



Where is home?

By Dafna Lemish

“Where is home?” is one question asked of all 78 interviewees in my ongoing study of migrant academics initiated in 2019 (Lemish, in progress). To date, they have moved from 35 to 10 countries around the world in pursuit of academic careers, under very diverse sets of circumstances. In the main, our discussions of “home” have been abstract and focused on identity - does the home country or host country feel like “home”? For some, the answer was one or the other; for others - both; and yet for a few - neither. However, in several interviews conducted remotely during the COVID-19 crisis, discussions of the concept of home turned into concrete reflections and decision-making. Where do I feel safe? Where do I want to be if things get out of control? Who will take care of my elderly parents if I am not there? Where do I want to die, mourned, buried or cremated, if this is to be my fate? What if I make a decision too late and I won’t be able to travel to get there in time?

Suddenly, complicated immigration arrangements and compromises related to mixed partnerships, homeownership, employment, health care, children, elderly parents - were all challenged. Urgently, the concept of “home” reignited and, all too often, begged for very concrete decision-making. Some academics rushed to their home

country to take care of their parents, to guarantee better healthcare, or to move to a rural environment. Others stayed put, as there was too much to lose by going back to their homeland. In doing so, they remained emotionally torn by the loss of psychological comfort knowing they could always go for a visit. Now they couldn't.

My own "research" may be a telling case study. I immigrated to the United States from Israel in my mid-50s as an established scholar with strong international networks and reputation, familiarity with American society, and excellent command of the English language. My husband of several decades and my three children were all American citizens. I landed wonderful academic positions of prominence. I am deeply aware that my immigration story is a very privileged one, which is what I mean when I refer to it as the "Rolls-Royce" of immigration stories. I remain confident in my decision to immigrate for a host of personal, professional, and political reasons.

However, COVID-19 and sheltering at home in New Jersey, one of the hotspots of the outbreak, rocked my boat in unexpected ways. While I always start the day checking an Israeli newspaper online, now I do so obsessively, multiple times each day, checking every detail related to how the COVID-19 affected my homeland; constantly comparing it to New Jersey (as both states are very similar in terms of population size and geography).

I started clinging to Israeli humor and memes forwarded to me on social networks by my family and friends (and, ever a researcher, analysis of this collection will probably become a future research project). There was something about the nuances of this humor that was so familiar, so comforting, so “homey” (Unfortunately, Israel’s history has included multiple opportunities to develop unique, particularly morbid forms of humor, mostly accessible “in-group”).

Uncharacteristically, I read translated thrillers in Hebrew left behind by an Israeli relative in her visit last summer. Similarly, I ended an intense working-remotely day by watching an Israeli soap opera on Netflix. Neither genre is my cup-of-tea, but now, immersing myself in my native language of Hebrew became a source of security, strength, and comfort. And needless to say, connecting with my siblings and their families, as well as elderly relatives and extended family members in Israel, which we did regularly B.C. [before Corona] as well, has received another layer of meaning, depth, emotion, and urgency.

But more than anything else, I, too, find myself struggling with the concept of “home.” I canceled airline tickets to a family event in Israel this summer. I know I probably won’t be able to travel before there is a vaccine that will keep me safe. I know that this will take a while and believe eventually it will happen, but what does it say about the future? About getting old and becoming vulnerable? About the day when going “home” is not going to be an option anymore - due to age and health, climate

change, war, or another pandemic? Will, I ever see 'home' as colored by my childhood memories, enjoy Mediterranean smells, taste familiar foods, hear Hebrew spoken everywhere, walk accustomed streets, and most importantly - hug all my loved ones – family members, friends, former students? All these and others were omnipresent but still quite hypothetical types of questions. But, COVID-19 has pushed them front-and-center. Now they are real. Now they matter.

Yes, on the one hand, quarantining away from 'home' is uniquely uncomfortable for immigrants. Yet, on the other hand, COVID-19 and quarantining are leading all of us into unfamiliar and threatening existential domains, needing to cross psychological borders and not merely national ones. While I knew, rationally, that leaving home to immigrate to the United States might involve significant difficulties, even with my Rolls-Royce voyage, now I – like many of my interviewees throughout the world – understand these threats in every cell of our bodies.

