



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT LECH LECHA

Welcome Home, Heroes

In a moving song titled "Avraham" by 8th Day, the chorus reads: *"Avraham, are we the children that you dreamed of? Avraham, are we the ones you hoped we'd be? When you looked up to the stars so many years ago and counted us one by one, what did you see?"*

Some may believe the Jewish spark is being extinguished as Jewish strength weakens. Our enemies pride themselves with the fantasy that G-d has forsaken the Chosen People and abandoned us in return for our mistakes. Maybe we are not in fact the stars that Avraham Avinu had counted and envisioned...

However, in moments of unimaginable darkness, when the human spirit is tested to its breaking point, we are reminded that faith can be the strongest form of resistance. The stories of Israel's last returning hostages on the miraculous day of Hoshana Rabba, just a few weeks ago, are not only testimonies of survival, but of spiritual victory — of Jews who, even in the depths of captivity, discovered an unshakable connection to their people, their faith, and their Creator. After 738 unimaginably painful and excruciating days of living in purgatory, their courage has not only inspired the nation but has sparked a profound spiritual awakening across Israel and beyond.

Rom Braslavski's defiance stands as a symbol of unwavering Jewish pride. Refusing to convert to Islam for food, he declared repeatedly, *"I am a strong Jew!"* — drawing strength from the very identity his captors sought to break. Upon returning home, his first act was to don tefillin, proclaiming, *"My only strength in captivity was knowing I was there for being Jewish."* In front of the cameras, he urged, *"Hamas did this to me only because I am a Jew. A Jew must know that he comes from greatness, that he's not like everyone else."* His words became a national call to rediscover the pride and holiness of Jewish identity.

For Bar Kuperstein, whose joyful dancing with a Torah on Simchat Torah once went viral, faith became his melody in the tunnels of Gaza. He drew strength from the song *"Ve'afilu behastara..."* — *"Even in the darkest concealment, I stand"* — a teaching from R' Nachman of Breslov. Those words, written over two centuries ago, found new life underground, as Bar stood firm in belief that even in hiding, God's presence remained.

Eitan Horn fasted on Yom Kippur in Gaza. Or Levy, as well, experienced a personal awakening. Before October 7th, he admitted he wasn't much of a believer. But as the light around him faded, a spark ignited within. He began speaking to a crack in the ceiling, then to a small LED light in one of the tunnels, and finally, in total darkness, he uttered the word "God" for the first time. *"From that point on,"* he said, *"I spoke to God."* His story captures how faith can be born not from comfort, but from desperation — a whisper of the soul that refuses to be silenced.

Matan Angrest's first request after captivity was not for leisure, but for holiness: a siddur and a pair of tefillin. Together with his father, he

recited Mizmor leTodah, a psalm of gratitude — a gesture that reflected not just relief, but a deep sense of divine purpose. Similarly, Segev Kalfon spoke through tears about feeling the Creator with him even in the tunnels. He fasted on Yom Kippur, led Shabbat kiddush underground, and sang Shabbat melodies with fellow captives, shaking the tunnels with songs of faith. He said the only things that kept him going were emuna and the unity of Am Yisrael.

Avinatan Or, upon his rescue after two long years, sent a message that pierced the hearts of the nation: *"Our strength is in our unity. Only with love, we will be victorious."* Even without internet access, he intuitively voiced the spiritual antidote to division — the truth that collective love and faith are Israel's greatest defense.

The stories continued to echo that theme. Yosef Chaim Ohana was reunited with his father on Hoshana Rabba, after his father had bought the arba minim (four species) in faith that his son would shake them this year. Their reunion was marked by Shema Yisrael and Shehechyanu, mirroring the biblical reunion of Yaakov and Yosef. Eviatar David, forced to dig his own grave, said he never lost hope: *"I always believed I would get out. You need to believe."* His faith, even at death's edge, was a living protest against despair.

Even in captivity, Jewish practice lived on in remarkable ways. Other unbelievable stories have emerged from some of the hostages that were released 505 days after Oct 7. Eliya Cohen would stand each morning and imagine wrapping tefillin, step by step — until he could almost feel them on his arm. Omer Shem Tov described missing the connection to God that he felt while in captivity, yearning to rediscover that closeness in freedom. Their testimonies show that even when every external ritual was stripped away, the soul continued to reach upward.

These hostages didn't just survive; they transformed suffering into spiritual resilience. And their return has deeply moved Israeli society. Israeli media have noted a striking surge in Shabbat observance among secular youth. One journalist shared that his friend's teenage son, who could barely read the haftara, has begun keeping Shabbat — part of a wave of tens of thousands of young Jews seeking connection and meaning. *"People who return from the Gaza tunnels believe in God,"* one reporter observed, *"and it's affecting everyone. What's happening in Israel after the war — it's truly an amazing thing."*

Yes, we are the children that Avraham dreamed of.

In their pain, these heroes uncovered a truth that transcends politics and circumstance: that the Jewish spirit is unbreakable, and that holiness can thrive even in the darkest places. From their stories emerges a call to every Jew — to believe, to connect, and to remember that we come from greatness.