

Torah Begins Here
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Where to begin?

There is so much I want to say—an occupational hazard in the rabbinate.

But I'm also reminded of the words of the late comic George Burns who said said, "the secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending—and to have the two as close together as possible."

So where to begin? How could I begin from anywhere other than deep within my heart, where I feel the fullest sense of gratitude I've ever known as a rabbi. On behalf of my family—my wife Nicole who's here and shares 100% of my excitement, and our 5-year-old Caleb and 2-year old Carmel: Thank You. Thank you for taking what I'd call a "leap of trust," in electing me to become your Senior Rabbi. I do not take for granted the strength, the resilience, and the heart that went into every step of your journey that led to this moment.

Where to begin? Where else but with the recognition that this community is what writers McKnight and Bloch call "*an abundant community*," filled to the brim with remarkable human beings who pour their hearts into Judea Reform Congregation. This is why when I was here just over a month ago, "you had me at Shalom."

My gratitude, of course, extends to Judith, Gary, and the search committee; to Ziva, the board and executive committee; to all of you who gave of your precious time to meet with me and the other candidates; to Emily Young and this devoted and gifted and wonderful staff— knowing that on July 1st I get to work with you fills me with.... a lot of impatience.

Where to begin? Why not with a little Torah as well. (My favorite occupational hazard!) Our portion this week, believe it or not, is also a celebration of this beginning—in three ways. The first is almost too obvious, it's a "softball." The portion is called Parashat Bo, the word *Bo* means "arriving." A nice portion to accompany our arrival to this covenantal moment.

Reason #2: Best captured by the great scholar of the 11th c. Rashi, whose commentary on this portion is shocking to say the least. This portion falls in the middle of the Exodus narrative, yet for some reason Rashi says, *The Torah should have begun here!*

Now, Rashi is arguably the smartest Torah commentator of all time, and somewhat of a literalist, but here he has the chutzpah to say, this portion, this is the REAL beginning of the Torah—not in that other beginning....

We all know that other beginning, the book of Genesis, beginning with the Hebrew word "*B'reishit*." And can someone call out the most famous English translation of the first words of Torah? ("IN THE BEGINNING!"). Last time I was here we talked about the most *egregious* mistranslation in the Torah; well, this is the most *famous* mistranslation. It doesn't mean "in the beginning"—the grammar just doesn't support that—we'll discuss that more in October.

Rashi knew what centuries later the Chasidic Master Reb Simcha Bunum clearly teaches. He says:

"B'reishit-- in a state of beginning, God created the world. The universe," he writes,
"is always in an uncompleted state
in the form of its beginning.
It's not like a vessel that a master works to finish it;
it requires continuous work and renewal by creative forces."

This community does not need a lesson on the perpetual state of beginnings. I know you have been through many. And through it all, you have channeled the energy of beginnings. Judea Reform Congregation has a spirit of beginning, of renewal, that is so palpable that when I arrived here one month ago, I felt ready to begin.

Returning to Rashi for a moment: That notion that the world is always beginning—perhaps this is what permits him to depart from the beginning of Genesis. But that doesn't explain why he chooses *this week*.

So, why begin this week? Because it is in this week's portion we find the very first commandment issued to whole community of Israel. The story of the Exodus is actually interrupted to introduce this very first Covenantal moment of the people of Israel. What a week to establish a covenantal beginning for this community. This week, with Torah, with each other, we begin again.

The third and final reason why this Torah portion is a celebration of this moment: There is one word, the root of which appears more times in this week's portion than in any other in the entire Torah. 9 times in this week's portion do we find the word *chazak*. "Strength." The very word at the heart of this community's touchstone text for this year: *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*, "Be strong, be strong, and we will strengthen each other."

As you know, in our tradition we chant this phrase in between each and every book of Torah—each and every ending and every beginning—with a reminder of our strength and our tradition

of finding strength through each other, through community. We sing these words between our books because Torah is not just a book, it is an *eitv chayyim hi l'machazikim ba*, “a tree of life to *machazikim*” -- that word again, *chazak*—*machazikim*, “a tree of life to those who HAVE STRENGTH!”

Chazak:

It DOES take strength to uphold a life of Torah, a life of meaning and purpose.

It does take takes strength to fight for justice; to love the stranger; to defend the bullied and oppressed.

It does take strength to face the world, the REAL world; to see what humanity is doing to our precious world; it takes strength to stand up and refuse to be complicit.

Yes, we have our work cut out for us in the days ahead. It will take strength to be morally counter-cultural. But it will take even more strength to do it *not alone*, but *as a community*—because we are a people that agrees and dis-agrees with *chazak*, with strength.

Yes, we disagree with the world, but we also disagree with each other: And it's always been this way!

It has always taken strength to BE a sacred community, let alone nurture it, grow it, and renew it over and over and over again. *It takes strength* to build friendships across communities—it takes far more strength to build bridges rather than walls, especially given how different we are.

V'nitchazeik.

But for thousands of years, miraculously, we draw strength from the other—each and every Other— and we commit, together, to a life-affirming purpose. THAT is why Rashi says *this Torah begins here, when WE, TOGETHER, hear our purpose!*

We are still here for a purpose: to partner with God, to heal and be agents of healing, to become what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called, “*the beloved community.*”

We are so far from achieving that vision, that dream, of worldwide beloved community. Where do we even begin???

Well? Why not here? In this sacred space, in this holy moment, with the strength of THIS beloved community? Where else, how else, but *here and together.*

Friends:

May we go from verse to verse, portion to portion, book to book, strength to strength, and beginning to beginning to beginning.

Chazak chazak v'nitchazek!