To Everything There Is a Beginning
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For score and seven years ago....

Where have all the flowers gone...

There was an old lady who lived in a shoe...

Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale....

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

December 7th, 1941 a day which will live…

Friend's, Romans, Countrymen

Here's a story...

Some of the greatest or at least most well known opening lines ever spoken. Each opening phrase is a story in it self. We almost don't need to hear the rest, we can fill in the blanks from our memory. These opening lines, they start for us a waterfall of memories and connections, we can place that phrase, we can give context to that statement, we remember the rest of that book, we can name that tune.

Next Shabbat the Jewish people read once again the greatest opening line of them all, we read *Beresheit Barah elohim*, "in the beginning God created…". What emotions does this line bring up for you, what avalanche of connections, context, subplots, story lines does this phrase start ringing in your ear? What comes next, what are the next words of the Torah, where does the story go from there?

I am concerned. I am concerned as a rabbi, that for too many of us, the significance, the back story the context of this opening line is lost to us. I am concerned that we can't retell the story of our people with the same attention to detail that we can tell of the movie we just saw or the book we just read. I am concerned that we have forgotten, or never learned our Torah, and I don't want to let another year go by

without at least raising the question, we, the supposed people of the book, when was the last time any of us read the book?

I see this as a serious problem, because for centuries the generations before us could finish that phrase, they could continue the story and launch from those few opening words into a thousand different commentaries on what it meant, who said it and why the Torah chose those words to begin with. Those stories, those little insights, those teachings and commentaries are the thread that binds our people together as an Am Echad, as one people. Its a problem because when we can't speak of Torah like we speak of the story line of LOST, or the latest best seller from Oprah's Book Club we become visitors to our own tradition and heritage, and though a visitor may feel comfortable in another person's home, they don't own it or have responsibility for it. No one has ever taken a rental car to a car wash. We aren't renters of Torah we are owners!

A Story: "When the great Rabbi Israel Bal Shem-Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jewish people, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I don not know how to light the fire but I am still able to say a prayer."

And again, the miracle would be accomplished, the Jewish people would be saved.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say; "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient."

It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.

And it was sufficient.

The great Rabbis of generations before us have spoken, no matter our distance from the Hebrew language, our infrequence in Temple attendance, our inability to regularly light the fire of the Sabbath candles in our home, no matter how far we get from these things, we must maintain an ability to tell the story, a certain comfort level with our sacred text, for no other reason than it is the story of our people, our story and if we can't tell it who will.

I am not one to usually invoke the memory of the holocaust in order to cajole or convince our community to uphold the tenants of Judaism. But on this night I can't escape a letter I read not long ago while doing some research for a class I was teaching. It was a letter, written during the Holocaust, from one SS commander to another. The commander was detailing in his letter the status of the military action to collect and warehouse all of the sacred Jewish books and Torah scrolls, Torah scrolls like the one in the center of our ark this evening. He wrote in his letter that the process was nearly complete for the region of his command and that soon they would have an extensive warehouse and museum of Jewish books for all the world to see. He remarked that it would be like ancient caves and pyramids, people would come and marvel at the

language and story of a people that no longer existed. They would visit this site and there before them would be a Siddur artfully displayed on a table, a Torah scroll encased under glass, with the handles exposed so visitors could freely turn the pages and roll and unroll the parchment.

This account begs us to ask the question, are our sacred texts already under glass? Are we already somehow removed from them, their scared words their message. The Jewish mystics teach that when God gave the Torah God gave not only the words but the spaces between the words, in those silent spaces were are to fill in the gaps in the stories, relate to them, expand upon them illuminate their message their moral teaching.

I worry that as our congregation enters this New Year with the reading of Torah again, from the very beginning many of us have only the gaps between the words, the empty spaces between "In the beginning" and Adam and Eve, and a flood, and a guy named Abraham and a sacrifice and a guy named Moses and the giving of the 10 commandments. Those are certainly highlights of the text but they are only highlights and they are not even all of them. To tell the story, to tell the story like we can tell the story of our family, or the movie we just saw, the book we just read, we must know the whole story, all the words, then we can fill in the gaps, then we can add the insight and the context that makes the story come alive.

Next Shabbat, this New Year as we begin again, at the very beginning with God's creation of light and darkness. Let us make a pledge, in the light that Torah brings to the world, let us pledge this year to read along with the text. Every week in our tradition we read another portion of the sacred story of our people. This year I challenge each of us to read along. We can all, rabbis and cantors included use this reminder, to go home and pull the Bible we were given for our Bar Mitzvah off our

shelf, or go to Barnes and Noble on your way home, on Shabbas no less and buy a Tanakh, a Jewish bible. Crack the spine, open those pages and begin to read. Drink in the story of our people, let the words of our sacred text, the English words, become as familiar on your lips as the words of great literature, or not so great Must See TV. Then we will be able to tell the story, then when we declare on Shabbat, "In the beginning", we will truly be able to begin, begin to tell the story of our people, because it is a story that begins and ends with each of us. And, it is like all good stories, a story worth repeating.