



## Torah for Turbulent Times

"Sitting in our Homes, Telling the Story"

In our home we've just now begun to talk about our Thanksgiving menu. Like all other holidays so far during the pandemic, this one will be different too. Staying home, either with our family pod or alone, I wonder what we'll all do besides Zooming in to greet family around the country and eating the traditional turkey (or tofurkey) this year? Join me to talk about this on Tuesday evening next week ([Zoom link](#)) and we will read together a Thanksgiving "Seder," as one option. Another option for this upcoming holiday is to simply tell the story. That is, the story of how past Thanksgivings were, who was there, and how we imagine or hope they will be next year. There's real power in pairing the simple act of telling the story together with a meal of gratitude.

Consider this story, a favorite of mine, by the founder of modern Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov (Poland 1698-1760). It ends with a rabbi stuck at home, restricted in his capacity, forgetful of ritual, disoriented, and even at a loss for words.

*When the Baal 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 special fire, say a special prayer, and the trouble would be averted. Later, when his disciple, the Rabbi Maggid 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 cannot light the fire, but I know the place and I can say the prayer." Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save the Jewish people, would go into the forest and say: "I cannot light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place." Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his house, 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.*

There are many angles to this story and it brings up some good questions. What was the "special fire" and how did it work? How does prayer help avert our troubles? What does that "same place in the forest" signify? What led to the disciples over time losing the capacity to continue the traditions of their heritage? This year, the last couple of lines stick out in my mind. I think "sitting in his house, his head in his hands" is a posture many of us can relate to. Unable to do this or that as we've done every year, maybe

somewhat forgetful, feeling loss or at a loss, we yearn for a feeling of orientation, some sense of normalcy, grounding, and familiarity, that consistent and recognizable “place in the forest.”

This year, we can all tell the story. This year, it will be sufficient.

Rabbi Mark