

## **Homeward Bound: Nostos and Teshuvah**

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הביתה. Come home with me.

During the Gaza war, while the hostages were in the Hamas tunnels, there were regular Shabbat gatherings at a junction of the Train Track Park near our home in Jerusalem. After morning services, 100-150 people would assemble for brief prayers and Torah study, the reading of the names and communities of those still captive, expressions of support for the families, and song.

After his release from captivity, Gadi Mozes reflected on the civilian rallies he caught glimpses of while in captivity:

“The few times I was able to see television, you don't know how much it strengthened me to see the rallies ...and to understand the nation is fighting for us and our return home.”

Those gatherings concluded when the last living hostages were released on Hoshanah Rabbah, two years after they were dragged into captivity.

Three songs were regularly sung. They shared the theme of coming home.

One was “The Honey and the Sting” — על הדבש ועל העוקץ — with its line:

השיביני ואשובה אל הארץ הטובה — Let me return to this good land. <https://youtu.be/3yfxa0XcnEI>

Another was the lullaby בואי אמא, “Mama, Come Stay with Me,” with words that evoked the darkness of the tunnels:

“I’m not afraid of the dark,  
And I don’t tremble at all.  
Come, Mom. Come, Mom.  
Sit with me until I grow up.”

[https://youtu.be/getzeHGADes?si=yg-cGvVdTO\\_rOI-1](https://youtu.be/getzeHGADes?si=yg-cGvVdTO_rOI-1)

A third song, הביתה — “Homeward” — articulated the hope and desire of so many:

עוד שנה טרופה, עוד שנה חלפה,  
עשבים שוטים עלו בשביל ובגן.

רוח נאנח את התריס פתח

:כמו קורא, ומכה בקיר הישן

הביתה, הביתה,

באה עת לחזור.

Another year has passed, another troubled year.

Wild weeds have grown on the path and in the garden.  
A sighing wind opened the shutter  
And strikes the old wall, as if calling:  
Homeward, homeward,  
The time has come to return.  
<https://youtu.be/6svUiSagWxs>

During those two years, I would sometimes hum “Habaytah” to myself.

I thought of it again here in Canada, months after the hostages were released, when I watched Christopher Nolan’s The Odyssey. In the film, Odysseus, the Greek king of Ithaca, undergoes a long and perilous journey after the Trojan War as he attempts to return home to his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus.

Nostos is an ancient Greek word meaning “homecoming” or “return home.” It connotes the dangerous journey of a hero trying to return home after a war or major adventure.

Odysseus knows where he wants to go. His wife, his son and his throne are waiting for him in Ithaca. But the path of return involves diversions and disasters, short-term pleasures and temporary abodes.

The destination is clear. The journey is not.

That is true of our lives as well.

We try to navigate toward goals. We plan when we will take a vacation or visit family. We make more consequential decisions: Should I change jobs? Should we move to a new home? When should we have a child? What kind of life do we want to build? What commitments should guide us?

And then life intervenes.

Emergencies demand immediate responses. Finances constrain what is possible. Relationships become complicated. We become attached to habits that no longer serve us. We can be unwilling to take risks. Sometimes we simply lose sight of where we were trying to go.

Our challenge is to determine whether an obstacle requires a change of route or a more fundamental change in direction.

Nostos-shaped thinking asks us to keep our destination in view. Are the decisions we make getting us closer to what we seek? When circumstances force us to change course, are we still moving toward our destination?

Years ago, a wise friend told me that leadership is like skiing. Occasionally, you have to ski uphill to avoid a blockage, and then continue down. What matters is maintaining a sense of direction.

Our tradition gives us another way of thinking about homecoming.

At the heart of these days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur is teshuvah. Although commonly translated as repentance, the Hebrew root, shuv, means to turn or return.

Unlike Odysseus's Ithaca, however, our teshuvah home is not a physical destination. It is a spiritual transition.

We drift from our core selves into roles, habits and self-protective stories shaped by fear, pain or circumstance rather than by who we want to be. Returning home does not mean going backward. It means recovering our values and bringing them forward.

Teshuvah also has a spiral quality: we stumble, regain our footing, work on our balance. Many of us cycle through the five phases of teshuvah again and again. **reflection, remorse, resolve, restitution, renewed action.** And full teshuvah is

not simply feeling sorry. It is the conscious effort to sustain that change.

There is an interesting way to understand this difference between Nostos and teshuvah.

The British thinker Matthew Arnold, writing in 1869, described a tension between what he called Hellenism and Hebraism. Hellenism emphasized clear thinking and beauty. Hebraism emphasized hearing the Divine and responsibility.

The great German-American-Jewish thinker Leo Strauss developed a related distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. The two traditions offered different approaches to wisdom. Athens emphasized free inquiry guided by reason. Jerusalem emphasized awe of the Divine and moral responsibility. Strauss thought that this tension gives Western civilization a continuing vitality.

Perhaps that tension helps us understand the difference between Nostos and teshuvah.

Nostos asks the Greek question:

**Where is home, and how do I get there?**

Teshuvah asks the Jewish question:

**Who am I, and who am I becoming?**

Odysseus has a destination. Teshuvah has an orientation.

Nostos asks whether our choices are moving us toward where we intend to go. Teshuvah asks whether we are true to our deepest values and commitments. We need both questions.

Odysseus is unrecognized when he finally reaches Ithaca. His homecoming requires proof of his identity and recognition of the person he has become. His scar and his ability to string his bow offer external evidence of his past. Sharing his story with Penelope demonstrates the self-awareness he has acquired through his journey.

The idea of a true self might suggest an unchanging core to which we simply return. Yet the self does not remain static. As in a hero's odyssey, the journey changes us.

We become different each time we confront the anxieties and behaviours that impede our growth and keep us from fully realizing who we are.

Rabbi Abby Jacobson has noted, "Judaism is not for good people; it is good for people." That is the genius of teshuvah. Judaism does not ask us to pretend that we have arrived. It

gives us a way to recognize the gap between our intentions and our actions.

Over time, we accumulate habits, patterns and attitudes that no longer serve our deeper intentions. Our behavior can produce consequences very different from the ones we sought. A teshuvah-oriented life calls upon us to notice that gap.

How do we work and play? What do we ask of ourselves? Do our habits reflect our values? Where are our blind spots? Are we willing to learn and reassess when the paths we have chosen no longer serve our commitments?

These are not questions for one day of the year. They are questions for a lifetime.

And they are not only personal questions.

In Israel, the news changes each day. We are no longer focused on bringing the hostages home, but on how to rebuild our homes and lives. A friend told me that he asked his young daughter about school. She said, I can't talk about it. I have post-trauma.

One girl noticed that her mother was preparing a smoked meat sandwich and asked what kind of meat. Told it was pastrami, the girl asked, how do you put post-trauma into bread?

The aftermath of the Hamas attacks and the missiles from Gaza, Iran and Yemen permeate society.

And we must ask how will residents of Gaza rebuild their homes? Where will Israel's soldiers serve? What will security require? What kind of future will Israelis and Palestinians build?

We are still asking what constitutes הביתה—home — how do we get there and who are we.

Nostos and teshuvah therefore explore two different ways of understanding what it means to find our way. Nostos asks whether our choices are moving us toward our intended destination. Teshuvah asks whether those choices are true to our values and our identity.

Our task is to hold both forms of return at once — and to recognize that home may not look exactly as it did when the journey began.

That is why the story of Eli Sharabi is so powerful.

Sharabi was kidnapped by Hamas during the attack on Be'eri and was released after 491 days in captivity. After his liberation, he learned that his wife Lian and his daughters, Noya and Yahel, had been murdered. He also learned that his brother Yossi, was murdered after 100 days in captivity.

In his book *Hostage*, Sharabi writes about what kept him alive: "I don't know if I [felt] God in those moments. But I ... feel a connection. To my people. To our tradition. To my identity. It connects me to my family. To my childhood. To my roots. It reminds me why I must survive. Who I'm surviving for. What I'm surviving for."

And he writes:

"Hope is never something that comes easily. It's always something you've got to fight for, to work on. Like Kiddush every Friday night, like Elia Cohen's Havdalah songs at the end of every Sabbath, like the prayers that open every morning, this circle of thanksgiving is something that we stick to, cling to, cleave to. To search for something good. To stay optimistic. To win."

Hope, Sharabi reminds us, is not simply something we feel. It is something we practice. And we need each other to practice it.

The lullaby בואי אמא, "Mama, Come Stay with Me," reminds us of this:

כל האור מזמן הלך לו,  
אל תלכי פתאום גם את.  
בואי אמא, בואי אמא,  
בואי שבי איתי מעט.

All the light has long since gone away.  
Don't suddenly go too.  
Come, Mama, come, Mama.  
Come sit with me for a bit.

No, I am not afraid of the dark,  
And I don't tremble at all.  
Come, Mama, come, Mama.  
Sit with me until I grow up.  
בואי אמא, בואי אמא,  
שבי איתי עד שאגדל.

We need others to help us on our path. That is one of the deepest meanings of Kol Nidre.

We enter this night as individuals, each carrying our own memories, regrets, fears and hopes. Each of us has a personal path of teshuvah. But we do not recite Kol Nidre alone. We stand together. We hear the ancient words together. We begin again together.

While Nostos emphasizes the solitary hero making his way home, teshuvah reminds us that in Judaism we do not have to make the journey alone.

Our covenant community helps us find our direction when we have lost it. It reminds us who we are when we have forgotten. It sits with us in the darkness until we are prepared to grow.

הביתה.

Homeward.

The time has come to return.

May this be a year in which we find our way home — to ourselves, to one another, to our people, and to the values that give our lives meaning.

May you have a meaningful Fast, and may you be blessed with a year of personal teshuvah, a true homecoming.

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