

Home

אני חוזר הביתה
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והדרך שרה

The words of this song – “I’m coming home” – have been on my mind a lot in the last year. I thought about them on the plane flying to Israel for our nine-month sabbatical in October. Going to Israel felt like going home. And I thought about them again on the plane flying back to Philadelphia at the end of June. This, too, feels like home. Both times I thought, “כמה טוב לבוא הביתה!” It’s so good to come home!” Two weeks ago, we took our oldest son, Zeke, from our home and off to college over 250 miles away. Now we are seeing him make that place into a new kind of home. And yet we also know that he will talk with us about when he will come home, to this place that he also sees as home.

What is home? What does it mean to us? How do we find it? And how do we know when we are there?

This holiday of Rosh Hashanah is a kind of homecoming. In the ancient Near East, it was common for a king to designate one day a year as a festival on which all of his subjects would gather to reaffirm their bond with each other and their loyalty to their king. Many scholars think that the festival of Rosh Hashanah is based on this model. On Rosh Hashanah, we come back together and reaffirm our bond with each other and with God. More than any other time of year, we have the chance to see each other face to face and to rebuild our connections. We see changes as we age, children grow, and elders pass from this world, but beyond the changes we see what remains the same. Familiar faces, familiar stories, familiar words and prayers and songs – these are part of what we seek and what we find when we come together on this day, part of our coming home.

This time of year is also a time to come home to ourselves. During the year we are pulled in so many directions. Torn between our many obligations – work, caretaking, the myriad small tasks that take up our time between waking and sleeping – we can become distant from ourselves, far from the core of who we are as people. The still small voices of our souls can become hard to hear. This is the time to come back. This is the time to rebuild our own sense of self, a sense that can give us stability in the whirlwind of activity that is our daily lives. Re-connecting with ourselves is also part of what we seek and what we find when we come together on this day, part of our coming home.

The story we read today in the Torah is built around anxiety about home. Sarah, who at an advanced age has finally achieved her heart's desire in bearing a son, binding her husband to her and ensuring her future, still feels insecure about home. She sees threats to her sense of home everywhere. In the seemingly innocent words of her servant, Hagar, she sees evidence of a dangerous foreign rival for her husband's affections. In the simple play of Hagar's son Ishmael with Sarah's son Isaac, she sees hints of the frightening possibility that Abraham's inheritance will have to be shared or may even be usurped by the older son, Ishmael. She insists that these threats be banished from her home, directing Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the camp and to leave them to die in the wilderness. What motivates Sarah to such an act of cruelty? After a lifetime of searching, she thinks she has found her way home, and she will do anything – anything – to hold on to that fragile sense that she is finally there.

This story is part of a larger narrative about leaving and finding home that is core to the story of Abraham and Sarah. These earliest ancestors of the Jewish people are called by God to do something extraordinary:

לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֹרְאָהּ :

“Go from your land, from your native place, from your ancestors' house, to the land that I will show you.”¹ I have always been struck by Abraham and Sarah's willingness to follow this directive, to leave the place where they were born, their families, and everything they know – to leave home – on the strength of a promise, a promise that there will be another land, a new house, a different place that they will be able to call home. Unlike some commentators, I can't see this as a reflection of Abraham and Sarah's faith in God. After all, according to the narrative of the Torah, this is their very first interaction with God, and they know nothing of this voice that commands and promises other than the words that they hear. Instead, I see in their willingness to give up everything a recognition that finding the place we call home is not about birth, ancestry, or history. It requires a journey, and the journey is a risk. But home is important enough to be worth the risk.

To go further, we even can see the whole story of the Torah as a search for home, an idea I first heard articulated by Harry Dudnick in his d'var Torah at his Bar Mitzvah – to give credit where credit is due. Taking upon themselves the journey of Abraham and Sarah, the people are constantly on the move, crisscrossing the land of Canaan, travelling down to Egypt, and wandering in the wilderness, all in pursuit of home. On the way, they come to and then leave some beautiful and inviting places. Egypt, in particular, is described as an attractive and sophisticated place, with good supplies of water and food that the Israelites, even in slavery, enjoy. Remember the

¹ Genesis 12:1, translation mine.

complaints they throw at Moses when they are forced to eat manna day after day for forty years? “Why did we ever leave Egypt? Life was so good there! We remember the food!!” Instead of seeing their complaints as a delusional rewriting of their experience, I see in them another lesson about home: Home is not necessarily the place where it is easiest or most pleasant to live. Home is important enough to be worth both hard work and discomfort.

As we move forward in Jewish history, the story of the Jewish search for home becomes intertwined with the larger global story of migration. Even in the ancient world, the large and small-scale movement of groups and the interaction between people from many different places was a fairly common feature of daily life, especially in the urban contexts to which Jews were increasingly drawn. As people whose literacy and education made them useful to the builders of empire, Jews perhaps more than others followed the wide-ranging paths that those empire-builders travelled, spreading east into Babylon and Persia, west into Egypt and north Africa, south into Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and north into Europe. Along the way, Jews encountered many others whose languages, foods, philosophies, and modes of thought left lasting impressions on Jewish life. But all of these travels and migrations only sharpened for Jews the question of what constituted home.

How we understand home is far from an academic or theoretical question. It can be a matter of life and death. In this country, we see an active debate about who deserves to live here and who does not, whose lives matter and whose do not, who deserves safety and protection and who does not, even who deserves help to buy food and who does not. Do we demand that the lives of all of this country’s citizens are protected and supported equally? Or do we draw lines of protection and support more narrowly? The answer depends on how we define home. In the wider world, we see huge migrations of refugees and asylum-seekers crossing border after border, with hundreds of thousands of lives at risk. Do we pressure our government to take in more of these refugees from Syria and elsewhere? Or do we turn away and allow that to be someone else’s problem? The answer depends on how we understand home.

So how do we define home? What makes us feel at home? What is home for us?

For me, although I have lived many places, there are two that truly feel like home: this community and Israel. In our nine months in Haifa, we had a chance to sink into the soil of the Land of Israel a bit, to find our way toward home. Our two younger sons, Avi and Mati, went to Israeli public high school – yes, entirely in Hebrew – just a few blocks from our apartment, while our oldest son, Zeke, studied photography at the WIZO School of Art and Design downtown, learned some Arabic, and volunteered at the Hai Bar center for wildlife in the Carmel forest. But Zeke spent most of his time hiking

the length and breadth of the Galilee and the rest of the land, putting his feet to the soil and taking beautiful photographs of what he saw. Cheryl studied Hebrew and volunteered with public health epidemiologists in Haifa on their cancer screening programs.

And I? I studied written Arabic at the University of Haifa and spoken Arabic at Beit HaGefen, the Arab-Jewish Cultural Center in Haifa whose executive director, Asaf Ron, will be our Charry Weekend Scholar in Residence, along with an Arab and a Jewish teen from their joint youth group. I also studied the oud, an 11-stringed instrument that is at the center of much Arab, Turkish, and Sephardic Jewish music, and my teacher, Yair Dalal, a world-class performer and composer on the oud, will be playing a concert right here in this sanctuary on Sunday, October 18th. In addition, I involved myself with organizations and groups of people who are trying – below the radar of even the Israeli media – to bring people together across the differences that usually divide them. This meant going to gatherings of Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Bahai, and Druze religious leaders where we shared our commitments to peace and our different perspectives about how it could be achieved. This meant participating in dialogue groups between Arab and Jewish Israelis, hearing about both the conflicts in Israeli society and the yearning for a shared life of peace. This meant attending conferences where politicians, academics, and regular citizens offered diverse views on where Israeli civil society is headed and what can be done to influence its direction. And this meant travelling over the Green Line to meet Palestinians and Israeli Jews and hear their very different opinions on conflict and the possibilities for peace.

What was striking to me was that whether I was in a Druze village or in the center of Haifa, in an Arab-Israeli community school or in downtown Tel Aviv, in the Moroccan Sephardic synagogue in my neighborhood or in the Ahmediyan Mosque in Kababeera, I felt at home. Seeking out and interacting with the immense diversity of Israeli society – its social diversity, economic diversity, religious diversity, and ethnic diversity – made me feel not out of place but more firmly rooted in place. It didn't matter whether I was speaking Hebrew or Arabic or English, and it didn't matter if the person I was talking to originally came from halfway around the world or had lived on their land for hundreds of years. It didn't matter if they expressed opinions I agreed with or ones that made me profoundly uncomfortable, and it didn't matter if they understood me completely or misinterpreted me entirely. I felt at home. Why?

Now you might say, "Well, Adam, you're an anthropologist, right? You seek out difference and enjoy it. That's your thing." And certainly there is some truth to that. But I think it's not just me, and it's not just because I'm an anthropologist. I believe there is something profoundly Jewish about thriving and finding home in difference, and it is rooted in the Biblical description of the place that in Jewish imagination always represents home: the Land of Israel. As I talked about last year, from the earliest

descriptions of that Promised Land in the Torah, it is imagined as a land of diverse landscapes and even more diverse peoples, always referred to as the land of the Hittites and the Hivites and the Jebusites and all the rest. In the following books of the Bible, when the Israelites enter the Land, what do they do with all of this diversity? Do they eliminate it? No. They make treaties and arrangements with the inhabitants of the land and live there with them. The diversity of the peoples of the land becomes one of its defining features. The Israelites have their conflicts and their disagreements with those peoples, sometimes going to war with them and sometimes finding ways toward peace, but they never cease having to deal with them. The Israelite vision of home always includes the presence of others unlike themselves.

We see that vision active in the State of Israel today. It is not the homogeneity of the Israeli population that draws it together; it is its diversity. Avi and Mati saw it in their school, where Jews of many shapes and colors whose families came from all over the world studied together with Druze kids from the villages south of Haifa. They saw it in their classes when they discussed the many communities that make up Israeli society and the complicated relationships between them. Zeke saw it in his photography classes, where native speakers of Hebrew, Arabic, Tigrinya, and English spoke Hebrew together as they learned about the finer points of their craft. Cheryl and I saw it in the marketplaces of Haifa, where Arab shopkeepers learn Russian phrases for the sake of their Jewish customers. I saw it in dialogue groups where Arabs and Jews lean in close to hear and try to understand the concerns of the other. And I saw it in world of music in Israel, where people who may disagree about everything else come together for the sake of creating something beautiful.

Of course, the vision of home as a place of diversity is not the only one active in Israel today. Even in the Torah we see a competing vision of home as a place of uniformity and sameness, a place where everyone is like us. This is expressed most strongly in the book of Deuteronomy, which paints a fantasy picture of somehow expelling all of those diverse peoples from the land so that the Israelites will not be influenced by them and will stick to the worship of God and the teachings that Moses has given them. We know that this dark fantasy is never fulfilled, and subsequent Jewish tradition largely rejects it. Unfortunately, in Israel today there are voices that are trying to resurrect that fantasy, arguing that the only way for us to feel at home is to banish all those who are unlike us. We saw this, too, in our time in Israel. We saw politicians and other leaders make narrowly-focused appeals that promised to protect “us” at the expense of “them.” We heard them declare that group A is necessarily opposed to group B and that coexistence between the two is impossible. We witnessed fear-mongering and warnings of the dangers of this or that kind of person, as well as physical attacks, arson, and murders justified by the rejection of difference. If you think I am being deliberately vague about who these voices were and where these attacks were coming from, you’re right – because they came from the right, the left, and the

center, from Jews and from Arabs, from religious people and from secular people. Fear of the other is a base human instinct, and it is present in Israel as it is everywhere. But the forces pushing the other way, pushing for tolerance, acceptance, and even celebration of the diversity of Israeli society, always gave us hope.

Outside of the Land of Israel, from the Second Temple period down to the present day, the vision of home as inherently diverse has stayed with us and allowed us to thrive in many of the places that Jews have come to call home across the world. This is the vision that drives and sustains this community, and it is one of the reasons this feels like home to me as well. Here, we have learned how much we can gain from each other when we honor the diversity of voices, perspectives, practices, and thoughts that Jewish life has to offer. Here, we put into practice the truism that there is more than one way to be Jewish. And here, we take it as given that running up against others' differences is part of the point of being in community with each other in the first place. Of course, it has not always been easy for us either. Sometimes our differences have threatened to tear us apart. But the vision of home as an inherently diverse place has sustained us when things got tough, and we have always emerged stronger because of our continued willingness to struggle to maintain our diverse home for ourselves and for each other.

In the larger society of the U.S., though, we see evidence of the same dark vision of home that argues that homogeneity is the only way to security and stability. We see it in the horrific violence in Charleston and elsewhere directed against people of color, and we see it in attacks on people whose sexual or gender identity somehow offend others. We see it in the hateful rhetoric employed against Muslims and other minority religious groups, and we see it in the policies of our wealthy nation that have allowed only a handful of refugees from current crises to enter this country in the face of the thousands in desperate need. Some might see in these shameful actions the last gasps of the tyranny of the majority over the minority, a natural reaction to the loss of privilege that growing equality has caused. But even in this analysis, there is all the more reason to struggle against the vision of home that requires that diversity be obliterated. We are obligated by our Torah and by our history to spread the opposite vision and to embody it in the way we choose to live our lives.

In addition to diversity, Jewish visions of home have also long depended on recognition – the ability of each person to be recognized and known by others. The ancient rabbis lived in a world of face-to-face interaction, and they saw recognition as the very core of social life. In the Talmud, one explanation of the earliest time one can say the morning Sh'ma is “when you can see the face of your friend at a distance of eight feet.”² You don't truly know it is morning – your day can't truly begin – until you

² Babylonian Talmud Berachot 9b.

can see and recognize the face of a fellow human being. Being in community with others whom you can recognize and know is central to our ability to perform the mitzvot that are at the center of the rabbinic vision of Jewish life. To take just one example among many, the mitzvah of *tz'dakah* – righteous charitable giving – may seem to be a simple matter of dropping a coin into a box for the needy. But the ancient rabbis see it differently, as illustrated in the story of Mar Ukba:

In Mar Ukba's neighborhood, there was a poor man under whose door Mar Ukba used to [secretly] slip four coins every day [without being seen]. One day the poor man said, "I will go and see who does this kindness for me." It so happened that on that day Mar Ukba had stayed late at the house of study and his wife was accompanying him [on his way home]. As soon as the poor man saw the two bending down over the door [to put the money in], he ran out after them. They fled from him and entered a furnace from which the fire had just been swept [so that it was still very hot]. Mar Ukba's feet were scorched [but not his wife's], and so she said to him, "Place your feet on mine [and I will save you from being burned]." He was upset [because she appeared to be worthy of a miracle but he was not], so she explained it to him, "I am usually at home and so my care for the poor is face-to-face."³

For the ancients, if you are truly going to help others, you have to see them face to face so that you have can learn what they need. What type of food are they used to? What clothing fits their occupation? What resources will help them to develop so that they no longer will require the assistance of others? Only by seeing others and recognizing their uniqueness can one hope to truly fulfill the mitzvah of *tz'dakah*.

This vision of home as a place where one is recognized and known is also very alive in Israeli society. We were surprised at how many interactions – from subscribing to the newspaper to getting a library card – required that we see another person face-to-face, situations that in the U.S. would be handled entirely via email or the internet. Knowing people and turning to them for help and advice is still a strong part of Israeli culture, and it made us realize how anonymous American culture can sometimes be. Part of the push for community that we see in both places comes from this desire of human beings to be recognized and known, and we enjoyed coming to be known among the people and in the places that we frequented while in Haifa. One of the things we love about this community is that we see and are recognized by our neighbors and friends as we shop at the Coop, bike through the Wissahickon, and walk along the streets. It is one of the things that make both Mt. Airy and Haifa feel like home.

³ Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 67b.

But this experience of recognition is in danger both here and in Israel. Economic barriers such as housing costs and social barriers of ethnicity and race distance people from each other and make it less likely that we will know and be known by others, especially others who are different from us. In its place, we see the rise of the concern for privacy, the somehow prized ability to be unknown and unrecognized, to operate in a sphere of anonymity. Although privacy of course has its value, too great of an emphasis on it robs us of the ability to form social bonds with each other, to feel bound and obligated by each other's needs, and to create a community that feels like home. Religious communities like Germantown Jewish Centre work against this trend. Here we deliberately seek to interact with those like and unlike us face to face. Here we get to know each other and what each of us needs, and we form bonds strong enough to obligate us to one another and to form common cause with each other. In Israel, organizations like Makom ba-Galil, the Galilee Foundation for Value Education, and the Jerusalem Center for Christian-Jewish Relations are working to build up civil society and to get those who are not alike to talk and interact with each other. When Arab kids from a Galilee village can talk and work with Jewish kids from Haifa or Akko, when Jewish and Christian residents of Jerusalem can see the ways they can help each other, they, too, form connections across all that might divide them, and they resist the anonymization of Israeli culture. These efforts both here and there give us hope. But we should not think that the ability to be known and recognized can be taken for granted. It is one of the things in our modern world that is the most fragile and the most at risk. Without it, our empathy, our solidarity, and our commitment to care for each other can start to disappear.

Finally, Jewish understandings of home require both a clear vision of what is broken and a clear commitment to repair it. To be home is to be able to see the immense potential inherent in a place and its people while at the same time being able to see the work that needs to be done and the changes that need to take place to make our vision of home a reality. Cracks and flaws in our friends' houses rarely bother us; we hardly notice them. But the same flaws in our own homes can drive us to distraction because we feel the obligation to set them right. In medieval Jewish texts, this obligation to repair the world is expressed through the metaphor of *tikun ha'olam*. Although this phrase is common today, the idea of *tikun* actually comes from the world of Jewish mysticism. Mystics understand our world to be in a state of cosmic brokenness, with shards of light, sparks of divinity scattered throughout it. Our task, our holy task as partners with God, is to use the vision given to us by God to recover these shards of light, to repair what has been shattered. The vision of the heavenly world that we cannot see must guide our actions in the world that we can. Paradoxically, in the shattered and broken parts of our world we see most clearly the potential for uplift and for the creation of something holy.

That special, dual vision of divine promise and prosaic reality is a key feature of the Jewish understanding of home. When we are at home, that does not mean that we have found that special place where everything is perfect, where every act accords with our values, and where every social arrangement sings of justice fulfilled. Instead, when we are at home, we can see the divine potential lurking even when we know that realizing that potential will take huge investments of time and energy. Home is that place where we choose to invest our energy to turn potential into reality, to move a place and the people in it toward equality, justice, and love.

In Israel, we saw wonderful work in progress aimed at creating a more just society, and we also saw the immense amount that remains to be done to truly realize the vision of Israel's founders and of the Jewish people. We met amazing people committing their lives toward moving Israel more in the direction of justice. Yes, Israel is a miracle, and yes, there is injustice, racism, discrimination, and violence there that should not be. We call attention to these and struggle to address them not because we don't love Israel enough or because we feel separate from it. On the contrary – our very ability and willingness to see Israel's flaws springs from our love for the country and our feeling that it is home.

We feel the same obligation here in the U.S., when we see the myriad flaws and unrealized potential that abound in American society. Racism, homophobia, structural injustice, discrimination, educational inequality, lack of help for the poor – all of these are problems we are called upon to speak up about and to work to change precisely because this is our home and we love it. Here again, there are opposing voices that will argue that any criticism – whether of Israel or of the U.S. – is a sign of betrayal and disloyalty. We must push back hard against those voices. As Rabbi Noa Sattath of the Israel Religious Action Center said to our GJC Israel Trip group when we met with her in December, "Love is what is left when you know the truth." To love is to know both the beauty and the flaw in the beloved. Without a clear vision of both the immense potential of a place and people and the extent to which current reality falls short of the ideal, we can never truly be home.

How we see home affects everything about how we act toward others who share it with us, and I want to emphasize again that it can be a matter of life and death. Instead of a place in which everyone is the same and everyone is like us, Jewish stories envision a place full of diversity and difference where we find our place by encountering others unlike us and connecting across and through our differences. Instead of a castle in which our privacy and anonymity are protected, Jewish texts imagine a place of face-to-face interaction where we know and are known by those among whom we live and where we become personally obligated to one another and involved in each other's lives. Instead of a place of perfection in which criticism is treason, Jewish teachings conceive of a place in which we have a clear vision of both immense divine potential and

the gap between that potential and current reality. If we are truly going to build a world of security and peace for all, we need to actively advocate against the darker visions of home that we see around us. When we promote a diverse view of home rather than a homogeneous one, we change how we treat refugees and asylum seekers, helping them to find their way into our vision of home. When we encourage and practice face-to-face interactions that allow us to be recognized and known rather than the anonymization of society, we change how we treat our neighbors. Their worries and troubles become our own, and we reaffirm that all kinds of lives – black, brown, white, blue, and rainbow – matter to us. When we speak about and work to repair those places where our home falls short of our vision of what it could be rather than staying silent and inactive in the name of so-called loyalty, we change how we approach changing the world; it is not someone else's obligation – it is our own.

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Today, we seek to return home, home to ourselves and home to each other. What kind of home will we build together? It's up to us, to all of us. May God grant us the vision, the strength, and the tenacity to transform the boundaries of a place and the collection of people in it into a just and welcoming home for us all this year. *L'shanah tovah tikateivu.*