



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Starting Over from *Bereshit*

There are moments in life when we must start all over, when we have no choice but to begin again.

Such moments seem to typically follow tragic events. Sudden loss, especially the loss of those closest to us, forces us to begin again. Our only other options are lifelong despair and depression.

There are times when even good fortune demands that we begin again. Acceptance into a new professional career, or a move to a new community, or marriage, all require a new response, and often an entirely new way of life.

I write these words little more than a week after one of the most horrible catastrophes in recent Jewish history, Hamas' invasion into Israel's homeland and its consequent massacre, torture, and kidnapping of well over a thousand civilians and soldiers.

I leave it to those who have the expertise to describe and record details of the terror. I am not sufficiently astute to even speculate upon the military decisions that lie ahead, nor am I remotely qualified to suggest political responses to this complex predicament.

What I can do and will do is to ask that you consider, if not immediately then as the way forward becomes clearer, that we

now have a responsibility to begin again. As individuals, as communities, and as a Jewish nation, we must start over. We must reconsider old habits, past strategies, former relationships, and long held ideologies and beliefs.

In short, borrowing from an old Yiddish adage which Naomi Shemer used as the title of one of her poems, we are all now challenged to "begin anew from *Bereshit*."

Ironically, the day that Hamas struck, the Shabbat that shall live in infamy, was *Simchat Torah* in Israel. The core ritual of this sacred day is to read the final passages of the *Chumash* from one Torah scroll, and then open another Torah scroll to "begin again from *Bereshit*."

How apt it is that this column is dedicated to *Parshat Lech Lecha* (Genesis 12:1-17:27). This *parsha* begins with the Lord's instruction to Abram to begin again, to

May the learning
from this Torah Tidbits
be an עילוי נשמה
for my beloved husband

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start all over. We know almost nothing about Abram's life until this point. We know his father's name, his brothers' names, and his nephew's name. We know that his father took some of his family on the journey from the land of Canaan, but never quite made it there until the father died. All that was recorded in last week's *parsha*.

This week's *parsha* begins: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you...'. Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him..."

Abram began anew. He started over. He readied himself to face the various challenges, *nisyonot*, that lay ahead. Beginning again was just the first of these challenges.

We, the Jewish people, are all descendants of Abraham. Even converts to the Jewish faith typically adopt the name Abraham for themselves or refer to themselves as *ben Avraham*, a son of Abraham. Like our forefather, we all are called upon, at critical moments in our long history, to begin again, to start anew.

I am not sufficiently arrogant, however, to offer direction to an entire nation or even to any one specific community. I will instead confine myself in this column to guidance for those interested in, resorting to a psychological terminology that I picked up in graduate school, the "developmental task" of lifelong Torah study. This is a task incumbent upon us all.

In the future, however, I will endeavor to bring to your attention themes from future *parshiot* which detail ways in which the Jewish nation as a whole must "begin anew.

The advertisement features the Adesco Currency logo at the top, with the text "WE ARE HIRING!" in large, bold, blue letters. Below this, the phrase "Join our team" is written in a gold, cursive font. A blue rounded rectangle contains the text "Adesco Currency is seeking an experienced banker" in white. Below that, "Retirees Welcome to Apply!" is written in gold. The "Qualifications:" section is in white on a dark blue background, listing four items with checkmarks: "Ability to review and approve transactions", "Compliance with regulations and internal policies", "Fluency in Hebrew and English", and "Business Development". A gold "Work at home!!!" banner is below. At the bottom, a light blue banner says "Adesco Currency get more shekels faster" with a starburst icon, and a dark blue banner provides contact information: "Contact Jeff Balsam directly: jeff@adesco.co.il | 052-2237897".

For now, let me introduce you to a wise old rabbi whom I was privileged to learn from in his later years. His name was Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, of blessed memory. He was born and educated in pre-Holocaust Lithuania and spent the last decades of his life as the head of the Torah Vodaath yeshiva in Brooklyn, New York. Toward the end of his life, he lived with family in Baltimore, where I then resided. From time to time, I was invited to keep him company, and I used that opportunity to interview him on subjects of interest to me, especially Torah education.

Once he initiated our conversation by exclaiming in Yiddish, "*Menn darf vaksen in lernen Torah*," "One must grow in one's Torah study." He went on to portray just how comic it would be for a 30-year-old to cling to the Torah lessons he was taught in kindergarten.

“As a five-year-old,” he would explain, “he was excited to learn what the world calls ‘bible stories.’ As he matures, so must his understanding of Torah so that those stories become the basis of profound lessons of theology, Jewish history, ethics, and morality.”

He continued with a delightful tale about his childhood friend, Asher, with whom he grew up in the old *shtetl* in Lithuania. Their paths diverged when Asher, then no more than eight years old, emigrated with his family to the United States.

Seventy years later, their paths again crossed. It was the day before Yom Kippur and, as is the custom, Rabbi Kamenetsky went to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath house, to “cleanse” himself before the Day of Awe.

How surprised he was to encounter Asher there! They joyously reunited, trying to catch up with all that had transpired in their long lives. Then, in the dressing room, Rabbi Kamenetsky donned his *arba kanfot*, his undergarment with ritual fringes, or *tzitzit*. His garment extended from his neck down to his knees, in accordance with Jewish custom.

He was stunned to observe that Asher too had donned a similar garment. But his merely extended from his neck to his chest. As the Rabbi explained to me, “it was like a baby’s bib!”.

When the Rabbi asked Asher to explain why he wore such an inadequate garment, Asher responded: “You must remember my old *Zaidi*, my grandfather. He did not accompany us to the United States. He felt that our religious observance would be compromised there. But he did call me over to him and pointing to my *arba kanfot*—I was then only eight years

old—instructed me to always wear this garment. And so, although I am now 6 feet tall, I continue to wear the same size garment that I wore then.”

Rabbi Kamenetsky then drove home his point to me. Just as a grown man cannot wear a child’s clothing, so must a grown person’s understanding of Torah grow as he matures.

The Rabbi’s pedagogical lesson was cogent and forceful and remains so. A ten-year-old must be taught Torah at his or her level. So must the twenty-year-old and thirty-year-old and fifty-year-old and eighty-year-old approach Torah anew as he or she advances through life’s stages.

Each year of our lives requires us to return to the beginning. To return to *Bereshit* again. To readjust our understanding to conform with the lessons we have learned earlier in our lives.

At this tragic juncture in the history of our people, we must be prepared to begin anew to ascertain where we have gone wrong in all aspects of our behavior, in our faith, in our prayers, in our understanding of what the Almighty expects of us, and especially in our relationships with others.

Pray for true and total peace. *Shabbat SHALOM!* ■

Pinchus Klahr, MD

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