

# Interpreting the Map of Our Lives

**High Holy Days 5769**  
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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

**V. Returning Home**  
Or  
**Arriving at our Destination**  
Morning of Yom Kippur  
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And so the journey continues. We continue praying, reflecting, studying, marching forward. We have each pulled out of our map to see if it agrees with the ground, and to see where we stand. We have each looked backwards to tell our story, to understand how we got here and who we are. We have each looked forward to plan a path for the future. Finally last night, we stared into the face of the abyss, the painful world when our map is destroyed, and how we carry each other through those times, as a supporting community, guided by our tradition, caring for each other.

However subjective the past and uncertain the future, we are now at the place we recognize, the place where we live, the now. Today is the tenth day of *Tishrei*, the tenth of the ten days of repentance – *aseret yemei Teshuvah*. So this morning I want to look at *Teshuvah* to focus us on this great day.

*Teshuvah*. We generally translate it as repentance, and think along the lines of becoming aware of our sin, feeling remorse for our action, making restitution, seeking forgiveness from the person we wronged and behavioral modification so as not to repeat the sin, finally, seeking atonement, the spiritual state of forgiven.

Something like that.

But the word literally means “turning” or “returning.” When we translate it as “turning,” we generally think of it as turning away from our wrong doings, our sinful ways. When we say “returning,” we often mean returning to our more righteous, higher image of our self.

We use the word at the end of every Torah service, as we did a couple of minutes ago, when the Torah goes back, we quote from the end of the Book of Lamentations: (5:21)

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּבָה [וְנָשׁוּבָה] חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:

“Return us God, to you, and we will return to you. Renew our days as of old.”

In the context of Lamentations, we are praying for a reunification, a return to closeness with God, and a return to the way it used to be.

Can't we just go back to the way it was, when we were close to each other. Before we drove each other apart, us driving you away by our bad behavior, our infidelity, our disobedience, our indifference to you, and you driving us away in anger and in judgment.

The story of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but for many of us, sounds a lot like the story of our lives. Can't we make it whole again? Won't you take us back and we will come back? Can't it be like it was?

The image here is “returning” as going home, going home to a place, and going home to a relationship that defines who we are, where we come from and where we are going.

If we can go to a very different source than the Book of Lamentations, there is a beautiful passage towards the end of Billy Crystal's *700 Sundays*.

Whether or not you saw Billy Crystal's Broadway show, you really should read the book he published from it. It is powerful.

Billy's father died when he was quite young, and the title *700 Sundays* reflects the amount of time he spent with his father – a little over thirteen years. But the book is really a memory of and a tribute to his family, in particular, his parents.

Billy writes:

"About a year before my mom passed away, it was a Saturday night in Los Angeles, very late, around 12:45 on a Saturday night, which actually makes it a Sunday. The phone rings and I panic, because when you're a Jew and the phone rings late at night, it means somebody's dead. Or worse, they want money. But no. It's Mom calling from the house.

"Mom, are you okay?"

'Yeah. I'm fine, dear."

"But Mom, it's three-thirty in the morning."

"I know. I just wanted to hear your voice, Bill. That's all. I woke up your brothers too, but I wanted to hear your voice."

"But you're okay?"

"Yeah. I just—I couldn't sleep. I've been having trouble sleeping, and I just couldn't sleep."

"Oh, really ..." I softly said, nodding my head. Her honesty was disarming.

I'm an insomniac myself. I mean, I've been up since 1948. I wanted to find out why she couldn't sleep because somehow it might help me. But, really, I just wanted the conversation to keep going on, because these kinds of conversations with your parents are best when they're not just your parents, but they feel like they're your friends.

"Mom, why can't you sleep?" There was a pause, and then . . .

"Oh, I'm listening for you boys."

I knew exactly what she meant. The cry in the middle of the night, "Mommy, I have a fever." The nightmares, "Mommy, there are pirates in the room!" Then as they get older, the sound of their cars pulling up in the driveway, the jingle of their keys in the front door lock, just so that you know that they're home safe. She was eighty-five years old now, alone in that house, her sons scattered across the country, but she was listening for us.

We sold the house. We had to. Without her in it, it really didn't make much sense to keep it. Somebody else owns it now, but it doesn't belong to them . . . because I can close my eyes and go there anytime I want."

Here is a mother, waiting for her children to come home. Here is a son, feeling the distance from his home, at least one of his homes. We feel the love, the warmth, and the separation. Somehow, the phone call isn't enough.

But at the end we also feel the author's deep reverence for his home. The home that is still his, even though it is owned by another family. The home that continues to survive, the home that he continues to inhabit in his memory and in his soul. This is a beautiful metaphor for his loving memory and enduring relationship with his "home," his parents. In rabbinic idiom, home, at least house, is a metaphor for the woman of the house, wife, mother. In today's idiom, it is a beautiful metaphor for our parents, mother and father.

Going home then is the possibility for a reunification, a return to the world where we were taken care of, where love was shown us, where we were loved no matter what.

*Teshuvah* then becomes not merely restitution and behavioral correction, it is about going home again.

So what does it mean to go home again?

Do we say in the innocence of youth, blown far off course by a twister, Dorothy's words: "There is no place like home. There is no place like home."

Now you and I don't have magical ruby red slippers, or silver ones like they were originally in Frank Baum's novel. Interesting side bar, does one have to do *Teshuvah* for dropping a house on a wicked witch?

You and I don't have faith that a shyster, snake oil salesman with a hot air balloon can take us home either. Though if you, like me, grew up going to the county fair every summer, at a time when the fair was more animals than fried snickers and oreos, a ride up in a hot air balloon can make one awfully nostalgic for the thrills of childhood.

But just as Glinda tells Dorothy that she had the power to go home all along, so too do we – and we don't even need magical shoes to do it.

As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

"The most unnoticed of all miracles is the miracle of repentance. It is not the same thing as rebirth; it is transformation, creation. In the dimension of time there is no going back. But the power of repentance causes time to be created backward and allows re-creation of the past to take place. Through the forgiving hand of God, harm and blemish which we have committed against the world and against ourselves will be extinguished, transformed into salvation. God brings about this creation for the sake of humanity when a human being repents for the sake of God."

For Heschel, clearly, *Teshuvah* is not simply a *mitzvah* or an opportunity for a fresh start. *Teshuvah* is a miracle. It does not allow us to travel backwards in time, he explains, it allows for time to be recreated. We change our past, our history, by doing *Teshuvah*. Remember from Rosh HaShanah, the interconnectedness between where we stand and how we got here? *Teshuvah* allows us to change the story of how we got here, to recreate our past.

So we can go home again, but the home we return to is not the same home we lived in the first time, it is changed. It is a new creation of our old home. It is a “new past.”

When Billy Crystal closes his eyes and returns to his old home, it is a new creation. He identifies it as the same house, but he knows that he is in his mind, in his memory, in his soul. He has gone home not in three dimensional space, but in spiritual dimension space. He has done *Teshuvah*, he has returned and been returned. He goes back not to the home of tragedy and loss, but to the home of love and nurture.

Thomas Mann creates a beautiful image of this in his *Joseph and His Brothers*. Mann writes of time as a rolling sphere. On the one hand, life is cyclical. We do return to the same place we were before. However, the ball moves forward, so even though we are in the same spot relative to the rotation of the sphere, the whole sphere has travelled forward in time and space, so we have arrived at the same spot in a new location. Think of it like a spiral traveling forward.

So *Teshuvah* allows us to return to the same place, though now moved forward in time. As Heschel teaches, the past has been recreated by a miracle, our story is different than the one we used to tell about our past. We are different than who we used to be.

But now the hardest part. We don't live in the world alone. We can do *Teshuvah* and recreate our story and our self. But others also make their own choices. They do or don't do *Teshuvah*. And we often think that repentance and atonement mean forgiving and forgetting. That is true in the heavenly sphere, but not on the earthly one.

God is praised as compassionate, because unlike a human being, when a person sins against God and then whole heartedly does *Teshuvah*, God loves them even more than before. They are even closer to God than before. The tradition is:

דאמר רבי אבהו : מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין שם ׀ צדיקים אינן עומדין שם

Rabbi Abbahu said: The place occupied by repentant sinners cannot be attained even by the completely righteous.

But we human beings are not like that with each other. We sin, hurt each other, do complete and total *Teshuvah*, but even when we are fully forgiven by the other person, it does not mean we return to the same state of our relationship. It may be the same relationship, but the sphere has rolled forward. *Teshuvah* may allow for us to recreate a better history shared

between us, than the one we shared before *Teshuvah*, but in this newly created history you and I may not be as close or as trusting as we were through the first rotation.

You can forgive a person who has done *Teshuvah* without every trusting them again. You can forgive them and harbor no ill will or anger, but not want to be with them anymore. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. In this world, *Teshuvah* wipes the slate clean from punishment, but it does not mean starting over.

So, even though we can go home, we are changed and home has changed. Billy Crystal lives in California. He used to be able to visit his boyhood home and his mom by visiting New York, now, he does so by: going to New York in his mind. (It's a more Jewish way of going home than James Taylor's.)

As we move towards the end of our exploration of maps, we also have moved from Broadway musicals to popular music.

We have looked around at where we are to make sure that the map agrees with the ground.

We have looked backwards at the travel log of our lives to see how we got here, to hear how we tell our story.

We have looked forward, planning as best we can the road ahead.

Last night, we shared stories of surviving the brutal destruction of our map by having community living Torah to carry us, and committing to be there for each other.

Finally, this morning we have spoken about going home – changed, grown, scarred, but still able to go home in our mind, in our memory in our soul.

First, a Jewish singer and bass guitarist, born in Haifa as Chaim Witz, son of a survivor, grew up Orthodox in New York, speaker of six languages, and started his career as a sixth grade teacher in Spanish Harlem. I mention his biography because those who know of whom I am speaking can chuckle, and those who don't, it's probably better that way – ask me later.

On an album from 1975, his band sang a beautiful song called "Beth." A song far removed from the normal genre of their music.

In the song, the singer sings of his love, a woman named Beth, who is waiting for him at home while he is working with the band, trying to make their music.

He sings:

Beth I hear you calling,  
But I can't come home right now,

Me and the boys are playing  
And we just can't find the sound.  
Just a few more hours, and I'll be right home to you  
Beth I hear you calling, oh Beth what can I do.

We know this experience, even those of us who have never been in a band. Home is calling. Home is where we want to be, but work requires us, or at least our perception is that it requires us, to be away. It keep us from going home.

There is a wonderful, subtle calling in the song – the name itself, Beth. The name, Beth, does derive from the Hebrew, from the name Elisheva. But in a fascinating twist, this derivative from Elisheva, Beth, is also the English cognate for BAYIT, home. We know this from a number of synagogues that carry “Beth” in their name, including the synagogue that built our building.

So the singer is longing to return home, and to return to his wife Beth, whose name also means home – art often transcends the intentionality of its creator.

Finally, one more song. Another Jewish singer, though one who didn't change his name. Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sing:

I'm sittin' in the railway station  
Got a ticket for my destination  
On a tour of one night stands  
My suitcase and guitar in hand  
And every stop is neatly planned  
For a poet and a one man band

Homeward bound  
I wish I was  
Homeward bound  
Home, where my thoughts escaping  
Home, where my music's playing  
Home, where my love lies waiting  
Silently for me.

This is the day to do *Teshuvah*, the day to turn back for home, to our origin, to our source, to our strength, to our deepest love. We wander, we travel, we work late, we stray, we get lost, we make excuses, but God leaves the gates open, stays up late waiting for our return.

We need help to get home. Like the young one who has travelled to far, we need God to send us a ticket, to lead us in our return:

הַשִּׁבְנוּ ה' אֵלַיךְ וְנָשׁוּבָה [וְנָשׁוּבָה] חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם:

“Return us God, to you, and we will return to you. Renew our days as of old.”

Dear God, in this coming year, please help us to return to you, help us to fill our days with substance and significance, help us to draw close to those who are most important in our lives. Please God, help us to turn, to return, to come. *Amein.*