope is not yet lost.

Long to overcome the self-imposed constraints of this or that challenge or impediment (on the left and on the right). Long to gain sight beyond the blind-spots of this or that political vision (again on the left or on the right). Long for Israel, and commit passionately to that yearning, for Israel to become more of that Promise and more of that Home.

On a personal level, this Yom Kippur, many of us, too many of us, still find ourselves outside our own sense of a Promised Land. Many of us, too many of us, feel distant from fulfilling the great promise we each hold for our life.

Like Moses, we may have had a clear glimpse of what that Promised Land might be, but through the circumstances of our life, circumstances that too often feel like Divine decree, we find ourselves far away and removed.

Sadly, too many of us don’t feel at home, in our personal lives, in our religious life, or our vocational roles.

We might feel unfulfilled by our work, or lack of work, by our fulfillment of mitzvoth or failure to fulfill mitzvoth, by our social or family situation, by our children, or the absence of the blessing of children or a sense of family, by our sense of loss of potential or by loss itself.

To each of us, standing on that mountain with Moses, and to a degree we always stand with Moses on the mountain – I urge you to not give up, continue to drink from Moses’ spring of longing for eventually that very yearning will bring you Home.

Still, this Yom Kippur, some of us might feel like we entered the Land of Promise. To a degree, some of us do feel at home, in our personal lives, in our religious life, or in our vocational roles.

In the spirit of my *nonas* and *nonos*, both my maternal and paternal grandparents who never stopped dreaming about entering the Promised Land, though they themselves merited to move and live in the State of Israel – I urge you to continue to drink from Moses’ spring of longing.

Long to feel even more at home in your work, long to fulfill even more mitzvoth or the same mitzvoth but with greater *kavanah* (or intention), long to be even more connected with your family and friends, with your children or the people you love, as importantly long to gain a fuller sense of your life’s potential. Though you may feel like you already entered the Land of Promise, I urge you to still come Home.

Permit me to conclude with a story about Rebbe Nachman of Breslov:

“A number of people told the Rav of Chmelnik […] that the Rav of Volochisk […] was already longing and yearning for the last forty years to merit to move to *Eretz Yisrael* (to the Land of Israel). When the Rav of Chmelnik heard this he said, “What is all this noise about longing and yearning for forty years to go to Israel? You get the money together and you go!”

When someone told this exchange over to Rebbe Nachman, he responded, “The Rav of Volochisk, who is filled with longing for the Land of Israel, will eventually merit to get there.”

And so it was; not too long after this exchange took place, the Rav of Volochisk merited to move to Eretz Yisrael together with all of his family, and he was privileged to live there for a number of years.” (<http://www.breslov.org/longing-for-holiness/>)

Getting to the Promised Land is not as easy or as obvious as it may seem. There are certainly many obstacles on the way. Moses never made it, though he got a glimpse of it. For our people it took two thousand years and as modern Zionists we are learning that we have not yet completed the journey.

As individuals we each know that there is still a long way to go, each of us, to our own “Promised Lands.” In the course of our travels we may discover and we may need to learn that our sense of the promise and the potential has changed or must alter. Still, like a good GPS system, I urge all of us, let’s recalculate the route and find a new way, for I believe that the Promised Land, that very Home, is always waiting there.

This Yom Kippur, may we draw from Moshes’ stream of longing with great passion and great force, and as we do so, may our deep longings and profound yearnings continue to draw us ever closer to each other, to Torah and Mitzvot, to the Land of Promise, to God, and to our Home.