

*Returning to Each Other And Ourselves:
How Do We Embrace Our Post-Pandemic Journeys?
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Kol Nidre 5782*

Honi Ha-Meagel, Honi the Circle Maker was journeying on the road as he saw a person planting a carob tree.

Curious about this, he asked the person planting the tree:

"How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?"

"Seventy years." was the answer.

Honi then asked: "Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?"

The person planting the tree responded: "I found already grown carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted those for me, so I too plant these for my children."

We often tell this well-known story, on *Tu B'Shvat*, on the New Year of the trees. What comes after is also known. Honi falls asleep for seventy years and when he wakes up he sees someone next to the carob tree. Honi asks them if they are the person who planted it.

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The answer: “I did not plant this tree, it was my grandparent”

But the story does not end there. The Babylonian Talmud¹ tells us that after seventy years, Honi went back to the *Beit Midrash*, to the House of Study where, it is told to us, he used to settle any difficulty that they had when learning. Honi was known in the House of Study before his seventy years of sleep. As Honi entered the *Beit Midrash*, he introduced himself, but no one believed him to be *Honi Ha-Meagel*. He was devastated, and hurt. Honi prayed for mercy, and he died.

Rabbah, a third generation Rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud explains that this story is an example of the phrase: “*o havruta o mituta*” -- Give me *havruta*, give me companionship, give me partnership or give me death.” The tragic ending of this story of Honi, is that in his coming back after seventy years of sleep, the loneliness was too great for him to bear.

There is another story about *Honi Ha-Meagel*, this story is about his “grandfather” who had the same name, and is told in the Jerusalem Talmud². This story is not well-known.

¹ The Story is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate of Ta’anit 23a

² Jerusalem Talmud Ta’anit 16b

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It goes something like this:

Near the time of the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem, Honi went out to a mountain. Before he got there, it rained. Honi went into a cave. Once he sat down there he fell asleep. And Honi remained sound asleep for seventy years. Now, during that time that he was asleep, the first Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed but not only that, it was also rebuilt a second time. As he woke up after this long sleep, he went out of the cave, and he saw a world completely changed. He couldn't recognize it. An area that had been planted with vineyards in the past, now produced olives. And an area planted with olives before, now produced grain.

As he met people he asked: "What has happened in the world?"

"Don't you know what has happened?" they said to him.

"No!" Honi responded.

People then asked him, "Who are you?"

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I am Honi the Circle Maker.

The people knew who Honi was, they remembered that when he used to go into the Temple courtyard his presence would illuminate it.

Honi then went to the Temple -- to the new, rebuilt one -- and as he entered he illuminated the place.

As he did that, he recited the verse from Psalm:

בְּשׁוּבַ יְהוָה אֶת־שִׁבְתָּ צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים:³

“When Adonai brought us back to Zion, we were like those who dream.”

As I read these two stories together it seems to me that they can offer to us two models of what returning from seventy years of sleep can look like and specifically, as the story is told in the Yerushalmi, how we return from Exile.

³ Psalm 126:1

Both of them, grandfather Honi and grandson Honi, fell asleep for seventy years and a lot happened during that time. The number seventy symbolizes the fullness of life, as *Pirkei Avot* teaches us.⁴ When they wake up, they see a different world around them, a world that they have a hard time recognizing.

Honi, the grandson, is not recognized and he can not bear the process of re-entering a world that looks nothing like the one he knew before. The tragedy of his story is that he doesn't know how to re-enter. He cannot adapt because he doesn't have the tools.

The grandfather's story presents us with a different model. He also doesn't recognize his new reality and his new surroundings, but as he re-enters the Temple, a new one, a new future that has been rebuilt, he is able to illuminate it.

The words from the psalm *הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים*, *we were like dreamers*, perhaps says that those seventy years, were just a bad dream, the seventy years of destruction of the first temple and of exile were just a nightmare and now we are back to a new possibility.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 5:21

The two stories of Honi, as told in the two different Talmuds, one as a grandfather and one as the grandson, are perhaps the same story telling us about a different perspective of how we meet again.

When I consider both of these two narratives together, they invite a common question: “How do we return to each other and to ourselves after what has been a very long time of distancing, of separation, of pain -- in some way, of exile?” Honi, the grandson can’t bear it. Honi, the grandfather walks into it filled with light and possibility.

A few months ago, Dr. Brené Brown -- a globally-renowned researcher on vulnerability -- invited Priya Parker, author of “The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters” to speak on her podcast about returning to gatherings again, after 18 months of isolation, distancing, and collective trauma⁵.

In their engaging conversation, they invite us to think about this moment as an opportunity to re-enter the world perhaps a bit differently. They invite us to ask questions like “What have we learned? Should we fall back into our regular ways of

⁵ <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-priya-parker-on-how-we-return-and-why-it-matters-part-1-of-2/>

being and gathering? Or do we have an opportunity for a new way? How do we reinvent our gatherings? What worked before, what worked during the pandemic, and what didn't?"

Although their conversation mostly focuses on how to go back to the workplace and on offering tools for leaders of organizations, I think they speak profoundly to all kinds of gatherings and the process of re-entry.

Priya Parker encourages us to name and articulate this moment. A moment of transition, which can bring awkwardness and make us feel uncomfortable. Do I hug you? Do I shake your hand? How do I say no, and am I going to be judged for doing something a bit different than most?

Priya Parker tells us that we will all experience some micro-moments of perceived rejection during the next many months. I may put my hand forward to shake yours and you don't reciprocate. Or I may invite you to a gathering but you decide not to come just yet. Naming this, she says, is the first step.

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What Priya Parker encourages the most is to have worthy conversations. She tells us that this moment can be a beautiful and courageous moment for creativity. She encourages us to listen deeply and then make decisions on how we move forward with intention.

This moment of transition can be painful, but can also be an opportunity to name what we are facing. A return. A return that is perhaps a journey to a new place, to a place less known to us.

And isn't that what *Teshuva* is about?

Teshuva is the core practice and guiding principle of this season. *Teshuva* means Repentance, return, the knowledge that change is possible, that there is no such thing as, "it is what it is."

Teshuva tells us that we humans are capable of encountering what is ahead differently. Not necessarily going to our default. That is what *teshuva* encourages us and challenges us to do. *Teshuva* is the knowledge and the belief that we can change, that others can change, and that we actually have the power to facilitate such change.

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Maimonides in *Hilchot Teshuva*, reminds us that true *teshuva* happens when we are in the same situation and we do not make the same mistake:

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה. זה שפא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופרש ולא עשה מפני
התשובה.

What is complete repentance? A person who faces once more a situation and has the power to repeat the violation, but does not do it, because of *teshuva*.⁶

So, if *Teshuva* is returning, but it is not returning to the same place, what is this process about? And how can it help us and guide us as we enter this New Year, a year that gives us an opportunity to encounter our lives, our relationships, our behaviors, our priorities differently?

I am going to invite you to an exercise.

I am going to ask two questions and give you time to think about them.

⁶ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:2

First question:

I want you to take a moment, to think now, about one thing, just one for now, that you do not want to go back to in the way it was before the pandemic started? For example you might consider your allocation of time. Was your schedule too full? Did you always say yes, to every social gathering? Did you work around the clock, never taking a break for lunch? How much or how little time did you spend in nature, praying, journaling or meditating? These are just examples. So, take a few moments and **choose one thing you do not want back in your life.**

Second question:

Take a moment to think about something you learned during these past eighteen months. Something about yourself, your loved ones, your community, something that you want to hold on as you move forward to this coming year with intention.

I ask these questions as I invite each of us to think about our return.

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Each of us is *Honi*, returning after seventy years of exile to a new place, a place where we are encountering new realities, some that we do not recognize and some that do not recognize us. We are all, both Honis, the grandfather and the grandson. As the grandson, we have moments of desperation, of fear, of anxiety, of feeling that this re-entry is too hard to bear.

But we are also the grandfather and we have an opportunity to imagine the last eighteen months not just as a dream or a nightmare but as a possibility of learning, to reenter the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple of Jerusalem, the new, slowly rebuilding future with light, with new intention and hopes.

I know that I have learned so much about myself but also about our community during this time. Over the past eighteen months, I have come to realize more than ever the power of community. We have found ways to stay connected, to strive for belonging even while separated and even when we were alone. Staying connected, feeling a part of community has been difficult for some, easier for others, and for some near impossible. But I never felt more, as I have felt in the past year, the importance of being part of a relevant, intentional and meaningful community. As a

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Rabbi, I have never felt more clarity of my role as a facilitator to allow our community to strengthen and deepen.

The first Shabbat that we had people in the Sanctuary early June, as I invited those present to do a call and response and I heard the voices of people singing back, I broke into tears.

I felt the void of a sanctuary empty for so long, I felt the sadness coming back on Fridays walking back home after leading a service, all alone and I felt tremendous gratitude for our community, for belonging. I am hoping that in whichever ways we are reentering, some at a slower pace and some at a faster pace, we have the capacity to do it in community, and with others as we illuminate the path forward.

The Book of Ezra tells us the story of the Return to Zion following the close of the Babylonian captivity. The Book begins with the telling of the story of the first return of exiles and the completion and dedication of the new Temple in Jerusalem.

As the story of return to Zion is told, we read how the Priests and the Levites and the chiefs of the clans came back:

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וְרָבִים מֵהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם וְרֵאשֵׁי הָאֲבוֹת הַזִּקְנִים אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ אֶת־הַבַּיִת הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּיָסְדוֹ זֶה הַבַּיִת בְּעֵינֵיהֶם
בָּכִים בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל וְרַבִּים בְּתְרוּעָה בְּשִׂמְחָה לְהָרִים קוֹל:

Many of the priests and Levites and the chiefs of the clans, the old men who had seen the first house, wept loudly at the sight of the founding of this house. Many others shouted joyously at the top of their voices⁷.

The elderly, those who have seen the first temple wept loudly, perhaps wept for the destruction, for the pain, for the loss, for the exile, for what could have been. And the others shouted joyously at the top of their voices. In celebration, in joy because the new temple was rebuilt, because there was a new opportunity, a new hope.

And then we read:

וְאִין הָעָם מִכִּירִים קוֹל תְּרוּעַת הַשִּׂמְחָה לְקוֹל בְּכֵי הַעָם כִּי הָעָם מְרִיעִים תְּרוּעָה גְדוֹלָה וְהַקוֹל נִשְׁמָע
עַד־לְמִרְחֹק:

The people could not distinguish the shouts of joy from the people's weeping, for the people raised a great shout, the sound of which could be heard from afar⁸.

⁷ Ezra 3:12

⁸ Ezra 3:13

The cry, the pain, the weeping, and the joy and the hope and the possibility became one. One, without distinction. Perhaps the two stories of Honi are just one. As we are all.

We hold in ourselves the pain, the loss, the suffering of the many months. For some the loss of loved ones, parents and grandparents, friends and acquaintances to Covid 19. For some loss of jobs, and fear for the future. Or loss of direction of how to move forward.

For some, deeper psychological pain and sadness and loneliness and desperation. For others, fear and anxiety from the constant not knowing if we will be ok. For most, tiredness, exhaustion from this too long and still ongoing public health crisis.

מִן־הַמְצָר קְרֵאתִי יְיָ עֲנֵנִי בְּמִרחֵב יְיָ

From this narrow place, I call you Yah, please answer me with expansiveness.

This past year has been a time of *metzar* -- we have walked on narrow places, narrow bridges, narrow and dark tunnels, narrow moments.

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My prayer is that we can embrace the two Honis in ourselves, the one that is in pain, but also, the Honi who re-enters and reclaims the future with light. Not defaulting to the places where we were; not returning to the same mistakes, the same behaviors, but moving forward with intention.

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