



*Parshat Matot-Ma'asei*  
**August 6, 2016 — 2 Av 5776**  
**Return Again**

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Shabbat shalom and chodesh tov! What an incredible week this has been—I feel so blessed to be here and am so looking forward to getting to know you over the coming year!

This week, I have had a Shlomo Carlebach song stuck in my head –[sung] "Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul." Do you know it? It's one of my favorites. Over the course of this week, every time I caught myself singing it I would start to chuckle. It's not that it's a funny song in any way, but I always associate it with the High Holidays and the process of Tshuva, and it's really early to be starting down that path.

As I was reflecting on it (because naturally after chuckling I would start to wonder why it came to mind) I kept thinking about how our lives sometimes direct us back to memories or associations and suddenly we are living in this moment and reliving a past moment at the same time. For instance, this week I kept thinking about what a beautiful coincidence it is that I am now working here at Temple Emanuel. Temple Emanuel, albeit a very different one in Colorado, is where my mom grew up and where she sang in the choir with my great-grandmother. The name feels like a touchstone for me to the stories about the music they made together and I can't wait to create memories of music and laughter and learning here.

So maybe the Carlebach memory came to me because I was thinking about stories and beautiful coincidences in life. Or maybe something else surfaced it in my heart :-). But as I kept thinking about this song, it kept feeling relevant for me in other ways.

[sung] "Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul. Return to who you are. Return to what you are. Return to where you are, born and reborn again."

Starting two weeks ago, we entered into a Jewish time-space of return. This period is often known simply as "the three weeks." Starting on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz and going all the way until Tisha B'Av, it is a time when we remember and return to a moment in Jewish history when our ancestors faced a terrible calamity. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, the city walls were breached and Jerusalem was besieged. On Tisha B'Av our Temple was destroyed and our ancestors had the daunting task of re-imagining a Jewish practice that could exist without a physical space or a sacrificial ritual which had been our primary means of communicating with and serving God.

And this summer, it feels especially raw to be remembering the destruction of our Temple when we are surrounded by Temples and lives which are being destroyed every day by senseless violence and terrorism. We don't need to look to history to feel the pain of public spaces torn apart. We don't need to look to history to feel the loss of lives to terrorism and conquering anger. Every day, we mourn those whose lives have been uprooted by violence. People like Rev. Jacques Hamel, a beloved 85 year old priest in France who was so committed to his community and to creating spiritual energy in the world that he chose not to retire, and hoped instead to continue working his entire life. Rev. Hamel, a happy and caring spiritual teacher, who was murdered his own church while he celebrated Mass with his community.

But this week, our tradition also invites us to return and remember a very different moment. In this week's parsha, we read about the exodus from Egypt. Only it's not the massive triumphant saga where God plucked us out from under the yoke of oppression and delivered us to the Promised Land. Instead, we read about the journey as if we were tracing the route of our ancestors on a map. As if God had sent Moshe and Aharon a sheet of MapQuest directions as they started out—you can almost hear the Divine GPS reading [in monotone voice] "from central Egypt, continue straight to Ramses. From Ramses, take the first right to stay on the route to Succoth. From Succoth, continue to Etham"...it goes on and on. Forty-two starts and stops, and this week we are remembering each step of the journey.

And it was a big journey. Because even though our ancestors were lifted from oppression and were granted the opportunity to serve a beneficent God rather than a tyrannical Pharaoh, they had to leave behind everything they had ever known and venture out into uncharted territory. Their

lives were turned completely upside-down. In Egypt, their days had been governed by people who told them what to do and when, and gave them the physical means for survival. Now, they were following a God they could not see, to a place they did not know where they had no physical means—no way of earning a living, no water, no food. They had no guarantee they would make it, and no picture of what “making it” would even look like. When I think about our ancestors’ journey, I marvel at the kind of strength, courage, and hope our ancestors must have mustered to take even the first step.

The truth is, we like our ancestors, live our lives step by step. Very rarely do we know exactly where we will end up, or how this moment leads precisely to where we need to be.

At 23, my mom was living in an ashram and travelled to India with her teacher. (I do have her permission to tell this story, by the way.) She had been feeling lonely and disconnected and found herself walking down the beach in Goa. She was singing under her breath without really paying attention, walking on the sand where the waves could kiss her feet, when suddenly she realized she was singing Mi Chamocha and burst into tears.

Two years later, she was back in Colorado. She had left the ashram and was trying to come back to Judaism. She came across an article which featured a Reb Zalman. The article listed his contact information at the bottom, and out of the blue she decided to call him. He talked to her for more than two hours. He said the only thing she needed to do to come back to Judaism was to say the Shema every day.

Ten years later, my mom had and married my dad, my sister and I were born, and we were living in the mountains of Colorado in a little town called Evergreen. It was tiny then! There was no walmart, no real shopping, no real entertainment. My dad was still working in Denver. It was a long commute for him and in order to make the hours in the car more interesting, he used to check out books on tape from the Evergreen Public Library. One day, my dad came home all excited. “Wendy!” he said (that’s my mom’s name), “Wendy, you have to listen to this book!” My mom pressed play, and out of the speakers popped the voice of the rabbi who had counseled her when she first wanted to come back to Judaism.

My parents followed Reb Zalman to Boulder and we were raised in the Jewish Renewal Community there. In a very real sense, I grew up in a vibrant Jewish community with a wise and inspirational rebbe because of a beach in goa and a song and an article printed in a random paper, and a librarian who chose to order a book by Reb Zalman to add to their collection. Life is full of beautiful coincidences.

[sung] “Return again, return again”

This week we are returning to two stories. On the one hand, we return to the story of our Temple and its destruction. We return to the story of how our ancestors overcame the most painful loss, and the limitations of the Judaism which they had inherited, to re-imagine a vibrant Jewish practice which could exist outside the walls of the Temple. We return to this story as proof of our resilience. That no matter how terrible a situation may seem, we have the ability to not only survive, but to thrive.

On the other hand, we return to the story of our ancestors as they left Egypt; the story that teaches us that when everything feels broken and our world turns upside-down, we just have to take the next right step.

[sung] “Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are born and reborn again”

Shabbat shalom!