



The Jewish Homecoming

Every American knows about the concept of a homecoming. Interestingly, it has surprising resemblance to the holidays of Tishrei. This is truly our opportunity to come home.

The Origins of Homecoming

Good Yom Tov!

Anyone who grew up in mainstream Middle America knows what a homecoming is.

By dictionary definition, “homecoming” means an annual event held by a college, university, or high school for visiting alumni. But the Homecoming event has definitely evolved over the years.

Today, homecoming is the party they throw when your local high school or college football team comes back from playing a game out of town. Everyone shows up to celebrate their return home—which is followed by a home game in which everyone hopes the home team wins.

At a homecoming, retired or former players (and students) from previous years are invited— turning the party into an event at which friends who haven’t seen each other for years catch up with each other, and the spirits run high.

But in preparation for the homecoming party, a homecoming king and queen are crowned at a separate event a day or so earlier. And a day

after the homecoming, you've got the dance night, at which the school spirit peaks—and the spirits usual flow fairly freely, too.

But how many of you know where the American tradition of homecoming began

It actually started over a century ago at the University of Missouri.

To preface, before that, college football games were held at neutral sites not associated with either team. But in 1911, the rules of college football changed—requiring that each game had to be played on the home field of either team. And so, to celebrate that first game, which was supposed to be played in Columbia, Missouri, the team's home base, the coach wanted a lot of fans to attend so as to encourage his team. So he issued an emotional appeal to all graduates to “come back home”—and tens of thousands of graduates responded to his call and came to the college to watch the game. And that's how the American tradition of homecoming began.

The Yom Kippur Homecoming

And that takes us straight to Kol Nidrei.

So here we are, just before the Kol Nidrei prayer. And if we want to define Yom Kippur with just one word, we would go with “teshuvah.” Now in English, that's commonly defined as “repentance,” which in turn means regret.

So, there are those who privately think that if Yom Kippur is a day of regret—and if that be the case, they have nothing to do in synagogue simply because don't they think they did anything over the past year that they now regret.

On the other hand, there are those who think that since they did so many things that weren't good, they're now lost—they're sure that G-d will not forgive them, so why even try?

But along comes the Rebbe (Likutei Sichos Vol. II, pg. 409), and says that the correct translation for the word “teshuvah” is “return.” After all, the soul of every Jew is “truly ‘a part of G-d above’ ” (as Rabbi Shneur Zalman teaches in Chap. 2 of the Tanya)—and so when that soul comes down into the physical universe, it so happens that it gets a bit distant from its root and source.

But on Yom Kippur, G-d calls to each soul to return—G-d says to the soul, “Come home!” As the Prophet Yirmiyahu (3:14) puts it, “Shuvu, banim”—return, children. And this call applies to every Jew as he or she is—even the greatest tzadik wants to return to his root and source, meaning to get closer to G-d; even the proverbial “rasha” (sinner) can come home, and ultimately wants to.

So Yom Kippur, my friends, is the Jewish homecoming. On Yom Kippur, every Jewish “graduate” comes back home to Judaism and synagogue.

And just like you have a coronation of king and queen before a homecoming, the Jewish Nation has a coronation of its own a week before its homecoming. (You guessed it! Rosh Hashanah.)

Each Holiday’s Element

On Rosh Hashanah, we blow the shofar. And one of the reasons we do so is because on this day, we crown G-d as King. And just like they play horns at a coronation (or for those of us Americans, the horns of the U.S. military bands at a presidential inauguration), we play the shofar to coronate (or inaugurate) G-d as King (or President) of the universe.

In fact, in the Rosh Hashanah prayers, we ask G-d, “Rule over the entire universe in Your Glory... and appear in the splendor of Your majestic might over all dwellers of the land of your earth.” Put simply, we’re asking Him to reveal His power and to show the entire world

that there is a king of the world, that “there is an owner to this house,” to the point that “שׂידע כל פעול כי אתהפעלתו” and “everyone who has a breath of life in his nostrils shall declare that the L-rd, G-d of Israel, is King, and that His Kingship has dominion over all.”

Now, how would G-d reveal that He manages the universe?

So the Rebbe says that from time to time, open miracles do occur, of the type described by the verse (Yeshayahu 52:10), “The L-rd has revealed His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations...”

For example, the 12 young soccer players and their coach who got trapped in that collapsed cave in Thailand. The whole world was worried about them and prayed for them. Their chances of rescue were very low and it was estimated that it would take months to get to their assumed location—but then a mighty miracle happened and they were all brought back healthy and well.

So on Rosh Hashanah, when we crown G-d and accept Him upon us as King, we ask Him to make our work lighter by revealing His own power in the universe—“All the inhabitants of the earth will recognize and know that every knee should bend to You.”

And we do that before our homecoming party.

But then, Yom Kippur comes—Game Day between two opposing teams, between the two souls that battle each other for control of the person, between the divine soul and the animal soul. And in this battle, we’re not just fans who come to root for our team, but we’re players *on* the team. We are the ones who must defeat the other team within us, the team that drags us down and constantly distracts us with our material daily needs. And then, when we win the battle, we blow the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur as a sign of victory.

But the homecoming isn’t over there! A few days later, we’ve got

dance night—you know, the event that everyone attends dressed to the nines. For us, the homecoming dance is Simchas Torah, when we dance in the synagogue with the Torah scroll and take tremendous joy in it. And just like there are always those at the homecoming dance who have just a bit too much to drink at the homecoming dance, we also say “L’chaim!” and party on Simcha Torah.

When She Came Home in Venice

Now in Chabad, we have another homecoming of our own. Every November, all of the Rebbe’s shluchim converge on New York for a massive convention that concludes with a giant banquet. And in February of each year, you have the shluchos convention, at which thousands of shluchos from all over the world gather together for an extended weekend over which they meet friends, learn new things, and recharge.

Now at these banquets themselves, there is a reserved seat for everyone—but at the events before the banquet (like workshops and lectures), seating is open, with everyone finding whatever seat they can get.

So at a recent convention, two shluchos from Israel found themselves looking for seats at one of the pre-banquet events. Since we’re talking about thousands of women attending, it could become an unpleasant experience—but after a long walk around the hall, they finally found a table at which two chairs were unoccupied.

So down they sat, and everyone already at the table introduced herself. One of those shluchos said that she was from Venice, Italy. The shluchah from Israel was suddenly very moved—and with tears in her eye, she told her colleague from Venice, “You saved me!”

She went on to relate how nine years earlier, she was an ordinary Israeli single girl from a nonobservant family who at the time was

touring Europe with friends. One day, for no particular reason, she decided she wanted to go to Venice. So she left her friends and hitched her way to Venice.

I guess she couldn't have been that far because two hours later, that's when she arrived. She got out of the car with no idea of where to go. She didn't know anyone there and didn't have any money with which to take a hotel room. So she wandered around all day, ate a bit at some restaurants, and decided with nightfall that she'd spend the night at a lovely park she came across. But the very minute she wanted to step in, a guard stepped forward to lock the gates. She was shocked. She asked him why he was locking the gates—in Israel, park gates are never locked. The guard pleasantly informed her that in Venice, parks are closed from dusk to dawn— and with that, he locked up and left. After he left, she climbed over the fence, jumped into the park and felt happy to be sleeping in a secure, locked location. But early the next morning, the same guard woke her up and unceremoniously marched her out of the park.

That whole day, she wandered around Venice again until she found the old Jewish Ghetto. And of course, the Jewish Ghetto has a Chabad center. By the time she walked in to Chabad, it was already in the afternoon, and the place was quiet, with the open front room set up for tourists with computers and so on. She thought to herself, here's a chance to rest and call home to tell them where I am, etc.

Suddenly a young woman walked in on her. She saw her sitting at the computer and said to her, "Hi! Today's Yom Kippur—and you're invited to join me for the Neilah prayers!"

When she heard that, she burst out crying. She said that she was a completely non-religious single who had no connection to any religious—but that she had always taken care to fast on Yom Kippur, and now, she discovered that she hadn't even known that today was

Yom Kippur!

So the shluchah from Venice calmed her down and told her that she should come together with her for the prayers and then break the fast together with them. So she joined—but for some reason, she didn't feel comfortable in the place. She had never even been in a synagogue! The prayers ended and she joined the crowd for the post-fast meal. At the end of the meal, she got up to leave, but the shluchah asked her if she had a place to sleep. She replied that she'd be sleeping in the park. But the shluchah didn't let her leave. Instead, she arranged a bed for her in the study of her own home.

That night, she couldn't fall sleep, so she took a random book off the shelf to read. It was the *Tanya*. She read some of it and understood a little—but more than that, she perceived that there was something lofty and spiritual here, and it pricked her conscience. In any case, she decided to leave early the next morning.

So out she stepped into the streets of Venice, drifting around the canals a whole day. But then, another Chabadnik manning a tefillin stand met her and discovered that not only was she Jewish but also spoke Hebrew! He suggested she come to a class in *Tanya*. This time, she already knew what he was talking about, and she agreed.

After the class, the rabbi convinced her to go back to Israel and reorganize her life anew. And that's exactly what she did—and now, nine years later, she was a shluchah herself who “happened” to be sitting across that very same shluchah from Venice.

And so, my friends, the lesson is this: Yom Kippur is a day containing a special power to bring

Jews home. As halachah states, “Itzumo shel yom mechaper”—the essence of the day itself atones. There's something about the day itself that magnetically pulls Jews to synagogue. And that is what

pulled that Jewish girl into a Chabad center in Venice, and what has pulled us all here today.

And that, my friends, is our annual homecoming.

And, of course, anyone who participates in the Jewish homecoming is also invited to the dance— which takes place the night of Simchas Torah. See you all there!

Good Yom Tov!