

-It was a dark and stormy night

-All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

-It was the best of times, it was the worst of times

-Call me Ishmael

-All this happened, more or less

-Once upon a time...

A really good story has a terrific opening line. It's supposed to grab you right from the start and hold you in for the duration. And this week in our Torah cycle, we begin the greatest and most famous story ever told: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..."

We read this story again, and again. We work through it methodically and consistently every year, section by section. It was written long ago, but the text is deep, rich and powerful. Yet, we already are aware of what happens. We know how the stories play out, and how they end. So why does our tradition ask us to repeatedly read the same text?

The famous first century teacher Rabbi Ben Bag Bag told us to "Turn the Torah, and turn it again, for everything you want to know is found within it." One explanation as to why we read this story over and over is that there is so much contained within the Torah that one read-through every so often just isn't enough. As those of us who participate in Torah Study every Saturday know, there is always more to discuss. We have to continue turning the Torah so that we can absorb its knowledge, debate its theological significance and gain perspective about its words.

A more modern source, ReformJudaism.org, states a similar idea, “For the Jewish people, the study of Torah never ends. Each year, as we read the sacred text again, it can be as if we are reading it for the first time. Each encounter with sacred text offers the possibility of new meanings.” As we start a new year, we are also different people. We’ve just been through a reflective few weeks where we’ve contemplated who we are, and who we want to be. We’ve had more experiences, memories and encounters than we did last year. We can read our old texts with fresh eyes. The Torah is always new because we continue to become new people as we learn and grow. Even though we are reading stories that we already know, more things have happened to ourselves and in the world that provide us with new insight and perspectives.

Unfortunately, not everything that has happened since we last began the story of the Torah has been productive or positive. This weekend marks one year since the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh- the deadliest attack ever on the American Jewish community. This mass shooting that killed eleven congregants just because they were in their synagogue celebrating Shabbat was a part of our story that no one ever wanted to happen. Anti-Semitism has been on pages of our history for countless generations. Yet, we are in the middle of a new chapter where those who are ignorant and intolerant are emboldened to public acts of hate- drawing swastikas on synagogues, Holocaust memorials and schools, causing disruption on holy days and intimidating and assaulting those who are publicly Jewish.

This past Wednesday, the AJC, the American Jewish Committee, one of the oldest Jewish advocacy organizations, released the results of a landmark survey on American Jewish opinion about anti-semitism in America. There are many articles with detailed analysis about what respondents say and how they feel, statistics and impressions- and I invite you to go on the AJC website and do some reading. One article details the 3 key takeaways a year after the Pittsburgh massacre:

Takeaway #1: American Jews are deeply concerned. According to the survey, “Nearly nine out of ten American Jews believe the cancer of antisemitism has begun to spread in the U.S. Eight out of ten believe Jew hatred has been on the rise in the last five years. And neither age, political affiliation, nor level of religiosity makes much of a difference in who feels that way.” Across the aisle, throughout the denominations, and including all ages, we are worried. 42% of American Jews feel less secure than the last time we began the Torah over again.

Takeaway #2: Jews are hiding their Jewishness. The survey reports, “Nearly a third of American Jews (31%) say they have tucked their Star of David pendant into their blouse, removed their kippot, and avoided publicly wearing, carrying, or displaying other things that might help people identify them as Jewish. A quarter of respondents say they avoid certain places, events, or situations out of concern for their safety or comfort as Jews at least some of the time.” Young people are most likely to want to hide their identities, and those who have experienced anti-semitism directly are more likely than others to stay away from certain situations.

Takeaway #3: Jews consider anti-Zionism anti-semitic. The survey states, “According to the overwhelming majority of American Jews, statements that qualify as antisemitism include “The U.S. government only supports Israel because of the Jewish money” (80%) and “American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America” (73%).

But the most egregious statement, according to respondents, is “Israel has no right to exist.” More than 84% of American Jews believe that statement is antisemitic and that anti-Zionism—the belief that Jews have no right to statehood in their national homeland—is just a different way to spell “antisemitism.” This sentiment, too, is consistent across political and denominational lines.

I share these takeaways with you not to cause alarm, but because it is important for us to know what is going on in our Jewish community across the country, especially in the midst of this chapter in our story that is far from ideal. In order for us to finish this chapter and move on to the next one, now more than ever it is important for us to come together with those who may have different beliefs than we do. Our concern, fear and threats that we are facing apply equally to all Jews, in America and beyond- Republicans, Democrats and Independents, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Unaffiliated and Reform.

The AJC has named tonight, “Show Up for Shabbat”. Its website asks us to “come together to honor the victims and **raise our collective voice for a world free of antisemitism, hate, and bigotry.**” Just by being present in our sanctuary tonight, we are combatting those who wish to harm us. Just by showing up, we are continuing to be strong links in the chain of our tradition, ensuring that our people and our story will continue.

Maybe that is why we read the Torah over and over again. All around the country and the world, Jews finished and then re-started our foundational text earlier this week as we celebrated Simchat Torah. This Shabbat, we all read the same opening line that Martin just did, and Karoline will tomorrow- “Bereshit bara Elohim, et ha’Shamayim v’et ha’aretz”, “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” We are all in this together, as one people, across time and space, across the generations. We have read the Torah over and over again in the same way every single year, no matter who we are, where we live, or what branch of Judaism we practice. There has always been anti-semitism, but there have also always been Jews who continue to read and re-read our Torah in the face of fear, concern and threats. This holy scroll defines who we are as people, and we will continue reading it despite everything happening around us. It provides us with a consistency and a stability that is hard to find elsewhere. It provides us with a foundation for a rich and evolving story that we build upon, that is still taking shape.

This week, historian and author Deborah Lipstadt wrote that showing up and celebrating our heritage is the best thing that we can do as Jews in this moment. She states, “While we stand guard — we would be crazy not to — we do so in order to be free to celebrate Jewish life in all its manifestations. We are bearers of a magnificent tradition, one that expresses itself in religious, intellectual, philanthropic, artistic, communal, and political contexts. Despite the best efforts of so many generations of non-Jews to harm, kill, and even annihilate us, we celebrate the multi-faceted tradition that is ours and all it has given to the world. We do so, not because of the attempt to destroy us, but despite it.”

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Many generations later, God created us. We show up for Shabbat, we sing and pray and celebrate our Judaism in our own unique ways. While the opening line is famous and catchy, and we know what happens in the Torah, our story is still unfolding. May we build upon the holy work of creation that begins this week in the Torah. May we continue to show up, despite our fears, concerns and the threats we face. May we celebrate our tradition, and strengthen it in order to continue our story for all the generations yet to come. Amen.