

Kol Nidre 5787/ 2026 Returning Home
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A year ago, my mom moved into a retirement community after 57 years in our family home in Richmond, Virginia, where we lived since before I was born.

My mom had left my childhood bedroom perfectly intact.

My college admission letter was still thumbtacked to the wall by my desk.

On the desk, an 80's style push button phone with the coiled cord.

The shelves still held my Cabbage Patch doll and Garfield stuffed animals, and inside the drawers was my SONY walkman, Kodak disc camera, and cassette mix tapes.

It was like a museum of the 1980's, and over the last decades, when I'd go home to visit, as I went from young adult to adult, to adult, to um, whatever I am now, I'd sleep in my old room, with the plush purple wall to wall carpet and flowered wall paper, And read my old notes and letters (which is how we communicated back then in the olden days before the internet and cell phones), and I'd admire the ancient concert ticket stubs that were still on my bulletin board.

In preparation for my mom's move,

I made a few trips to Richmond to clear out my entire childhood,

but not before re-reading all of those notes and letters (boxes of them!), and reviewing all of my notebooks from high school and college (yes I had saved all of them) while listening to the old mix-tapes on the boom box.

It was an experience filled with lots of memories and emotions,

As I'm sure you've experienced if you've had to do such a clearing out of a home.

(Photos of my childhood bedroom and of my childhood friends holding some bedroom artifacts during one of my visits to Richmond. From left to right: highschool newspaper article about me in the Sound of Music, Cabbage Patch doll, Rubix Cube, Opus, Dressy Bessy, Mr Potato Head)



And then here locally, some recent changes required me to decide whether to move or stay in my current home, which I've lived in for the last 17 years. It's been a big and stressful decision and both of these processes with my childhood home and my current home got me thinking a lot about the meaning of home.

Teshuva has been understood in our tradition not just as repentance but also as returning home.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, [explained](#) how two of our great medieval sages differed in their understandings of teshuva.

Maimonides held that teshuva is about repenting and turning away from sin and he finds its biblical source in verses in Numbers about confessing before God.

But Nachmanides, just a couple of decades later, was a mystic,

in contrast to the rationalist Maimonides,

and he located teshuva in a different biblical source,

in verses in Deuteronomy 30 about "returning."

And so, Rabbi Sacks concludes, we have this double meaning of teshuva:

from Maimonides: Repentance.

and from Nachmanides: Returning home.

Maimonides' version is about "sin" and having done the wrong thing;

Nachmanides' version is about "homecoming" and having been in the wrong place, so to speak - in exile, alienated, not at home.

This Yom Kippur,

It's this latter notion of "returning home" I'd like to explore with you.

But first, what is home? What does it mean to feel at home,

so that we can return there?

Carole King sang: ♪ "Sometimes I wonder if I'm ever going to make it home again.

It's so far and out of sight..." ♪

Simon and Garfunkel sang: ♪ "Homeward Bound. I wish I was. Homeward Bound." ♪

John Denver sang: ♪ "Country Roads, Take me Home, to the place I belong..."

Steve Winwood in Blind Faith sang "and I can't find my way home" ... ♪

Hey, I could make a whole mix tape of songs about home and yearning for home.
(Actually, I did - but now it's called a [playlist](#), and I'll share it with you later)

There is certainly a universal need to come home and
a longing to feel at home. What is it?
Is it about the house? Our stuff? The way we feel in a physical place?
A person can certainly feel not-at home in their own house,
and sometimes we can feel at home when traveling on the road.
And our relationship to Home changes as our life changes:
a move to a new dwelling place, yes,
But also: a child leaves home and you become an empty nester,
Or, a death, divorce or struggle in the family,
or a new relationship or family member.
What defines feeling at home in our lives?
Is it our relationships? Is it something about how our soul feels?

Many in the American Jewish community have been experiencing a sense of
alienation from home.
As one of our members recently said to me,
"I've long felt politically homeless and alienated in this city but increasingly I feel
homeless in America."
Indeed, according to a [public research survey](#) done this summer,
most American Jewish adults are feeling a sense of political homelessness among
the parties and from the rise in antisemitism.
It's a strange and new feeling for most of us to not feel quite at home in our own
country.

We can't talk about the yearning to feel at home without acknowledging that
there are the very real crises of homelessness,
of refugees around the world,
of people displaced from their homes by war,
Of immigrants afraid to leave their homes in this country,
of those who've lost their homes in fires or floods caused by our changing climate.
I acknowledge the privilege of being able to reflect with you on the meaning of
home when I have a comfortable home to return to tonight.
But in this unpredictable and fast changing world,
"home" feels much more precarious for all of us.
In many ways our world has become unrecognizable -

Our country, our technology,
the structures we've relied upon to create order in our world,
I think there is a *collective* sense of alienation and dislocation,
in addition to the individual ways we grow distant or get lost in our lives.

Nachmanides' version of teshuva is exactly about returning home
When we are scattered and dislocated. In his [commentary](#)
on Deuteronomy 30, which describes God gathering us back in,
Nachmanides says: This is the mitzvah of teshuva,
As it is written וְהָשִׁבְתָּ אֶל לִבְבְּךָ “You will return to your heart” and
וְשָׁבְתָּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ “You will return to Hashem your God” (Deut 30:1-2)

Or to put it in contemporary terms, Estelle Frankel,
in her wonderful book *Sacred Therapy*, says it this way:
Teshuva is awakening to the ways that we have become spiritually disconnected,
to how far we've strayed from our home,
from our true selves. And then from the feeling of longing to return,
we find our way towards home. (see *Sacred Therapy*, chapters 6-7)
Frankel reframes Yom Kippur's idea of “sin” to mean:
that which distances us from God and
leads us to feeling alienated from our most whole and holy self.

The Polish Hasidic master, the [Sfat Emet, taught](#) the same thing.
He says Teshuva isn't about “sin,”
it's about returning and reconnecting to one's “root,”
recognizing how we've grown distant from our holiest values and Divine essence
and that allows us to start to return home.

It is this understanding of teshuva that I've had in mind when saying Psalm 27.
This Psalm is said every day during the month of Elul and throughout this season
of teshuva as a spiritual practice.

The most famous verse is the one that we always sing:

♪ “Achat Sha'alti Me'eit Adonai Otah Avakesh
Shivti B'veit Adonai Kol Yemai Chay'ai”

One thing I ask of God, this I seek:

To dwell in the house of God all the days of my life.”

What does it mean to dwell in the House of God?

Does the psalm mean literally? I don't think so.

I think it means to feel at home, with a capital H.
As in: God as Home, the home we yearn to return to.

Other psalms and texts describe God as Home.
Psalm 90 says “God, You have been our home in every generation.”
Psalm 23 that we’ll sing tomorrow in Yizkor says,
“V’shavti b’veit Adonai l’orech yamim
I shall dwell in God’s house for many long days.”
And in the Torah portion that we’ll soon read on Simchat Torah,
It says, *“M’ona Elohei Kedem*, the ancient God is a home.” (Deut 33:27)

There are so many metaphors for God in our machzor that can be hard for us to relate to: King, Judge, Father,
but what about God as “Home”?
The home that we long to return to?
What might that sense of Home mean to you?
What does “Home” feel like? [pause]

I know some of you were thinking about remodeling your kitchen! but
The Teshuva sense of Home doesn’t seem to be
about a physical structure and our stuff in it.
Rabbi Alan Lew, z”l, in his high holy day classic,
This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared,
Teaches that the high holy days are bookended on either side
by Tisha B’Av and Sukkot, which are both about the collapse of Houses.
Tisha B’Av is about the mournful collapse of the Temple in Jerusalem.
And Sukkot is the joyful sitting in an impermanent “house that calls attention to the illusory nature of all houses.”
Rabbi Lew’s take is that the journey of the high holy days is about feeling how we are estranged and dislocated and searching to come home and also paradoxically understanding that it’s not about the physical structure of a house.

(Although I would add, as a rabbi of a physical congregation,
that we do try hard to make everyone feel at home in this house,
in this *Beit* Knesset,
to feel welcomed, included, embraced, cared for.
I believe that having community that we all help create
is an essential part of feeling at home in our lives.)

This teshuva process of seeking to return Home -
Of feeling a sense of at-home-ness with God, with yourself,
with your people, with your life -
is more than the journey of the High Holy days, actually.
It's the Jewish story.

The main narrative of the Torah is the Israelites trying to get home to the
Promised Land from enslavement in Egypt.

And then for two-thousand years, our story was one of exile from home.
And our sages and mystics imagined that not only did we Jews go into exile, but
God is exiled and separated from God's own self:
Galut HaShechina, God's Divine Presence also went into [exile](#).

And in truth, it's not just our Jewish story, but also our human story, reflected in
all those songs that I put on [my playlist](#) for you,
and stories about yearning to return home.

Think of the Wizard of Oz. It's a mythic telling of our journey of teshuva:

"There's no place like home." (see Frankel, *Sacred Therapy*, p.128-129)

And while we don't have ruby slippers to click together to
magically transport us home,

We're like Dorothy with our community of fellow travelers,
Each seeking in our own ways, but in it together.

Along the way on our Yellow Brick Road, we learn about ourselves:
what we yearn for, what we are capable of,
maybe we discover our heart, our brain, our courage.

On Yom Kippur, we show up here to express what we lack and what we seek, and
hopefully over the course of this day we find it was already within us like the Tin
Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion.

If Teshuva is returning home, we can ask ourselves:

Where do we feel in exile from home?

Where are we distant from what we know to be our deepest values and our
holiest selves?

What would *Shivti B'Veit Adonai*, dwelling in the House of God,
be like?

We might feel pain and grief as we acknowledge the ways we've become alienated or our lives have gone off course.

But on Yom Kippur we find compassion and forgiveness for ourselves for the ways we have gone off track.

And I would suggest that there is a sense of being at Home, just by dwelling in that Divine Compassion and Forgiveness even if we don't get back to Kansas right away.

The poet David Whyte says that just acknowledging the way we are in exile is already turning towards home. He says it beautifully [like this](#):

“the ability to turn your face towards home is one of the great human endeavors and the great human stories.... No matter how far you are from yourself, no matter how exiled you feel... as a human being, all you have to do is enumerate exactly the way you don't feel at home in the world — to say how you don't belong — and the moment you've uttered the exact dimensionality of your exile, you're already taking the path back to the place you should be. You're already on your way home.”

Now, if this is our human condition,

do we actually ever get Home or

Are we always in the process of trying to return?

Yes. Probably both. I've been feeling this in the interplay between

Shivti B'Veit Adonai and *Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha* -

Shivti B'Veit Adonai, our Psalm of Teshuva that says we yearn to dwell in the House of God,

And *Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha*, a different verse from Psalms that is in our daily

“Ashrei”: “Happy are those who dwell in Your House”

We both feel our exile and the yearning for God's House and

We have moments of feeling that we are already there.

I love holding these two verses as a pair:

God, I *want* to return home and dwell in Your House, and

God, I'm *here, at home* in Your House.

We know we won't stay Home and we will go astray again,

which is why we nullified our vows in Kol Nidre,

But we'll always have the chance to return again.

Our great stories acknowledge that it's not really about staying at home:
At the end of forty years wandering in the wilderness,
to get home to the Promised Land, what happens?
Moshe dies and the Torah ends, and we start back at the beginning again!
Our epic story, our people's journey from exile to home -
and the Torah doesn't even include our arrival in the land!
Yes, that will happen in Joshua, but our tradition seems intentional in not
including our homecoming in the Torah as a way to say:
It's the journey of returning home that is the important part,
more so than the arrival.

It's the same with another ancient epic, the Odyssey.
Who saw the Christopher Nolan movie version recently?
When Odysseus finally (spoiler alert!) returns home to Ithaca after 20 years of the
hero's journey, he doesn't stay.
He realizes that he's changed, and everything has changed,
and he leaves once again.

And so too with Teshuva: we seek to return Home,
Shivti B'Veit Adonai, to dwell in the House of God,
But each Yom Kippur, we are different, like Odysseus,
Our lives are different, our world is different.
As they say, "you can't go home again."
That is the other paradox of teshuva as Returning Home:
Each year, we seek to return home,
but what is home for us is always changing, just as we are always changing.
We can't just go back to what Home was for us in past years.

So where does that leave us?
With a lot of reflections about Teshuva as Returning Home.
I invite you to consider for yourself: What does Home feel like?

I've tried to answer this question for myself in this year of thinking about home.
For me personally, home feels like:
Connection with others and feeling whole in my relationships,
A sense of belonging, purpose, and authenticity,
where there is alignment between my inside and my outside.
Home is a place where I can feel vulnerable and safe at the same time,

And where I feel a sense of groundedness and refuge from all the tumult.
Those are my answers at this time, but I hope you'll find your own.
What does Home mean to you at this time in your life?
Where do you feel alienated and distant from Home and what might it take to return?
In becoming aware of that, you're already turning towards home.
In feeling the uncomfortable places of distance,
you're already taking steps of returning.
In allowing yourself to feel Yom Kippur's Divine compassion and forgiveness for yourself in the places of dislocation,
You're already moving from *Achat Shaalti* to *Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha*,
From yearning to return Home to being at Home.

♪*Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha*♪