



When our forefather Jacob's past comes back to haunt him, he engages in an all-night wrestling match with a mystery man. As the match ends, his opponent changes Jacob's name to Israel, explaining, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." We learn that the defining quality of a Jew is to emerge from a struggle with the ability to self-transform and begin again. Having even extracted a blessing from the ordeal, Jacob will build an entirely new life with the new name Israel. From then on, we are called the Children of Israel—establishing our foundational blessing as having the ability to begin again.

Passover is another time of new beginnings for the Jewish people. Our Haggadah strangely starts the story of our freedom at least twice. Neither time do we have a promising start. One announces that we first began as idol worshippers. The other reminds us that we started out as slaves. Yet from those circumstances, we were able to begin again as the Haggadah tracks our reboot into who we are today. Reading this text should make us consider that if we were able to get to where we are now from where we were then, then imagine where we can go from here. Sometimes we just need the courage to begin again.

An inspiration for me on how to begin again was from Yekusiel Halberstam. Known as the Klausenberger Rebbe, he was one of the youngest rebbes in Europe, leading thousands of followers in Romania, before World War II. The Nazis murdered his wife, eleven children, and most of his followers while he was incarcerated in several concentration camps. After the war, he moved to the United States and later to Israel. Halberstam rebuilt Jewish communal life in the displaced person camps of Western Europe, re-established his "Sanzer" dynasty in the United States and Israel, and founded a religious neighborhood in Israel. He established a hospital aimed to "heal people and not just the disease." Personally, the rabbi also remarried and had seven more children.

The beauty of Judaism is that one does not need to wait for slavery, a holocaust, or a different tragedy to begin again. Every parent whose child ever pleaded "I'm sorry!" and every spouse who has begged for forgiveness knows that they are really asking the injured party "Can we begin again?" If the answer is yes, then the relationship can immediately begin again—and with more depth and meaning than if the wrong had not been committed. Just two little words can hit the reset button.

I hope that in this year's reading of the Haggadah we can all hear and heed the eternal and insistent invitation from God and through Judaism to begin again.

~ Rabbi Stephen Berger