

Returning Home

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It was quite strange to be back in our home in Berkeley after spending a six month sabbatical in Jerusalem.

On our very first day back, we walked around our home and felt strangely not at home. If that wasn't enough, our daughter, merely two and a half years old, turned to my wife, to Frayda and said, "Ima, I want to go home."

In the weeks after our return, Frayda and I spent considerable time re-envisioning the physical design and layout of our house.

We began by purging furniture, then we started moving furniture around, and finally we also began buying a few new pieces of furniture.

Friends and colleagues, who themselves had the experience of going away on sabbatical, reassured us that this was quite normal, that they too had this sort of feeling upon returning to their own homes after being away for some time.

Like our young daughter, Frayda and I just wanted to go home...or at least feel at home.

In truth, the "home" question is one that has been on my mind most of my life.

As many of you know, I was born in Israel, grew up in Canada, and spent most of my adult life in NYC and in Berkeley (which by the way, are quite possibly two different planets on their own). In Israel, I often feel like an American, in Canada, I feel like an Israeli, and in America I feel like a Canadian. Wherever I am, I quite often feel like my two and a half year old daughter, "I just want to go home."

Over the summer, I heard a talk by the essayist and travel writer, Pico Iyer that partially resonated with me.

Iyer explains: "People are always asking me where I come from, and they're expecting me to say India, and they're absolutely right insofar as 100 percent of my blood and ancestry does come from India. Except, I've never lived one day of my life there. I can't speak even one word of its more than 22,000 dialects. So I don't think I've really earned the right to call myself an Indian.

And if "Where do you come from?" means "Where were you born and raised and educated?" then I'm entirely of that funny little country known as England, except I left England as soon as I completed my undergraduate education, and all the time I was growing up, I was the only kid in all my classes who didn't begin to look like the classic English heroes represented in our textbooks.

And if "Where do you come from?" means "Where do you pay your taxes? Where do you see your doctor and your dentist?" then I'm very much of the United States, and I have been for 48 years now, since I was a really small child. Except, for many of those years, I've had to carry around this funny little pink card with green lines running through my face identifying me as a permanent alien. [...]

And if "Where do you come from?" means "Which place goes deepest inside you and where do you try to spend most of your time?" then I'm Japanese, because I've been living as much as I can for the last 25 years in Japan. Except, all of those years I've been there on a tourist visa, and I'm fairly sure not many Japanese would want to consider me one of them.

[...] And in so many ways, I think this is a terrific liberation. Because when my grandparents were born, they pretty much had their sense of home, their sense of community, even their sense of enmity, assigned to them at birth, and didn't have much chance of stepping outside of that. And nowadays, at least some of us can choose our sense of home, create our sense of community, fashion our sense of self, and in so doing maybe step a little beyond some of the black and white divisions of our grandparents' age."

https://www.ted.com/talks/pico_iyer_where_is_home/transcript?language=en

These words are stirring and at the same time, they are also very challenging as well.

Over the years, I have met many people who felt so liberated from their sense of home that homelessness (in the existential, emotional, and psychological sense of the word) became the only home they've ever known. Sadly, instead of stepping out of some of "the black and white divisions of their grandparents'" age, these individuals end up stepping right into the self-inflicted self-doubts and inner emotional divisions that plague our modern age.

A few years ago, a woman approached me at a neighborhood gathering on my block, just a few streets from here. She was thrilled to tell me that she "used to be Jewish." No, she never converted out, she just felt liberated from that old identity. At another event, a man once introduced himself to me as "Alexander" and then informed me that he "used to be Avraham."

What is home, nowadays, when it seems utterly up to us to choose our sense of home, to create our own sense of community, and fashion our own sense of self?

Our sages have taught us that the "home" question is not merely a human one, but a divine one as well. We are not the only ones looking for a place of our own, but God too, as it were, is seeking a sense of home as well.

In our tradition, God's Holy Temple is described in many ways. Most of all it is described as a home. It is "Beit Hamikdash," meaning, the home of holiness. It is also described as "Har HaBayit," the mountain of the House. Sometimes it is just plainly called "Beit El," the Home of God.

Our sages explain that initially the place of God's Temple, of God's Holy House could not be referred to as a home. Instead a process that took several generations had to take place so that our sacred place could be called a home.

לא כאברהם שכתוב בו הר שנאמר (בראשית כב, יד) אשר יאמר היום בהר ה' יראה ולא כיצחק שכתוב בו שדה שנאמר (בראשית כד, סג) ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה אלא כיעקב שקראו בית שנאמר (בראשית כח, יט) ויקרא את שם המקום ההוא בית אל

“[Concerning God’s Holy Temple], it will not be referred to as it was referred to by Abraham. It is written of Abraham that when he prayed at the location of the Temple mountain, he called it mount, as it is stated: “As it is said on this day: On the mount where the Lord is seen” (Genesis 22:14). And it will not be referred to as it was referred to by Isaac. It is written of him that he called the location of the Temple ‘field’ when he prayed there, as it is stated: “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field” (Genesis 24:63). Rather, it will be described as it was referred to by Jacob, who called it house or home, as it is stated: “And he called the name of that place Beth-El” (Genesis 28:19), which means the home of God.” (BT Pesachim 88a)

Through linguistic parallels and connections, our sages identify three formative experiences of our patriarchs as taking place on the future grounds of the Holy Temple. These three experiences are seen as laying the foundations for God’s home. The first is Abraham’s binding of Isaac on the mountain. The second formative experience is Isaac praying in solitude in the field, after the death of his mother, right before meeting his beloved Rebecca. Finally, the third is identified as Jacob’s dream of the angels ascending and descending on the ladder as Jacob escaped his home and fled into exile.

What is unique about each of these experiences and how do they lay the foundations of the building of God’s home? Most importantly, how might each of these experiences allow us to deepen our sense of being at home?

First, our ability to have a sense of home demands that each of us make a sacrifice.

If you truly care about something, than you must be ready to give up everything for that very thing. That is the binding of Isaac. Abraham’s ability, which is so incomprehensible to many of us, to put everything on the line and his readiness to sacrifice that which he holds most dear, lay the very first foundation for God’s home. Abraham calls the place “God’s mountain” because Abraham realizes that it is only through sacrifice that we ascend greater heights and gain greater vision.

Second, our ability to have a sense of home depends on our ability to access spaces (both physical and spiritual) that can hold and contain our most intimate moments of both deep grief and great joy.

That is Isaac’s field. It is the place where Isaac goes to grieve for the death of his mother. It is a place of prayer, and longing, and loneliness. The field however is also the very place where Isaac encounters Rebecca for the very first time. It is a place of hope, and love, and intimacy. Isaac calls the place of God’s home a field because Isaac realizes that a home needs the emotional openness of the field if it is to become a place of growth, a place where the seeds of pain can grow into the stems of consolation and then flower with new hope.

Third, our ability to have a sense of home depends on the strength of the relationships we cultivate with the people with whom we share that sense of home.

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy goes on a journey away from home, to only realize that “home is where you are” or more specifically “home is the people you are with.” I know that there are certain friends who I only get to see every few years, but whenever I am with them, I feel right at home. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the very patriarch who flees home, who has a falling out with his brother, who goes into exile twice in his life, and who also dies in exile, is the very patriarch who so deeply longs for a place to call home.

It is Jacob who merits to establish a large family, and despite the many internal struggles, it is Jacob who is able to gather all of his children around his deathbed and proclaim, according to our sages, that despite our many differences, our God is one. Jacob refers to the place of God’s Temple as a Home because Jacob realizes that a home is only as strong as the relationships that hold its members together.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as builders of God’s home represent our capacity to sacrifice, our ability to create and provide open spaces that are suitable for inner growth, and our relentless pursuit to deepen relationships and our sense of connection with one another.

When I think of these three insights, I can’t help but think of the spiritual home we built here at CBI.

Over the years our community, and so many of you, have made enormous sacrifices to make this place our home. Over the years, so many of you marked life-cycle events in this sanctuary, from grieving for a loved one to celebrating new life, from mourning to gladness, and in the process you made this a safe sanctuary for one’s soul and one’s heart. In addition, over the years, each of you has shown tremendous dedication to one another, and in the process friends turned into sisters and brothers, and a congregation turned into a family.

This Rosh Hashanah, we find ourselves living in difficult times, facing multiple challenges.

During this period of introspection, many of us might not feel fully at home, be it in our relationships with our friends or our families, or be it in our moral and or spiritual assessment of our own lives.

On a national scale, many Americans might not feel at home here in America. An emboldened voice of hate and bigotry threatens the fabric of our democratic society.

As North American Jews, we face a growing phenomenon among a younger generation of American Jews who no longer feel at home in Israel, whether through sheer apathy, or through a growing political and/or a denominational divide.

Here in the Bay Area, we face the daunting task of continued disaffiliation. Sadly, so many Jews don’t feel at home in the Jewish community.

At this time, I urge us not to cast blame or point fingers, but instead, let us hold on to the lessons that our sages offer, and to the model that our community provides, in the hope of strengthening our cause and deepening our resolve.

If you want to be home...in your personal life, in your service of God, in Israel, or in America... then now is the time to make sacrifices for the sake of the home you envision. Now is the time to commit, to volunteer and to give.

If you want to be home....in your personal life, in your service of God, in Israel, or in America... then now is the time to help create safe spaces that truly lend themselves for open expression and for inner growth. Now is also the time to support, as best we can, religious, civic, and cultural centers that sanctify open spaces for human expression.

And if you want to be home...in your personal life, in your service of God, in Israel, or in America... then now is the time to further deepen our bonds, not just with one another, not just with those with whom we share some affinity, but mostly also with those we disagree, or distrust, or disrespect.

In his seminal work on repentance, Rav Soloveitchik asks a simple question and offers a profound response:

“What is the meaning of the word *“teshuvah”*? What is the exact etymological significance of the term?

The word [...] appears in the following context (1 Samuel 7:15-17): “And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Beth-El and Gilgal and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all those places. *And his return (u-teshuvato) was to Ramah, for there was his home* and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar unto the Lord.”

Samuel was a leader and a judge for all Israel; he made a circuit of all of Israel’s scattered living places, but everywhere he went, he was heading for home. He belonged to all of Israel, for the land of Israel was his home, but his true home was only in one place, in Ramah, as it is written, “for there was his home.” Only there could he construct the altar of his life to God. [...]

Rav Soloveitchik notes, “Man may wander about in circles and become entangled in all sorts of vain causes and pursue empty ideas. [...] He makes a circuit of Beth-el, Gilgal and Mizpah, he searches for gods, overturns worlds, and it may appear to him that he can see ahead and is heralding a new and better future – but always and ever “his return is to Ramah, for there is his home.”

We may be two years old and we may be ninety five years old and we may fall somewhere in between, but ultimately we are all looking to be home.

This year, through our sacrifices, through the growth of our heart, and through the deepening of our connections, may we truly make it home.