To Return and Rebuild

Chapter 1: The Shore of Dreams

In the sweltering heat of a late summer afternoon in 1947, Nehorai Lahini stepped off a rusted British ship and onto the docks of Haifa. His shoes were worn through, his satchel light, but his soul heavy with memories. He came from a place of shadows, from ashes and silence, from the broken towns of Eastern Europe that once pulsed with Torah and now stood hollowed and charred. His parents had perished. His younger brother vanished in the forests. He had wandered through war, camps, and borders. But now—now he had arrived.

The sun glared against the white stone buildings. The sounds of Hebrew—real, modern Hebrew—buzzed around him. Palm trees lined the port. He felt like a man reborn. He lowered himself to the ground, kissed the dusty earth, and whispered through cracked lips, "Shehechiyanu, v’kiyimanu, v’higiyanu la’zman ha’zeh."

Hope surged through his chest like a breath he hadn’t dared take. He was alone, but he was in the Land. Surely here, he thought, a Jew could live as a Jew. He imagined himself one day teaching Torah, building a family that would restore what had been lost.

But that dream faded quickly.

British soldiers shouted in English and Hebrew, waving him and the other immigrants into fenced pens. He was taken to Atlit, a detention camp eerily reminiscent of darker places. Barbed wire enclosed the new arrivals. Medical checks were conducted brusquely. He was issued a number and told to wait.

Nehorai Lahini wandered the camp during those days, watching boys toss stones, women scrub laundry with anger in their eyes, and older men stare at nothing. He began to realize that not all who came to the Land had come for holiness. In Yiddish he asked a young man if there was a place to learn Torah. The man laughed. "Torah? This is Palestine. We’re building tractors now, not yeshivot."

Weeks passed. When he was finally released, he was sent to a ma’abara near Hadera—a temporary transit camp of tents, tin shacks, and mud. His tent sagged at the center, the canvas faded. He shared it with three other men, none of whom kept kosher. There

was no synagogue, just a makeshift minyan beside a gravel path.

He was given a job by the municipality as a street sweeper. He swept sand and cigarette butts from cracked sidewalks. The broom was splintered. The uniform smelled of mildew.

When Shabbat came, he approached his shift supervisor and quietly asked if he might be excused. The man scoffed. “In this country, we work. Even God took a break from resting.” The other workers chuckled.

Nehorai Lahini hesitated. He walked through the market that Friday afternoon, watching women buy bread, soldiers flirt, radios blare music. He felt adrift. That night, he put on his best shirt, sat alone at a rickety table, lit two stubby candles, and began to sing “Shalom Aleichem.” No one joined him. He cried silently.

And the next morning, with trembling hands, he lifted the broom.

The first Shabbat he ever broke was in the land of his ancestors.

Chapter 2: The New State, the Fading Flame

In May 1948, Nehorai stood in a crowd in Tel Aviv, eyes brimming with tears as David Ben-Gurion declared the birth of the State of Israel. Shouts of joy rang out, and Nehorai joined the chorus of Hatikva, swept up in the moment. Yet something felt strange. The speeches lacked any mention of God, Torah, or tradition. It was a celebration of the Jewish people—but without the Jewish soul. Nehorai tucked away his discomfort and told himself: in time, the spiritual light would return.

He met Tova that same year—a widowed seamstress with a quiet strength. They married in a simple ceremony, held in a neighbor’s backyard with borrowed chairs and a borrowed siddur. They moved into a one-room shack with a tin roof and shared walls, nestled among hundreds of similar huts in a dusty, sun-beaten neighborhood.

Nehorai found work in a textile factory, where he labored long hours and tried to maintain a halachic life under difficult conditions. Tova managed the home and gave birth to three children in five years. Nehorai registered their eldest, Avi, in the local state school. It seemed obvious: a Jewish state would protect Jewish values. He sent Avi with pride, confident that the system would reinforce what he taught at home.

But small cracks soon appeared. Avi brought home songs that mocked tradition. Leah, their daughter, refused to wear modest clothing. Nehorai reassured himself: children go through phases. Yet in his heart, doubt began to take root. Something in the air was not what he had hoped.

Avi, once eager to sing zemirot, now rolled his eyes during Friday night meals. "Do we have to do this every week?" he muttered one evening. Nehorai looked at him—his son in short sleeves, his kippah shoved deep into a pocket—and felt an ache in his chest. Leah, now ten, began dressing like the girls she saw on the street. She came home humming pop songs and quoting secular teachers who praised "modern thinking" and dismissed tradition.

Nehorai tried to counter with warmth. He told stories from the Gemara, tried to make Shabbat festive, even invited over the local Rav for dinner. But his children squirmed in their seats, uninterested. Tova, though loyal to Nehorai’s heart, was tired. "They have to fit in," she whispered one night. "This is their world, too."

Kosher food became a point of tension. Tova began shopping at the cheaper state stores. "They say it's kosher," she said. "It has a stamp."

Nehorai examined the packaging with narrowed eyes. "This is not mehadrin."

"It’s what we can afford," she replied. And so, bit by bit, their kitchen changed.

Avi began spending more time with secular neighbors, joining hikes organized on Shabbat. He proudly brought home a certificate for leading a song circle on a school trip. Nehorai congratulated him with a forced smile, hiding his sorrow.

One Shabbat morning, Nehorai stood alone in shul. He waited, eyes scanning the entrance. Avi never came. Leah claimed she had a headache. Tova stayed behind to prepare lunch. Nehorai walked home alone, the sun hot on his back, the streets filled with boys playing ball and radios singing.

That night, he sat at the table, surrounded by food he no longer trusted and a family that no longer listened. He recited Kiddush with tears rising in his throat. No one noticed.

Later, he walked to the beit midrash and sat in the back corner. The murmurs of Torah around him were a comfort, a lifeline. He opened a volume of Mesillat Yesharim but could barely read a line. He closed his eyes and thought of his father’s Shabbat table—

how the candles danced, how the room shimmered with kedushah.

Now, in the land his ancestors had only dreamed of, he was watching his own lineage slip away.

What good was a Jewish state, he wondered, if it raised children who no longer recognized their father’s God?

He sat there for a long time, not learning, not crying, just listening—to the silence, to the whisper of memory, to the place where his heart used to burn.

Chapter 3: The Erosion

The changes came slowly, like a creeping fog. Avi stopped saying brachot at meals. Leah rolled her eyes when Tova lit candles on Friday night. The tone of the household began to shift. Nehorai still tried to lead Shabbat meals with zemirot and divrei Torah, but his words fell flat. Tova, though loyal, grew weary of the struggle to keep kosher on a limited budget. The state stores offered meat at a steep discount, and the hechsher was dubious at best. "It’s food, Nehorai," she whispered. "It’s what we can afford."

At school, Avi was excelling—but not in Torah. He came home praising Herzl and mocking Chazal. He called Nehorai’s black hat “old-fashioned.” Nehorai tried to reason with him, but the boy had changed. The dream Nehorai had clung to—that a Jewish state would raise a generation of faithful Jews—was slipping away.

One Shabbat, Avi refused to go to shul. "We’re going on a school hike," he said. "Everyone’s going."

That evening, Nehorai sat alone in the beit midrash, staring at the aron kodesh. The pain pressed on his chest like a stone. How had this happened? He had survived the camps, reached the Holy Land, built a family—and yet here, in the land of the prophets, he was losing his children to a different kind of exile.

Nehorai buried himself in work and Torah. He helped expand the new school, started a shiur for young fathers, and led a neighborhood initiative to distribute matzot before Pesach. But his smile rarely reached his eyes. He had sacrificed his firstborn to protect a future. The guilt weighed heavy.

Leah, after a week of silence, lit Shabbat candles again. Nehorai noticed but said

nothing. Later, she asked for help with a school assignment on Ruth. They sat together for an hour. It was the first time they had spoken without argument in months.

Menachem flourished. He loved to daven, memorized mishnayot, and began waking early to walk to shul with Nehorai. “One child returned,” Tova said one evening. “Maybe another still will.”

Nehorai nodded. But his heart ached.

He still set a place for Avi on Friday nights.

Chapter 4: The Return Begins

It was a Thursday night like many others. The summer air was heavy, and the clamor of voices from the street filtered through the cracked window of Nehorai’s kitchen. He sat at the table, trying to review a few lines of Mishnah, but his eyes kept drifting to the clock. The house was too quiet. The children were out late, Tova had gone to bed early, and the old familiar ache pressed in.

Unable to concentrate, Nehorai stepped out and walked the dusty alleyways. He didn’t know where he was going, only that he couldn’t stay still. His feet led him to the edge of the neighborhood where a small, neglected beit midrash stood. The wooden door was open, its hinges creaking in the breeze.

Inside, the room was full. Rows of men, young and old, sat shoulder to shoulder, listening to a visiting rabbi. His voice was not theatrical, but each word landed like a chisel. “We have returned to the Land, yes—but not yet to Hashem. What is a Jewish nation without Torah? What is freedom without faith?”

Nehorai stood in the back, unmoving. His eyes welled. He didn’t take notes. He didn’t speak. But something inside him cracked open.

He returned home in silence, kissed each sleeping child on the forehead, and sat beside Tova’s bed. She stirred but didn’t speak. That night, he lay awake, thinking—not about history or politics, but about his father’s tallit, about the fire that once lived in his own chest.

The next morning, he rose early. He put on a white shirt, neatly ironed. At the textile factory, he found his supervisor and said, “I won’t work on Shabbat anymore.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “You’ll be back. Hunger teaches better than sermons.”

But Nehorai didn’t return.

That Shabbat was quiet. He lit candles while the others watched indifferently. He sang “Lecha Dodi” with a trembling voice. The children fidgeted. Tova said little. But when he blessed them at the table, something stirred—a faint warmth he hadn’t felt in years.

The week that followed was hard. He searched for odd jobs that didn’t require Shabbat work, but employers scoffed. He repaired fences, lifted crates in a warehouse, and peddled vegetables, earning just enough for bread and milk.

Then came a harder choice. Tuition was due for the Chinuch Atzmai school. The state schools were free. The religious ones were not. Nehorai went to the drawer, opened the small jewelry box, and lifted Tova’s last heirloom—her mother’s gold bracelet. He sold it the next morning.

Tova didn’t protest. She simply closed her eyes.

From that point on, Nehorai wore his tallit with pride. He davened each day in the local minyan, taught Torah to a few neighborhood boys in the evenings, and refused to compromise. The family remained strained—Avi barely spoke to him, Leah rolled her eyes—but Nehorai no longer wavered.

He had begun to return. Not only to mitzvot, but to himself.

Chapter 5: Walls and Winds

The decision to move to Bnei Brak came after a long silence between Nehorai and Tova. Their apartment near Hadera had become a place of unease—tension between tradition and accommodation filled the rooms. One night, after overhearing Avi mocking the weekly parsha and Leah openly declaring she would no longer dress “like a relic,” Nehorai said softly, “We need to leave.” Tova nodded. No argument. Just quiet consent.

Their new home was smaller, darker, and older. But it was in a place where men wore hats and children wore tzitzit. The stairwell smelled of cholent on Fridays and echoed with zemirot on Shabbat. Nehorai felt something akin to peace, though life did not become easier.

He found work repairing sefarim for a local scribe. It paid poorly. Tova took in mending and sewing. Their meals grew simpler, but Nehorai blessed every bite. The children adjusted slowly. Leah missed her old friends. Avi, now a teenager, spent most of his time outside, often in silence. Their youngest, Menachem, showed signs of curiosity—sitting beside his father during Maariv and asking questions about each blessing.

Nehorai quickly became active in the local community. He helped establish a stairwell minyan. He taught alef-bet to new immigrant children. He volunteered to organize food packages for struggling families. Yet something gnawed at him. The Chinuch Atzmai school Menachem now attended was overburdened, and the waiting list grew each week.

When the idea surfaced to open another class in the neighborhood, Nehorai stepped forward. He offered to coordinate, to teach if needed. But when they applied for approval from the Ministry of Education, a familiar wall rose: “The state will fund it if you include state curriculum—civics, Zionist history, secular ethics.”

Nehorai declined. Not again.

He spent the next eighteen months organizing protests, writing letters to religious Knesset members, and meeting with local rabbanim. He travelled to Jerusalem twice, speaking to a committee member who barely looked up from his notes. “We’re not interested in creating ghettos,” the man muttered.

Still, Nehorai persisted. He collected hundreds of signatures. He met with Agudat Yisrael representatives. He wrote to Rav Aharon Kotler in America for advice. And slowly, piece by piece, something shifted.

By the end of 1957, approval was granted—for a single caravan, a handful of desks, and partial funding. It wasn’t much, but it was something. Nehorai cried the night it opened. Twenty children in kippot and braids filled the small room with noise and light. Menachem sat in the front row.

Tova baked cookies for the occasion. She didn’t say much, but her eyes glistened when Nehorai returned home that day.

Their finances were still tight. The house remained cramped. But their walls now held Torah. Their windows let in light. And Nehorai, though worn, felt that the wind was at last shifting.

Chapter 6: Sacrifices and Silence

The school caravan stood at the edge of the neighborhood—modest, quiet, and sacred. Nehorai passed it every morning on his way to daven, and every time he saw children carrying Chumashim through its narrow door, he whispered a brachah. But what happened in the public square could not undo what was unraveling inside his home.

Avi was seventeen now—tall, confident, and increasingly distant. He had stopped wearing a kippah and refused to answer to his Hebrew name. He spoke with admiration about Ben-Gurion and the Palmach, and snickered at the stories Nehorai tried to share at the table. Leah, growing into adolescence, imitated her brother's tone and interests. Tova, weary from holding the family together with thread and teacups, said little. The atmosphere in the house had grown brittle.

Then came the confrontation.

Nehorai arrived home late one Thursday evening and saw Avi sitting at the table with a greasy box. Inside was pizza from a nearby stand. The smell of meat and cheese together—non-kosher, unchecked—was unmistakable. "It's just cheese," Avi said before Nehorai could speak. "What's the big deal?"

Nehorai sat down slowly. "This is our home," he said. "We are not just eating. We are building a world with every bite."

Avi laughed. "Then maybe your world is too small."

The silence that followed stretched thin. Finally, Nehorai whispered, "If you can't live by our ways, then perhaps it's time to find your own."

Tova gasped. Avi stood. The door slammed behind him.

That night, no one slept. Tova cried quietly in the bedroom. Leah stayed in her room with the radio low. Nehorai paced the tiny kitchen, his thoughts loud. Had he pushed too hard? Had he waited too long?

Days passed. Avi didn't return.

Nehorai buried himself in work and Torah. He helped expand the new school, started a shiur for young fathers, and led a neighborhood initiative to distribute matzot before Pesach. But his smile rarely reached his eyes. He had sacrificed his firstborn to protect a

future. The guilt weighed heavy.

Leah, after a week of silence, lit Shabbat candles again. Nehorai noticed but said nothing. Later, she asked for help with a school assignment on Ruth. They sat together for an hour. It was the first time they had spoken without argument in months.

Menachem flourished. He loved to daven, memorized mishnayot, and began waking early to walk to shul with Nehorai. “One child returned,” Tova said one evening. “Maybe another still will.”

Nehorai nodded. But his heart ached.

He still set a place for Avi on Friday nights.

Chapter 7: Struggle in the Streets

By the 1970s, Nehorai had become something of a landmark in the Bnei Brak neighborhood. His beard had silvered, but his eyes remained sharp. He walked with a slight stoop, but his voice still carried clarity and conviction when he gave shiurim. Children greeted him as “Saba Nehorai,” and even those who didn’t know his name recognized his silhouette in the early morning fog as he opened the beit midrash each day.

But outside the protective walls of his neighborhood, the country moved in another direction. New housing developments, modern schools, and secular cultural centers began encroaching on their quiet streets. One morning, Nehorai heard from a neighbor that the municipality had approved a Friday night public concert—complete with lights and speakers—directly across from the main shul.

He felt something drop in his chest.

That afternoon, he visited the mayor’s office. He was polite but firm. “You wouldn’t blast music next to a church during mass,” he said. The clerk dismissed him with a smile. “But this is different. We’re building a shared society.”

Nehorai left without another word. That evening, he began organizing. He drafted letters, gathered neighbors, and contacted rabbanim. A local newspaper ridiculed the movement, calling Nehorai “a relic of exile.” But he pressed forward, filing a formal injunction. The court date was set.

On the day of the hearing, Nehorai stood before a secular judge. He spoke simply: “This is not just a concert. This is our Shabbat. Our sanctuary. The one day a week when holiness walks among us. Let it be.”

To everyone’s surprise, the judge ruled in his favor. The event was relocated. That Friday night, the shul was full, the air still. When they reached “Lecha Dodi,” Nehorai’s voice rose stronger than it had in years.

A few weeks later, the government offered Nehorai a new housing unit. Spacious. Modern. Well subsidized. But it was in a secular development, with conditions: shared community events, televisions in every unit, and a curriculum for residents promoting “national unity.”

He declined.

“I would rather live in a room full of kedushah,” he told Tova, “than in a mansion built on compromise.”

She smiled. “I never liked the idea of a television anyway.”

That night, Nehorai sat on their old balcony, watching the candles flicker through dozens of windows across the courtyard. The neighborhood was old, the walls cracked—but the light, oh the light, was strong.

Even as the world outside surged ahead, Nehorai stood still—not in stubbornness, but in loyalty. In a land that had forgotten its soul, he remained its whisper.

Chapter 8: A Letter in Winter

The winters in Bnei Brak were mild, but Nehorai still felt the chill more than he used to. His steps were slower, his hands more careful when turning the pages of his sefarim. He had stopped giving nightly shiurim, passing the mantle to younger voices. Still, every morning, he could be found in his usual seat, wrapped in his tallit before the first rays of sunlight touched the rooftops.

His apartment was now filled with grandchildren. Leah had married a young man from Jerusalem, a talmid chacham who respected Nehorai deeply. Their home was warm with Torah and laughter. Menachem was now a teenager, excelling in yeshiva and already being asked to help tutor younger boys. Nehorai would often sit with him in the

evenings, learning a sugya or reviewing a daf. “Your eyes,” he once told him, “remind me of your grandfather’s.”

Still, one chair at the table remained empty.

Avi had not returned. Not after the shouting, the silence, or the letters Nehorai had sent every year before Rosh Hashanah. They were never answered. Occasionally, Tova would hear from a neighbor who had spotted him in Tel Aviv, clean-shaven, dressed like any other Israeli man. Nehorai said little. But every Friday, he set a place.

Then, one morning in Tevet, a letter arrived. The envelope was plain, the handwriting unfamiliar. Tova opened it first and quietly handed it to Nehorai. He read it once, then again.

“Abba,

I see now what you were trying to protect. I didn’t understand it before. I see what you built, and I miss it. I’m sorry. Can I visit?

Avi.”

That Friday night, the house was filled to bursting. Children chased each other, Tova cooked her best dishes, and Nehorai sat at the head of the table, waiting. The candles flickered. The doorbell rang.

Avi stood there—older, thinner, eyes softer. He didn’t speak at first. Just stepped inside, removed his shoes, and reached for a siddur.

During “Shalom Aleichem,” Nehorai’s voice caught, but he continued. At the meal, Avi asked to lead Birkat HaMazon. Tova’s hands shook as she passed him the bentcher. The grandchildren stared with wide eyes.

Later that night, Nehorai sat with Avi on the balcony. They didn’t speak of the past. Not yet. They looked out at the neighborhood—small balconies, flickering lights, the soft hum of zemirot drifting through the air.

“You know,” Nehorai said finally, “they built towers, roads, and armies. But we—” he gestured toward the apartment, “we rebuilt souls.”

Avi nodded, blinking away tears. “And I want to help.”

The silence between them dissolved like mist. The exile, Nehorai thought, had truly ended—not the one from land or language, but the one from heart to heart.

That Shabbat, the candles burned brighter.