

RETURN AGAIN
YOM KIPPUR DAY 2015

Return again, return again return to the land if your soul.. Return to who you are, return to what you are return to where you are born and reborn again... Return to the land of your soul.

These are our days of return. In these “*Aseret yamei tshuvah*” our ten days of repentance, we examine our lives and ask ourselves the difficult questions: *Ma Anu?* What are we? *Ma Chayenu?* What is our role in life? *Ma chasdenu?* What is our contribution to the world? *Ma Goralenu?* What is our destiny? Often, we live lives that seem so distanced from our essential being. How do we return to who and what we really are? How do we return to the Land of our Soul?

On Sunday morning, August 14, I opened the NYT opinion section (my way of avoiding the process of writing High Holiday sermons) to find an extraordinary article entitled Oliver Sacks: Sabbath. This was his letter of tshuvah, the story of his journey home, written two weeks before his death.

Oliver Sachs is one of the world’s most famous neurologists, the author of many books that brought the reality of alternative modes perception to widely popular audience. In his book The Man who mistook his Wife for a Hat, for instance, he told the story of a patient who was unable to process and synthesize information properly, and therefore “mistook his wife for a hat”. His book Awakenings, tells the story of a man asleep with encephalitis for over twenty years, who returns to consciousness for a limited time with the help of an understanding doctor. The doctor, of course, was Oliver Sachs, and many of us remember Robin Williams with a double twinge of sadness as he played a doctor who could provide vast help to his patient, portrayed by Robert DeNiro, but could not always help himself.

As a doctor, Oliver Sachs was deeply loved by his patients, many of whom he treated over an extended span of time. In the words of Michkiko Kakutani, writing on the day of his death in the New York Times:

It is no coincidence that so many of the qualities that made Oliver Sacks such a brilliant writer made him an ideal doctor; keen powers of observation, deep reservoirs of sympathy, and an intuitive understanding of the mysteries of the human brain. In his hands, science became poetry. He leapfrogged among the disciplines, shedding light on the strange and wonderful interconnectedness of life”(NYT8/31)

I knew that Oliver Sachs was greatly loved as a doctor and a writer and that his death at age 82 marked the passing of scientist who made important contributions to our understanding of the human mind. I did not know that, despite his outwardly jovial appearance, his own mind was often tortured, cut off from the “land of his soul” and that he lived in celibate isolation for thirty five years. I did not know that Oliver Sachs was a Jew who strayed very far from his roots. Oliver Sachs:Shabbat is the story of his Tshuvah, his return to the Land of His Soul.

The essay begins with his childhood memories of Shabbat in his Orthodox English family. In his words:

MY mother and her 17 brothers and sisters had an Orthodox upbringing — all photographs of their father show him wearing a yarmulke, and I was told that he woke up if it fell off during the night. My father, too, came from an Orthodox background. Both my parents were very conscious of the Fourth Commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”), and the Sabbath (Shabbos, as we called it in our Litvak way) was entirely different from the rest of the week.

No work was allowed, no driving, no use of the telephone; it was forbidden to switch on a light or a stove.

On Friday, my mother devoted herself to making gefilte fish and other delicacies for Shabbos. Just before evening fell, she would light the ritual candles, cupping their flames with her hands, and murmuring a prayer. We would all put on clean, fresh Shabbos clothes, and gather for the first meal of the Sabbath. My father would lift his silver wine cup and chant the blessings and the Kiddush, and after the meal, he would lead us all in chanting the grace.

On Saturday mornings, my three brothers and I trailed our parents to Cricklewood Synagogue, a huge shul built in the 1930s to accommodate part of the exodus of Jews from the East End of London. We all had our assigned seats, the men downstairs, the women — my mother, various aunts and cousins — upstairs. Though I could not understand the Hebrew in the prayer book, I loved its sound and especially loved hearing the old medieval prayers.

Saturday afternoons, for my parents, would be devoted to family visits. Uncles and aunts and cousins would visit us for tea, and we all lived within walking distance of one another. The Second World War decimated our Jewish community in Cricklewood, and the Jewish community in England as a whole was to lose thousands of people in the postwar years. I chanted my bar mitzvah portion in 1946 to a relatively full synagogue, including several dozen of my relatives, but this, for me, was the end of any formal Jewish practice.

Like Oliver Sacks, so many of us ended our formal Jewish lives soon after bar mitzvah or confirmation. It just didn't seem relevant as we entered college and career. Return again? For so many of us in our twenties and thirties, Judaism was a back burner idea. At best, we returned home-for a holiday meal. But sometimes, the

memories continued to simmer, silently guiding our steps. Many of us intermarried, or found a spiritual home in New Age workshops and gatherings. We ate bagels, but with bacon. When we had children, we were torn about having a bris, but then brought our children here for pre-school. You are here today, and your presence itself is *tshuvah*, a return, even if it is just for a brief High Holiday visit.

For Oliver Sacks, however, the falling out with Judaism was so painful that his return took a lifetime. As he recounts, there was no particular point of rupture until he was 18. It was then that his father, inquiring into his sexual feelings, compelled him to admit that he liked boys.

“I haven’t *done* anything,” I said, “it’s just a feeling — but don’t tell Ma, she won’t be able to take it.”

He *did* tell her, and the next morning she came down with a look of horror on her face, and shrieked at me: “You are an abomination. I wish you had never been born.” The matter was never mentioned again, but her harsh words made me hate religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty.

In the land of his soul, his essential sexual being and the ancestral path of his Judaism were now at a crossroads. Oliver Sacks wanted nothing more to do with a Judaism that had hurt him so deeply. As soon as he completed medical college, he moved to the New World, where he knew no one. In Los Angeles, he found a sort of community among the weight lifters on Muscle Beach, and bonded with his fellow neurology residents at U.C.L.A., but did not identify as a Jew. Seeking community, he rode with Hells Angels. Driven by a search for meaning, he fell victim to a near-suicidal addiction to amphetamines in the 1960s.

Ma Chasden? We ask. What is our role in life? How are we to repair the world? Often, our answers arise from the place of our deepest pain.

As a part of his drug recovery process, Sachs found meaningful work in a chronic care hospital in the Bronx. He was fascinated by the patients there, and felt something of a mission to tell their stories — stories of situations virtually unknown, almost unimaginable, to the general public. It was a lonely but deeply satisfying, almost monkish existence that he was to lead for many years.

Oliver Sacks lived ‘at a certain distance from life’, lauded, loved, but celibate for 35 years. Despite few flings, he could not bring himself to come out as a gay man. Instead, he devoted his days to his patients and his writing. In his words, he acquired “habits of a lifetime of solitude, decades of meals that consisted mostly of cereal or sardines, eaten out of the can, standing up”. He had no family ties, no family holiday celebrations. He proclaimed himself an atheist, and was far removed from any path of Jewish observance.

During the 1990s, however, he connected with a cousin, Robert John Aumann, a prize-winning scientist who saw no conflict between faith and reason. He insisted that Sacks have a mezuzah on his door. He brought him one from Israel, saying. “I know you don’t believe, but you should have one anyhow”. Sacks did not argue.

In December of 2005, Robert John Aumann received a Nobel Prize for his 50 years of fundamental work in economics. That same month, Oliver Sacks was found to have cancer in one eye. When Robert John visited, he was full of entertaining stories about the Nobel Prize and the ceremony in Stockholm, but made a point of saying that, had he been compelled to travel to Stockholm on a Saturday, he would have refused the prize. “The observance of the

Sabbath is extremely beautiful,” Aumann said. It is about improving one’s own quality of life.” But for Sachs, the observance of Shabbat was not an option.

But the tastes and smells of Jewish food can outweigh resistance to Jewish practice and belief. In the very last article that Oliver Sachs wrote, Sachs disclosed that over the years he had developed a taste- or was it a memory- for perfectly made gefilte fish, along with the obligatory *khreyn*. In his forties, he found a black Baptist housekeeper, Helen, who made gefilte fish from whitefish carp and pike that they shopped for together each Thursday morning in the Bronx.

I had no idea how Helen, African American and a good, churchgoing Christian, could manage making such a Jewish delicacy, but she made magnificent gefilte fish, which she called filter fish. I had to admit was as good as my mother’s.

Helen introduced it to her church, and Sachs loved to think of her fellow Baptists gorging themselves on “Filter Fish” at church socials. He writes:

When Helen died after seventeen years, I mourned her deeply-and I lost my taste for gefilte fish. Commercially made, bottled gefilte fish sold in supermarkets I found detestable compared to Helen’s ambrosia.

Oliver Sachs “ate Jewish”, but he had almost no contact with members of his family of origin. But in the spring of 2014, hearing that his cousin Marjorie was nearing death, he phoned her in Jerusalem to say farewell. “I don’t intend to die now,” she said, “I will be having my 100th birthday on June 18th. Will you come?” Despite a successful trip to Israel for five months when he was in his twenties, Sachs had vowed not to return to Israel again. The politics of the Middle East disturbed him, and he suspected that he would be out of place in the deeply religious society that had

rejected his sexual orientation. Miracle of miracles, at age 77, he had finally opened his heart and fallen in love with a writer, Bill Hayes. Of course he was hesitant about bringing his lover to visit his Orthodox family in Jerusalem.

“Please come”, Marjorie begged. “Yes, of course!” Sachs replied. And he then realized that in a few seconds he had reversed a decision of almost 60 years.

‘I had felt a little fearful visiting my Orthodox family with my lover, Billy— my mother’s words still echoed in my mind — but Billy, too, was warmly received. How profoundly attitudes had changed, even among the Orthodox, was made clear when Robert John invited Billy and me to join him and his family at their Sabbath meal. The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, Sacks said; it infused everything.

Shabbat in Jerusalem. It is a sanctuary in time. So many of us have been blessed with a sense of return in the penetrating silence of a Jerusalem Shabbat afternoon. In what must have seemed like an instant, the journey of a lifetime was over, the cycle complete. He had returned to the Shabbos table. Enveloped by the Shabbat peace of Jerusalem, Oliver Sacks entered the gateway to the Land of his Soul.

I found myself drenched with a wistfulness, he wrote, something akin to nostalgia, wondering *what if*: What if A and B and C had been different? What sort of person might I have been? What sort of a life might I have lived?

What if? What if we wait too long before stopping to breathe, to rest, to refresh-*v’y’nafash*. *What if* later... is now?

Unetaneh Tokef Etzem Hayom. The words send a chill through us all. How many pass on, how many shall thrive: Who shall live and

who shall die? Whose death is timely and whose is not? *What if* we wait too long to turn around, to say “Of course I’ll come... to open our hearts in love... to allow ourselves to sink deeply into the silence of Shabbat. *What if- we wait too long to “ return to who we are, what we are, where we are our truest selves?*

We never know the timing of the “ *What if*”. This year, two core members of our synagogue, George Greenberg, who served as our Board President for many years, and Steve Kivo, the tall, kind gentleman who guides you to your seats each High Holiday, spent extended periods of time in a coma, hovering between worlds . It is a pity that Oliver Sachs is not here today to hear their tale of return.

Last Spring, Steve, on the way to fly his plane at Camarillo airport. had a massive coronary. With a fierce will to live, he drove into a fire station while having a heart attack, and the firemen kept his heart going as he fell into a deep state of unconsciousness. Steve survived, but not without spending over two months in a medically induced coma. Each time I visited Steve, hooked to tubes and respirators and barely in this world, I spoke about returning to the synagogue, and told him that I could not do these High Holy Days without him. At first, he could not speak but only cry. But he could hear me as he danced on the edge of light and darkness, and he’s here today. When he finally returned to consciousness, he related that in his dream state, memories of his Jewish childhood, and his faith and connection to God and to Judaism helped to keep him alive. He is very grateful for the prayers of this community, and related that he could sense your prayers even when he walked in a world of dreams.

A month after Steve’s heart attack, George’s heart valve literally burst, and he too found himself in the void between worlds. George wrestled with angels, and made it home, Victoria always at his side. As George says, “I died and went to heaven *and they sent me back!* Many of his worries, his preoccupations, and his fears

seemed much less important now. Wow! He said to me on the first day that he could eat. Have you ever tasted, really tasted *oranges*? I urged George to stay in that place of grace as long as possible, looking at the world with the eyes of a newborn child. Of course, with healing comes responsibilities, and it is difficult to return *from* the land of your soul. But what the Zohar calls a *reshimu*, an indelible impression, like the white of a thumbprint, remains. Its presence guides his every breath.

When we begin the Torah service in a few minutes, we will call up all who would like “bench gomel”, to express gratitude to the One who sustained them in life. Steve and George will be front and center as each person on the bimah acknowledges that without God’s help, they might not be here today.

Baruch atah Adonai eloheynu melech haolam Hagomel l’chayavim tovot, s’gemalani kol tov, each person will say. Blessed are You, who bestows good things to those in debt to you, and has granted me all-good.

Then, as a community, we will respond “May the One who bestowed good upon you continue to bestow good.” We acknowledge that we find our way back due to God’s grace, but it is the welcome of the community that sustains us.

Unetneh tokkef etzem hayom.. On this Most Awesome of Days, we acknowledge that some of us will return next year to ask the same questions- Who are we? What is our purpose? What is our destiny? And then again, some of us will not.

Oliver Sachs did not. In December 2014, just as he completed his memoir, “On the Move,” Sacks learned that he had metastatic cancer, stemming from the melanoma in his eye nine years earlier. In his words:

I am glad I was able to complete my memoir without knowing this, and that I had been able, for the first time in my life, to make a full and frank declaration of my sexuality, facing the world openly, with no more guilty secrets locked up inside of me. I cannot pretend I am without fear, But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written.

And eaten as well. It turns out that The Land of our Soul has a taste and smells all of its own, and that taste and smell guide us home. When my mother was dying, she insisted on a teaspoonful of fresh chicken soup from Brent's every day. On her last day, she opened her eyes as I was headed as out the door for fresh soup, and asked, "Do you think they have chopped liver?"

For Oliver Sacks, it was not chopped liver but gefilte fish. In his final essay published last week in the New Yorker, he writes:

—I have rediscovered the joys of gefilte fish, even though I can only swallow a few ounces of liquid. Gefilte fish will usher me out of this life, as it ushered me into it, eighty-two years ago.

"I find my thoughts-not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest. (Oliver Sachs:Shabbat)

Today, on Yom Kippur, a Shabbat Shabbaton, may we all find a deep rest, and all that we need to return to The Land of Our Soul.