

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Fighting Calypso and Her Lotus Flowers

D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

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With appreciation to Silvia, who shared a TikTok video¹ with me and gave me the insight for this d'var Torah, to Rabbi Joshua Kullock, who writes what I want to write, but better, to Daniela, who helped me focus on the central message of this d'var Torah.



I am sure you heard about the Odyssey, an ancient Greek epic poem traditionally attributed to the legendary poet Homer. Written in dactylic hexameter around the 8th or 7th century BC, it stands as one of the oldest surviving and most influential works of Western literature.² When I was young and intellectually ambitious, I thought about learning Homeric Greek to read the Odyssey in its original. Later, I thought it would be ambitious enough to read it in translation, either in Spanish or English. Finally, I say to myself, "I will wait for the movie."

And this past summer, at last the movie, a three-hour adaption, directed by Christopher Nolan, came out. Silvia and I went to the AMC Fresh Meadows theater and truly enjoyed the movie, which I highly recommend. For once, you will grasp the essence of the story without having to learn Homeric Greek.

For those who are not familiar with the Odyssey's main plot, allow me to share with you: this ancient epic poem was written by Homer more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It tells the story of Odysseus, whom Homer describes as a man of many turns. The movie is a modern reflection on war, guilt, the treatment of the vulnerable, and what happens to societies when trust breaks down. Nolan's Odysseus is less the clever

¹ <https://www.tiktok.com/@markov.decrypte/video/7667997653329825056? r=1& t=ZP-doQaxXVra>

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odyssey>

trickster of Homer's poem and more a man haunted by the consequences of his actions. Through the movie, the ancient story becomes a way of asking questions about our lives and the kind of world we want to build together.

The story focuses mainly on Odysseus' long journey back to Ithaca. From the day he left Penelope to the moment he returned home, twenty years would pass: ten years fighting the Trojans and another ten, sailing home while facing one monster after another: the Cyclops ³, Circe ⁴, the Sirens ⁵, and more.

And yet, as challenging as these hurdles can be, The Odyssey speaks to us about an even greater danger: what happens when we become complacent and stop reaching for the life that is waiting for us. That danger, in the movie, is embodied by the beautiful goddess Calypso.⁶

Calypso is not a monster. She is not a threat. She is beautiful. And caring. And calm. Calypso welcomes Odysseus and helps him heal. She provides him with almost everything she thinks he wants. But the price he pays is years of forgetting who he really is. In the movie, Calypso feeds Odysseus lotus flowers, and he enjoys them. But the more he eats, the more he forgets himself, his people, and the love of his life. During those long years, Odysseus is anesthetized. He doesn't ache. But he doesn't feel either. He no longer has any urge to return home. He settles down. No more obligations, no more guilt, and no more reasons to be afraid.

Odysseus is on a journey, he wants to get back home, and Calypso stops him. The beautiful Calypso succeeds in what all the other monsters failed.

In Homer's The Odyssey, Calypso represents the ultimate escape from reality, responsibility, and the struggles of human life. Calypso's island is a peaceful, beautiful oasis far removed from the violent aftermath of the Trojan War, and it offers an alluring refuge from the hardships of the world.

³ In ancient Greek lore, a cyclops (plural: cyclopes) is a giant creature with a single, round eye in the middle of its forehead. In Homer's Odyssey, the most legendary individual is Polyphemus, a lawless, man-eating shepherd and son of Poseidon. In the Odyssey, the hero Odysseus gets trapped in Polyphemus's cave and escapes by getting the giant drunk and driving a wooden stake into his single eye.

⁴ A famous sorceress and goddess in Greek mythology who transforms people into animals with magic potions and herbs.

⁵ In [classical Greek mythology](#), the Sirens were alluring yet dangerous creatures who lived on rocky islands and lured sailors to their destruction with their enchantingly sweet music and voices.

⁶ Calypso most famously refers to a nymph in Greek mythology who detained the Greek hero Odysseus on her remote island for seven years.

It's hard to resist such an offer. There are days when we would prefer to seek comfort in Calypso's warm embrace rather than confront the challenges life presents. Who doesn't want a break when the struggle becomes too much? What's so wrong with stepping away, at least for a while? Who would say no to a few lotus flowers after hurting for such a long time? ⁷

Calypso's island ultimately serves as a gilded cage that threatens the protagonist's identity.

Odysseus is brave and strong and really loves his wife and son, but he cannot leave the beautiful oasis with its anesthetizing flowers. He stays on the island for seven years; he knows he must return home, but he cannot even muster the strength to walk the first step.

Do you have days like these? Do you sometimes feel that you should and could live up to the expectations that God has for you, but instead you tell yourself, "Mañana"? Do you feel at times that you have worked hard enough throughout your life and now you want to rest and do nothing? Are you trying to find out on which website you can buy lotus flowers wholesale? Are you convincing yourself that a gilded cage isn't so bad after all?

If you answer yes to the above questions, you are not alone.

Odysseus is a mythological figure, but a very powerful symbolic one. On Yom Kippur, we read about our hero Jonah, who also runs away - not to a paradise island, but to Tarshish. He also knows what he must do, but just doesn't want to, at least not today. However, Jonah doesn't get stuck in paradise, he gets trapped at the bottom of the sea swallowed by a monster. After a long inner struggle, Jonah musters his courage, does what he has to do, and embraces the mission. In the film, Odysseus ultimately chooses to leave Calypso and return to Ithaca. But his decision is not obvious. The tension between a quiet, comfortable, uneventful life and a challenging, life-threatening journey back home is real.

Odysseus is ultimately a hero not because he killed the Cyclops or tricked the sirens, but because he overcame seven years of complacency and started a slow and long journey home. To me, and perhaps many other modern readers, Odysseus is ultimately

⁷ My appreciation to Rabbi Joshua Kullock for this summary.

a hero because he understood, before it was too late, that "the greatest tragedy in life is not death, but a life without a purpose."⁸

Home, by the way, is not a physical place but a place where we feel whole, where we feel we belong, and where we feel fulfilled in our *raison d'être*, our reason to exist.

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the particular mission each of us has on this earth; about the unique journey tailored by God for each of us.

Yom Kippur, a day of prayer, fasting, and reflection, presents us with a unique opportunity to reconnect with what really matters: our soul mission and our reason to exist. Hopefully, for most of us, life's scary monsters are behind us. All we need is to shake ourselves from Calypso's complacent embrace and embark on a journey toward a life of purpose, meaning, and significance. The journey may be challenging, but ultimately, it is the only one that truly matters.

And so, we pray,

My God! The soul that You have given me is pure; You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me, and You preserve it within me. Master of the Universe, help my soul connect with its unique mission. Shake me away from the complacency that prevents me from coming home, from embarking on a journey that will bring purpose and meaning into my life.

Unlike Odysseus and Jonah, we are not lonely heroes. Help us gather strength and self-confidence from our community and friends, from our teachers and role models, and when we stumble, help us rise and try again.

And in your kindness, bless all of us, our loved ones, your people Israel, and your fractured world, with a year of peace and health, a year of sustenance and contentment, a year of meaning and purpose, and a good and sweet year.

Amen.

⁸ The famous statement "the greatest tragedy in life is not death, but a life without a purpose" is most famously attributed to the renowned speaker and author [Dr. Myles Munroe](#). This idea challenges us to look beyond mere survival and focus on finding a deep, personal reason for being.