

When I teach at HUC, I ask the Rabbinical students to write a story of an important event in their lives. Then I ask them how they knew where to start. Where do our stories begin? With an event, or the decisions that brought me to this place and time? Does my story begin with my birth, or with the decisions of my grandparents to flee from the pogroms in Russia? Or with the ancestors who were taken to Babylon? Or those who left Egypt? Or does my story begin “in the beginning”, in Genesis? Where is the beginning for each of us? In any particular story?

This Shabbat is all about starting over, about being back at the beginning. We have just rerolled the Torah, and once again, God creates the world. We celebrate our children, beginning religious school. And we mark the onset of adult responsibilities for Caroline Watson. Lots of starts.

What strikes me about these beginnings is that they all occur in a specific context. Caroline and the other children follow in the footsteps of their parents, who have chosen this path for their lives. And the Torah – well, rereading the Torah is simply part of being Jewish. We know how it will end up, that what has happened before will happen again.

How often have you reread a book? How often do you reread a book you have just finished? And when you do, isn't the book changed by the simple act of rereading? Are you changed?

In my clinical practice, people often want to go back in time – before the death, before the affair, before the change they're having trouble adapting to. They say “I wish I didn't know”, or “I wish I hadn't done...” I tell them that we cannot go back – we can't return to the marriage before the betrayal or the life before the loss – but that we can and must go forward, to the new marriage, the new life.

So why do we return to this book, with its familiar stories? In my Sunday morning Torah class, we find that each piece of text is changed by our own lives. In fact, we Jews are in an intimate relationship with this book. We impact it much as it impacts us. And, in our starting over, we have the opportunity to be changed again by these stories.

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