

INVITING GOD HOME

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THE CORONATION OF God on Rosh Hashanah can be an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and control over the world. But it can also be something more desperate. When we see a world spinning out of control, we invite—maybe even demand—that God sit on the throne, and please, please, take charge of this world!

Through the last 10 years, it has often felt as if God was absent from our world, leaving that throne vacant. From COVID-19 to fragile democracies to the unbearable pain of October 7th and the war that followed, we have too often felt unmoored and unprotected. These painful realities can leave us feeling distant from God. In a more visceral and frightening way, it can feel as if we are witnessing God's departure, watching a world that used to be more stable come apart at the seams.

An especially poetic passage in the Talmud beautifully and painfully describes what it feels like to watch God leave us behind. It offers an account of what it might be like to watch God slowly, step by step, ascending to heaven and withdrawing from the world.

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה לא.
עֲשׂוּר מִסְעוֹת נִסְעָה שְׁכִינָה מִקְרָאִי:
מִכְפָּרֶת לְכְרוּב,
וּמִכְרוּב לְכְרוּב,
וּמִכְרוּב לְמִפְתָּן,
וּמִמִּפְתָּן לְחִצֵּר,
וּמִחִצֵּר לְמִזְבֵּחַ,
וּמִמִּזְבֵּחַ לְגִגַּי,
וּמִגִּגַּי לְחוֹמָה,
וּמִחוֹמָה לְעִיר,
וּמֵעִיר לְהָר,
וּמִהָר לְמִדְבָּר,
וּמִמִּדְבָּר עֲלֵתָה וְיָשְׁבָה בְּמִקְוָמָה —

שְׁנָאֵמַר: "אֵלַי אָשׁוּבָה אֶל מְקוֹמִי"
(הושע ה:טו).

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 31a

*The Shekhinah traveled ten journeys:
from ark cover to cherub;
and from cherub to cherub;
and from cherub to threshold;
and from threshold to courtyard;
and from courtyard to altar;
and from altar to roof;
and from roof to wall;
and from wall to city;
and from city to mountain;
and from mountain to wilderness;
and from wilderness she ascended and
rested in her place,
as it is stated: "I will go return to My place"
(Hosea 5:15).*

We can almost picture the Divine Presence flying out from the ark, and then moving slowly outward and upward. With each painful step, the Shekhinah moves away from us until, in the end, God has returned to God's original place in the heavens, and we are left alone. The talmudic poem paints a heartbreaking portrait of God's departure from our temple, from our city, and from our world. We might experience the news cycle similarly: witnessing the wreckage of each new tragedy can feel like watching God's presence float farther and farther away.

The talmudic poem ends with a line from the prophet Hosea, who channels God's words upon departure, "אֵלַי אָשׁוּבָה אֶל מְקוֹמִי" - I will go return to My place." At the end of the poem, God has returned to the heavens, and we are left here alone.

But Midrash Tanhuma offers a very different interpretation of this same verse. In fact, this complicated *midrash* offers two different ways to understand God's going and returning in relation to "God's place":

מדרש תנחומא בחקותי ג

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מה אני עושה כאן,
"אלך אשובה אל מקומי" (הושע ה:טו).

"אלך ואשובה" אין כתיב כאן, אלא "אלך
אשובה", שאילו היה כתיב "אלך ואשובה" לא
היה תקוה.

Midrash Tanhuma

BeHukotai 3

The Holy Blessed One said,
"What am I doing here? 'I will
go return to My place' (Hosea
5:15)."

It isn't written, "I will go **and**
return," but rather, "I will go;
I will return." For if it said,
"I will go **and** return," there
would be no hope.

The question is: When God returns, to where is God returning? Is it that God is returning back to where God came from originally (the heavens), or is it that God will eventually return back to us?

The *midrash* notices that there is no *vav*, meaning "and," between the two verbs here—nothing to grammatically conjoin the first part of God's statement, "I will go," to the second, "I will return." Had the two been conjoined, the implication would have been: "I will go and return back to My original place, to the heavens." But that is not what is stated in Hosea. There is no conjunctive *vav*. God states, "I will leave." But also, separately, subsequently, "I will return." Implying that God's ultimate return is not to the heavens, but back to us.

If, in the Talmud, this verse is a warning about God's departure only, in this *midrash* God's declaration is instead a promise: God always returns. The *midrash* emphasizes that the absence of a *vav* means that the statements are disconnected, and we can count on God's return. So there is hope.

The *midrash* goes on to offer a second close reading of the word "I will return" in this verse that is not only hopeful, but offers us agency in the longing for God's return:

אלא אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אעפ"י שאני
הולך יעשה תשובה ואני חוזר, מתוך צרה...
עושים תשובה, ואני מחזיר שכינתי.

Rather the Holy Blessed One said, "Even
though I leave, do teshuvah, and I return.
In the midst of pain... they do teshuvah
and I return my Shekhinah."

We are taught that even in times of deep pain, *teshuvah* can bring God's Shekhinah back to us.

If the talmudic poem reads Hosea as suggesting that "God's place" is in the heavens—far from our world—for the Tanhuma, "God's place" is here, with us.

In fact, not only is God's place in this world, but we have the ability to bring God back. Without *teshuvah* there would be hopelessness (לא היה תקוה). God would leave never to return. We would be completely without hope. But *teshuvah* is the antidote to despair: it gives us agency; it gives us the power to change the course of the world; it gives us the power to bring God's presence back not only to ourselves as individuals, but to the world at large.

Teshuvah can transform the world back into God's place. Without our *teshuvah*, God would remain adrift, out of place. Our *teshuvah* can bring God home. This framework reminds us that we do indeed have control. Our choices and behaviors matter.

To be clear, I'm not saying that *teshuvah* alone can stop all the chaos and suffering in our world. For better and worse, good is often unrewarded and bad unpunished; disasters happen without apparent reason. The world is not governed by a simple calculation of sin and punishment. But that does not mean we are off the hook, or that our behavior—our *teshuvah*, our constant striving to be better people—does not matter. *Teshuvah* may not heal all our pain and loss, but it can help manifest God's presence in the world as we face life's storms.

R. Yitz Greenberg concretizes this connection between our actions and God's presence through his teachings on covenant. He explains that, in modern times, we are God's actors in the world. In this era of history, God acts solely through us. We are the ones who feed the hungry. We clothe the naked. We help

“THROUGH TESHUVAH,
WE HAVE A WAY
FORWARD. THROUGH
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those in need of help. If we want to experience God's presence manifest in our world, we have to get to work.¹

Without *teshuvah*, we could feel helpless and hopeless. Through *teshuvah*, we have a way forward. Through our *teshuvah*, God returns.

And if *teshuvah* can bring God home, maybe *teshuvah* can do the same for us. We, too, long to return home, to return to our place (אשובה אל מקומי), to feeling settled and at peace. Some years, *teshuvah* is a deeply personal journey of return to feeling at home in ourselves. Some years our individual lives contain their own storms, their own losses of control, and we long for order. We long to find personal peace and safety in our minds and hearts.

This past year has pushed us so much further. This year, returning home has taken on a meaning in our national consciousness more nightmarish and more urgent than we ever imagined. We have spent so much of this past year hoping and praying for exactly this: a return home.

May our *teshuvah* this year serve as a way of enacting this prayer. May we bring about a year of homecoming in every possible sense: for our people, for the world, and for God.

God, we will do *teshuvah*. Please return. ♦

¹ See R. Yitz Greenberg's new book, *The Triumph of Life: A Narrative Theology of Judaism* (2024), esp. ch. 10.