



## STORIES OF RETURN

In July 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, Max Steinberg, an American-born IDF lone soldier, was killed in Gaza. He, like many others, was inspired by a Birthright trip to make aliyah and join Israel's army. The night before his funeral, however, a disturbing article was published. Allison Benedikt, the current executive editor of *Slate*, wrote an article on the online magazine partly blaming Birthright for his death. Needless to say, the brash statement crossed many lines. But one of her questions remains valid: "What makes an American kid with shaky Hebrew and no ties to the state of Israel suddenly decide he is ready to make this sacrifice?"<sup>1</sup> And Max is not alone; hundreds, even thousands like him have made the courageous move

to leave their homes and families behind to support their Jewish state. But how exactly do we explain this phenomenon?

In his commentary to *Pirkei Avos*, R' Chaim of Volozhin, the foremost student of the Vilna Gaon, provides us with an answer. The Mishnah in *Avos* (5:3) praises Avraham for withstanding the ten trials posed to him. But whereas the preceding mishnah refers to him simply as Avraham, our mishnah refers to him as Avraham Avinu, Avraham our forefather. Noting the subtle lingual difference, R' Chaim remarks:

כי כמה מדות שהצדיק טרח ויגע להשיגם,  
לבניו אחריו המה כטבע מוטבע ובקצת יגיעה  
יגיעו לזה כמו שנראה בחוש שרבים מעמי  
ארץ מהיהודים מוסרים את עצמם על קידוש

השם והוא מוטבע בנו מאבינו אברהם ... וכן  
ההתעוררות לאדם פתאום לילך לארץ הקודש  
הוא מנסיון לך לך.

*There are many great levels that a tzaddik works and toils to achieve, to whose descendants after him they are naturally inborn. And with only a little effort, he (the descendant) will reach [this high level], as we see with our own senses that many simple Jews give their lives for the sanctification of God's name. And this is our nature from Avraham our forefather... And so too the sudden inspiration to travel to Eretz Yisrael, this is from the test of "lech lecha."*

Every *nisayon*, every trial that Avraham Avinu withstood, was not merely a personal spiritual achievement by the individual Avraham; it was an experience and essential quality that Avraham Avinu,

the father of a nation, would bequeath to all of his descendants. The spiritual and mental courage that Avraham (then Avram) displayed in response to the call of “*lech lecha*” would be built into the fabric of the Jewish soul for all time.

We can understand this idea further based on a comment by Rabbeinu Nissim (the Ran), the great Spanish Talmudist. In his philosophical work, *Derashos HaRan* (8th *derasha*), the Ran notes:

שהענין כאשר קבל צורה אחת, גם כי תסתלק הצורה ההיא מן הדבר ההוא, שיקבל הדבר ההוא הצורה ההיא שנית יותר בקלות במעט פעולה.

*When something once acquired a certain form, even if the form subsequently departed from it, it will be easier for that thing to acquire that form once again.*<sup>2</sup>

Once Avraham Avinu made the sacrifice and carried out the charge of “*lech lecha*,” it subsequently became easier for every Jew after him to follow suit.

And so it was throughout Jewish history that Jews around the world left everything behind and responded to this inner calling with an almost absurd passion. Absurd in the sense that it was not because of greater financial opportunity or stronger familial ties — historically, it was usually the opposite — but by an inner yearning ingrained in our spiritual DNA from the time of Avraham Avinu.

Although, as the Rambam tells us in his *Sefer Hamitzvos* (Positive Commandment, 153), the Jews will always maintain *some* presence in our homeland, this did not preclude the historical reality that after the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash (70 CE) most Jews were living in the Diaspora. Be that as it may, the call of “*lech lecha*” never left the Jewish consciousness. And so there were always those great individuals, those courageous sons of Avraham Avinu, who left behind “their land, their birthplace and their father’s house” headed for “the land that I will show you.”

One of the first “stories of return” we have on record of belongs to R’ Achai Gaon, the author of the halachic-aggadic work the *Sheiltot*, one of the first post-Talmudic works published. In around the year 750 C.E. he left Babylonia, the center of Jewish learning at the time, and settled in Israel, where he remained until his last day.<sup>3</sup>

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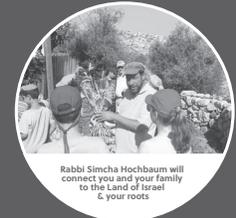
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Most famous, however, was the aliyah of the Ramban. The great Talmudic scholar and Kabbalist famously disagreed with the Rambam (Mitzvos omitted by the Rambam, positive, no. 4) and argued forcefully that living in Eretz Yisrael is one of the 613 mitzvos. Moreover, this one mitzvah is equal to all the mitzvos in the Torah and one about which Chazal expanded greatly. The Ramban, however, didn't just talk the talk; he, quite literally, walked the walk. In the year 1267, at the age of 72(!) the Ramban left his family and the world he knew behind, set out for the land of Israel, and on the 9th of Elul arrived home at last in the port of Acco. Shortly thereafter, he traveled to Jerusalem where he found poverty, ruins, and hardly any Jews at all. Though he found destruction, he saw hope:

ומה אגיד לכם בענין הארץ כי רבה העזובה וגדל השממון וכללו של דבר כל המקודש מחבירו חרב יותר מחבירו ירושלים יותר הרבה מן הכל ... ועם כל חרבנה היא טובה מאד.

*What can I tell you about the land, greatly forsaken and significantly desolate? But the principal of the matter is: the more sacred, the greater the destruction. And Jerusalem is more destroyed than all... but despite its destruction, it is very good.*

**Kitvei Ramban, Vol. 1, pg. 368**

He turned a dilapidated old house into the city shul, taught Torah, composed his classic commentary on Chumash and helped rebuild and restore a Jewish community in the Jewish city. And ever since, Jerusalem has been home to a community of Jews.

Skip forward about 200 years. In 1488, R' Ovadiah of Bartanura, the author of the famous commentary on the Mishnah, set out for Jerusalem

and quickly became the spiritual leader of a community in need. The famed Kabbalist, R' Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz (the Shelah), left the post of Chief Rabbi of Prague and moved to Israel in 1621. Some seventy years later, R' Yehuda Hachassid (not to be confused with the medieval scholar) took with him a small following and settled in Jerusalem at the turn of the 18th century. The Ohr Hachaim too followed suit in 1740, settling in the Holy Land. And in 1789, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, almost impulsively, set out for the Holy Land. Although he remained there for six months, upon walking *daled amot* on the holy ground, he remarked that he could return. And there were many, many more who risked everything to return home.

One aliyah trip, however, taken by an unparalleled scholar, was especially mysterious:

הנה אנשים נוסעים על כמה שנים בשביל ממון מניחים נשותיהם ... ואני תודה לא-ל

נוסע לארץ הקדושה שהכל מצפים לראותה.  
חמדת כל ישראל.

*It is common for men to leave their wives for years traveling for business... But I, thank God, am traveling to the Holy Land, about which everyone longs to see, our people's most Beloved*  
**Iggeres HaGra, Alim L'terufah**

It is unclear what year exactly the Vilna Gaon set out for Eretz Yisrael, but it is clear that he never made it. For reasons unknown to us, he turned back in the middle. When pressed by his sons as to his motives for returning, his response was: "Heaven did not grant me permission" (Introduction to *Biur HaGra; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*). Though the Vilna Gaon himself did not complete the journey, his students did for him. In 1808 a close disciple of the Vilna Gaon, R' Menachem Mendel of Shklov, headed for Eretz Yisrael only to begin what would later be known as the aliyah of the Perushim, the community founded by



students of the Vilna Gaon. Soon after, R' Yisrael of Shklov, another close student of the Vilna Gaon's, followed. In 1816, R' Menachem Mendel moved to Jerusalem and established the Ashkenazi community of Jerusalem. The "Shklovs," along with fellow students of the Gra and their families, were responsible for setting in motion a revival of the Holy Land. Their impact is felt to this very day.

Any student of the Talmud knows that when encountering a halacha two questions must be asked: What is the *makor*, the source for the law, and what is the *sevara*, the logical reasoning behind the law? If R' Chaim of Volozhin has provided us with the *makor* for the "aliyah phenomenon," it is the Maharal who provides us with the *sevara*. In the first chapter of his philosophical work, *Netzach Yisrael*, he writes the following:

... וזה כי אין ספק כי הגלות הוא שינוי ויציאה מן הסדר, שהשם יתברך סדר כל אומה במקומה הראוי לה, וסדר את ישראל במקום הראוי להם, שהוא ארץ ישראל. והגלות מן מקומם הוא שינוי ויציאה לגמרי. וכל הדברים כאשר הם יוצאים ממקום הטבעי, והם חוץ למקומם, אין להם עמידה במקום הבלתי טבעי להם, רק הם חוזרים למקומם הטבעי... שאין עומד בתמידות רק הדברים הטבעיים...

*It is clear that exile is a divergence from the natural order. For God, Blessed be He delineated each nation in its proper place and the Jewish people in their proper place, namely, Eretz Yisrael. And exile from their place is a total divergence. And all things that are moved from their natural place cannot persist in a place that is unnatural for them; rather they must return to their natural place... Only things that are natural persist... "*

When a Jew speaks of "return" he can refer to either the return to his Creator (*teshuvah*) or the return to his Land. As the *Sefer Chareidim* (chapter 59) writes, "Just as Hashem chose the Jewish people, so did He choose Eretz Yisrael." The natural state for a Jew is in the Presence of God and the natural place for a Jew is in the land of God. A lacking of either is unnatural and, says the Maharal, bound to end. Hence the Rambam writes in his *Hilchos Teshuva* (7:5):

וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותו ומיד הן נגאלין.

*The Torah already promised that ultimately, Israel will repent at the end of her exile and, immediately, she will be redeemed.*

Whether it is a return to his Creator or

to his homeland, the Jew will return, almost compulsively, as if steered by an inner, constant voice, whispering "lech lecha, go, go to yourself, to your Creator, to your homeland." So when we hear of a seemingly unaffiliated Jew suddenly seek out his Creator or abruptly decide to give his life for his people and we are asked, "What makes an American kid with shaky Hebrew and no ties to the state of Israel suddenly decide he is ready to make this sacrifice?," we know very well. Because it comes naturally.

## Endnotes

1. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/07/max-steinberg-death-how-birthright-convinces-american-jews-to-embrace-israel.html>.
2. Translation from Sefaria.org.
3. See R' Zechariah Fendel's Legacy of Sinai pg. 248.

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