Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo



The Revival of the Dead & the Miracle of Return

Afterword to *Returning*

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Includes Q & A with Yael Shahar, author of Returning

Afterword

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Returning is a book about memory — Jewish memory. It tells the story of a soul's descent into hell and, after a long and arduous journey, back into life.

But it's also a book about something else, something that we hesitate to name. Something we fear to call attention to, perhaps out of fear that we will be laughed at, or fear that we will be wrong, yet again. It is something that has entered into the Jewish worldview and become part of everything we do, a certainty and a faith that has carried us through the darkest times. We pronounce our belief in it three times daily. And yet, we have no idea what it really means.

I speak about the belief in *T'chiat HaMetim*, the revival of the dead. This is indeed a book about the revival of the dead, of one soul's journey back to life. The theme of returning from death — death of the will, death of the heart, death of faith — runs all through *Returning*. The characters themselves are conscious of this theme. But there is a deeper theme buried just beneath the surface, and it is that which makes this book a unique testimony for our times. Because this book could not have been written before the birth of the State of Israel.

Our author finds herself in Jerusalem, at the home of a rabbi who teaches at Neve Yerushalayim, a yeshiva where I also once taught. The scene is familiar to me — the gathering of young people around the Shabbat table, getting to know what it means to be Jewish. The familiar rituals of Shabbat punctuated by the lively conversation of young minds.

> Their host, a rabbi who taught at a nearby yeshiva, asked each of his young guests to tell a bit about what had brought them to Israel. Besides the humorous answers: "An El Al 747!" and the facetious

answers: "A desire for the quiet life," there were also more thoughtful ones. In fact, for most, the question was not easily answered. There was a sort of bemused wonder that they were here at all.

And a few of them had no rational answers: recurrent dreams — or nightmares; vague memories from early childhood, now scarcely recalled; a persistent pull without any reasonable explanation....

"Would the three of you be willing to come back after *Havdalah* to help me with a project?" asked the rabbi.

It turns out that the rabbi wants to write down their individual stories, but the reason why goes beyond the simple preservation of memory. Such stories hint at a great secret about the age we are living in now. The rabbi described here could have been any of us; we've all heard these stories. But not everyone connects the dots in the same way.

"You see, at the yeshiva, we get a lot of people who come in search of something they feel they've lost. In most cases, it's just a deeper, more meaningful lifestyle than the one they grew up with. Most of them come from secular homes, so learning for a bit at the yeshiva is a way to find out what they've been missing. Some stay and raise families. Others get a taste and move on to other things.

"But every year we get a few who describe their journey in much the same way as you three did last night: rebuilding someone else's life. Seeking relief from a nightmare they can't clearly recall.... Well, let's just say that I think I understand the reason these people — people like you — are here.

"This index file here.... This is a record of a miracle that is happening in our day, right now, all around us."

He paused and pierced each of them with his glance. Then in a voice filled with wonder: "We, in our generation.... We are witnessing *T'chiat haMetim* — the revival of the dead. And I am keeping a record."

The revival of the dead, for Jews, is more than a metaphor; it has taken on substance and form in our tradition.

Isaiah prophesied:

> Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while until the fury runs its course. For behold, the Eternal is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed and will no longer cover her slain.

This took on more concrete imagery in Ezekiel:

> Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am The Eternal.

From a few lines of lyrical and allusive prophecy, whole worlds have taken shape. We have formed a picture of what the Revival of the Dead will entail. This picture is based largely on the speculations of our sages during the time of the Second Temple and — even more — after the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginnings of a long exile.

We seldom stop to think — and we certainly should do so more often — that in taking the words of our sages as a description of mere fact, we may miss the deeper meanings which they meant to convey. As a rule, *aggadah** should not be taken literally; rather, it must be interpreted with the understanding that a higher truth is being alluded to — a truth that is beyond historical perspective, philological expression, or the dimensions of scientific observations. Agaddah speaks to that part of us that understands but cannot articulate what it understands. It allows us to go beyond the realms of the definable, perceivable, and demonstrable. In this sense, aggadah is a form of religious metaphor, a mirror that enables us to form mental images of the indescribable.

* Interpretive story, usually based on a Biblical text.

Isaiah's words, "the earth will reveal her bloodshed and will no longer cover her slain," are eerily appropriate to the phenomenon described in this book: a memory from beyond the grave takes form and substance, and stands in accusation against the murderers. In fact, this is not as rare a phenomenon as we might think. Perhaps this is simply the natural response of a people to sudden and traumatic loss of the memory of individuals: the memory must find another route to reach the next generation. Perhaps we are taking note of it now only because the magnitude of the catastrophe makes it impossible to ignore. Perhaps. But perhaps this is something that we haven't seen before, something different not only in degree but in substance.

Whichever is correct, we are led to ask a more pertinent question: could this phenomenon be the fulfillment of the prophetic vision?

The same prophecies that speak of national — and perhaps even individual — revival also contain harrowing accounts of the days before this miraculous rebirth of the State of Israel. It's been suggested by many that the Holocaust was *ikveta d'mashichah* — the catastrophe foretold to herald the arrival of the Messiah.

The author of *Returning* doesn't state an opinion on these matters, but the question is never far below the surface. Early in the book, a discussion is recorded among a group of young people at a kibbutz. The participants marvel at the miraculous resurrection of Israel and speculate on whether we are entering the Messianic Age. If so, who then is the Messiah?

> "Who's the Mashiach? Easy!" Uri, a kibbutz member their own age, plopped down on the grass between Aaron and Dov. He was their go-to man on the kibbutz, equally at home in Hebrew, English, and half a dozen other languages. "It's obvious who the prophecy's talking about!"
>
> "Yeah? So who is it?" asked Aaron, with less skepticism than was his wont.
>
> "David Ben Gurion!" said Uri. He was met with blank stares all around, except for Dov, who looked at him with shocked disapproval. "No,

> really! Think about it. Ben Gurion met all of the Rambam's conditions — he restored Jewish sovereignty, set up a government, health care system, unions, the works — even before the Brits left. He ruled pretty much like a king for the first thirty years.... He could have installed himself as lifetime dictator if he'd wanted and no one would have objected. He rebuilt Jerusalem — as much of it as he could reach, anyway. He institutionalized the return of the exiles. And then, once the Jewish state was well on its way toward a golden age, he quietly left the government and went to live in a little one-room hut on his kibbutz. He not only rode in on a donkey, but he rode back out on one!"

Irrespective of Uri's speculation, it is no doubt true that our image of what a messiah might look like may keep us from recognizing the real thing when it stands before us. Could it be that we have embellished the long-awaited event with so many aggadic flourishes that we can no longer recognize the reality when it happens? Could our overly literal reading of our sages' poetic descriptions have led us to overlook completely the miracle as it happened?

One of the dangers of taking the statements and speculations of our sages as literal truth — when they were not meant as such — is the distortion of our expectations.

In a remarkable *midrash* (commentary) on Proverbs, we read the following: "All of the festivals will be abolished in the future [the Messianic Age], but Purim will never be abolished."

The miracle of Purim is very different from the miracles mentioned in the Torah. While the latter were overt miracles, such as the ten plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea, the miracle of Purim was covert. No law of nature was violated in the Purim story and the Jews were saved by seemingly normal historical occurrences. Had we lived in those days, we would have noticed nothing unusual. Only retroactively are we astonished that seemingly unrelated and insignificant human acts led to the redemption of the Jews. The discovery that these events concealed a miracle could only be made after the fact.

Covert miracles will never cease to exist, explains the *Torah Temimah*.** In fact, they take place every day. The Midrash on Proverbs is not suggesting that the actual festivals mentioned in the Torah will be nullified in future days. Rather we should read the midrash as follows: Overt miracles, which we celebrate on festivals mentioned in the Torah, no longer occur. But covert miracles such as those celebrated on Purim will never end; they continue to occur every day of the year. Purim functions as a constant reminder that the story never ended. We are still living it.

Such miracles are rarely apparent to those living through them. Only in hindsight are they revealed as miraculous at all. The midrash hints that the messianic age itself is not meant to be an age of open miracles, but of miracles hidden in plain sight. Perhaps this includes the messianic personage himself. Have we, in trying to interpret aggadot about the Mashiah literally, lost sight of what aggadah is all about? It would not be the first time that an over-emphasis on the minutiae of our tradition has led us to lose sight of the substance!

Jews are the ever-dying people that never died. They have experienced a continuous resurrection, like the dry bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley. This has become the *sine qua non* of every Jew. It is the mystery of the hidden miracle of survival in the face of overwhelming destruction. Our refusal to surrender has turned our story into one long, unending Purim tale.

And herein is the essential tension in *Returning*. In speaking of one type of T'chiat HaMetim, we are led to the very boundaries of something that may well be the thing itself — the fulfillment of prophecy. Are we already in the early stages of the messianic age?

Returning describes a spiritual journey. But what makes this journey significant is not its particulars — the memory of this or that incident, traumatic and world-shattering as it was. No, what makes this journey significant is that it is *our* journey, as a nation. Ovadya's struggle with faith after what he has seen is common to many of us.

** A commentary on the Torah written by Rabbi Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (1860–1941).

Yael's attempt to put down roots in the Land of Israel is representative of *Am Yisrael* in our day. The need for closure and atonement is the great need of a nation coming out of the darkness of exile and blinking in the sunlight of a new dawn.

"You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy," said Isaiah, "for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while until the fury has run its course."

Can we believe — dare we hope — that the fury has passed and that the dawn has come?



Nathan Lopes Cardozo
Jerusalem

Q & A with Yael Shahar

***Returning* must not have been an easy book to write. What drove you to write about such difficult subject matter?**

It certainly wasn't a conventional "I want to write a book" project! *Returning* grew out of a deep compulsion — an obligation, really — to tell what had happened, coupled with a complete inability to talk about it. Ovadya's story had been a part of my inner world for so long that it was eating me from within, demanding to be told. I eventually found that the words would come out, slowly and haltingly, on a computer keyboard, even if I couldn't speak them out loud. Gradually, the writing became a path to healing — both physical and spiritual.

Once I started, the process took on a momentum of its own, taking up six years of almost full-time engagement. Only years after I started did I begin thinking seriously about trying to make what I was writing into a book — and considering my own extreme reactions to the trauma I wrote about, it was a major challenge trying to work all this into a book that anybody would actually want to read!

The end result makes for quite a gripping story. A lot of the writing in *Returning* is strongly visual; many parts of the book could almost be used as a shooting script for a movie. Was this something you did deliberately?

I don't think it was a conscious choice. *Returning* is largely about memory and what memory can do to a person, but it was also written *from* memory. It turns out that my most vivid memories tend to be largely visual.

To the extent that there's technique involved, it's mostly a matter of knowing what to leave out. I try to be fairly minimalist, describing just the few things that pop out at me. If those are the things that stuck in my own memory, I assume it's because they were the ones that had emotional impact and convey the essence of what happened. The rest is up to the reader to imagine.

And of course, it helped that so much of what I was trying to say was hard to talk about. It kept me from getting wordy!

That minimalism works well to convey a sense of "being there". This is particularly true of Ovadya's memories of Birkenau. It's as if he never really left the place.

Ovadya's writing conveys what it's like to live with traumatic memory, with its odd juxtapositions of past and future. That sense comes through in the very language that he uses to describe his experience. He dips into memory and suddenly "was" gives way to "is", "there" becomes "here".

This experience affected the telling of my own side of the story too: my "conventional" experiences growing up in Texas often take on a dreamlike quality, while Ovadya's recollections of life in Saloniki and Birkenau are fragmentary, but vivid and concrete. I guess to Ovadya, Texas — and Israel too — are fairytale places, and my life is a fairytale life!

So that leads to the obvious question: the book's chapters alternate between Ovadya's first-person narrative and your own story told in third person. Why is it Ovadya's part that's in first person, considering that it's your name on the cover?

Well, I did feel at first that the name on the cover should be Ovadya's and not mine. However, a book-publicist friend pointed out that I had already established something of a reputation as a writer, and said I shouldn't squander that.

Still, in a sense Ovadya really is the book's main author, even if I did the actual writing. Not only is the main narrative voice his; but also, it's his desperate compulsion to bear witness that drives the story. In *Returning,* Yael struggles with the aftermath of trauma — the flashbacks, the need to tell, and the difficulty of evading memory. But Ovadya struggles with deeper issues: is there meaning in a world where God appears to champion evil? "Omnipotence and malice are a frightening combination!" He doesn't ask how we should live in such a world; he questions whether it is worth living at all.

And of course it's Ovadya who is trying to come to terms with his role as a part of the mechanism the Germans created to bring about the destruction of his people.

The issue of names seems to run a lot deeper than whose name is on the cover. One of the themes of *Returning* is the way our self-identification changes our view of the world — particularly Ovadya's struggle with his own name.

Ovadya does indeed have a very conflicted relationship with his name, partly because of its meaning — "Ovadya" means "servant of God" in Hebrew — and partly because it connects him with his life before he and his family were taken away from their home in Saloniki and sent to Auschwitz. His real name reminds him too strongly of all he has lost — physically, emotionally, and morally.

Instead, as we meet him he refers to himself only as "Alex", the generic nickname he acquired in Birkenau. "Alex" has no past, no future, and — at least in his own self-perception — very little real value. When pressed to use his real name, he refuses. "For a long time I have not dreamed of using that name," he says. "It is like a beautiful garment, which I can't wear because I'm too worn down to fit into it and too filthy to avoid soiling it."

Ovadya's initial refusal to use his given name shows us how trauma and guilt alienate us from ourselves. "One who became a slave to the

Germans can't use a name that means 'Servant of God'," he says. But of course, the only way he can get out of that slavery is to reclaim his name — the goal becomes the very means to achieve it. Reclaiming his name is part of his journey back to the better part of himself: a true journey of T'shuvah, the process of repentance, which — translated literally from Hebrew — means "returning".

***Returning* doesn't seem to fit comfortably into any particular genre. It reads like literary fiction, but it's a true story. So how would you categorize the book?**

I'm not sure I have an answer to that one — no single genre quite fits. Ovadya's story is told exactly as he remembers it; the conversations and correspondence related in the book actually happened. Masha's and Rav Ish-Shalom's words are their own; and while Don adamantly denies ever having been "insufferably smug", believe me— he was.

Although telling my own part of the story as a coherent narrative required me to take a few liberties with time, combine a minor character or two, and of course leave out a lot of people and events that played some part, I've stayed close enough to the actual course of events that my first inclination was to classify *Returning* quite firmly as a non-fiction memoir.

There's one problem, though: The whole issue of how I became entangled with Ovadya's memories is something I have no real explanation for, and it obviously doesn't fit into any of our conventional understandings of how the world works. Some people are going to have a hard time accepting this aspect of *Returning* as true, and ultimately it's not important that they do so. The historical events Ovadya lived through are well documented, and happened as he remembers them; and the challenges he faced — and faces — are real ones. If it's easier for someone to read *Returning* as historical fiction, that's fine; just remember that Ovadya's story is true, even if it's difficult to understand how he came to be able to tell it.

However we classify *Returning*, it's a story of recovery from trauma, of guilt and atonement, of the preservation of memory. . . . But most of all, it's a story of God-wrestling in the timeless tradition of Jacob's wrestling match with an un-named and un-namable entity on the banks of the Yabbok River. We've all crossed that river at one time or another, and most of us have wished we had some way to name what we faced there. But, like Jacob's opponent, the apparition vanishes in the light of reason, leaving us both wounded and blessed . . . and forever changed.

For Ovadya, this God-wrestling involved taking his case to a rabbi to judge. That search for justice and atonement was Ovadya's path to healing. Telling his story was mine.