

Today we end and begin the Torah. With *V'zot Habracha* and *Bereishit*, we read of Moses' death and the creation of the universe. The new beginning that we experienced as individuals during the Days of Awe has given way to a new beginning in our Torah cycle. I'm really looking forward to beginning this Torah cycle with you. Last year was the first complete Torah cycle that I had the opportunity to undergo with this congregation. This will be my second one. What new insights will we gain? How much more we will learn!

The holiday's focus on happiness is much like yesterday's Shemini Atzeret. Whereas yesterday the source of happiness was the beginning of the rain, today the source of happiness is our Torah.

Why is the Torah a source of happiness? Because it provides guidance as we make our way through a world that is at times overwhelming, trying, and confusing. The Torah is there throughout providing us with a friend, reminding us of our Creator who sees in us His own image.

The end and beginning of the Torah that we experience today reminds us of the cyclical nature of existence. We recall what our lives were like at this point last year and the year before and the year before that. It gives us a reference point from which to measure ourselves. Yet the cyclical nature of existence is complemented by a forward linear progression as well. We are not the same people we were last year or the years before that. We move forward; we make progress. We don't simply go around and around.

With the end of the Torah, we bid farewell for several months to Moses and return to the world of the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah all beckon us with their example. We follow their lives as they enter the land of Canaan and experience their first encounters with God. We return to the moment before the people Israel was created to

remind ourselves that our people began with a few unique and singular individuals. These individuals are like us. They make mistakes; they repent; they develop and change. Consistent with the themes of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the focus becomes much smaller. Rather than a people and a great prophet in Moses, we read about the lives of individuals and their families. Surely this is familiar to us.

What is the unifying characteristic of the patriarchs and matriarchs that demands our attention? Each of them demonstrates how to live a life that is independent and bold while also being dependent on their Creator. Abraham at the Akeidah, Sara's barrenness, Isaac's digging of wells, Rebecca's efforts to ensure continuity, Jacob's return from exile, and Rachel and Leah's parting from their father are just the most famous of the actions of our protagonists as they try to find a foothold in the land of Israel. Perhaps more than anything, what characterizes the patriarchs and matriarchs is their commitment to truth. Their world was no less prone to the blemishes of lying. They had to maintain a commitment to honesty even as they navigated environments pervaded by lies.

As we embark upon this new cycle of reading, let's redouble our commitment to truth. We will seek it in our own personal lives; we will seek it in our synagogue, and we will seek it in our society. My hope is that our readings of Genesis during these coming months will strengthen our resolve to be truth-tellers even when – or especially when – telling the truth is not convenient. As the Talmud teaches, the seal of Torah is truth. Together let us confront the cesspool of lies in our society and return the reign of truth to its rightful throne in our world.