Hi, I'm Gavriel Savit and today I'm thrilled to be sharing with you the opening of my brand new book, *The Way Back*. It's a dark adventure of magic and mysticism, set in 19th century Jewish eastern Europe. And this is how it begins.

On a bright summer day in the year eighteen hundred and twelve (by the gentile reckoning), a girl left her mother’s house—the little house where she had been born—and went to the brambles on the far side of the forest to gather the small summer strawberries that grow in the shade.

These were the best kind of berries, tiny and soft, and the girl crouched in the bushes, staining her lips and fingertips red: one for her mouth, one for her apron, and so on and on.

At first, the girl was sure that she must be imagining things. She was far from the village here, far from the road, and she alone knew of the berry bush.

Surely no one else would come to this place.

But she was not imagining things.

The column burst out into the clearing like a ball from a musket: men in orderly rows, stepping in time, their buttons and bayonets shining in the sun, and more and more and more men—the young lady had never seen so very many. Now horses came as well, and taller men in splendid uniforms astride them. Mules and wagons and great bronze cannon thundered by the girl in the brambles, and feet and hooves and studded wheels churned the grass into a muddy slaw.

The girl was not foolish; she kept hidden and did not draw attention to herself. But when one particular man reached the clearing, she could not help but rise up to get a better look.

Even in the heat of the summer sun, he wore his long pale blue coat. The gray stallion beneath him moved dexterously at his urging, as if it were a part of him, and as he loped out into the clearing, it became quickly clear that the entirety of the column—all of the men and horses and cannon and shot, all of it—was simply an extension of his body.

This, of course, was the great War-Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.
He had come to take the Russian Empire.

He had come to take the World.

An officer on a dappled charger came cantering up to his elbow, and the Emperor turned his head. It was in this moment that he caught sight of the girl in the bushes.

His eyes bore into hers, and she locked her lips tight, unwilling to let even the lightest breath pass between them.

The officer was speaking.

The Emperor did not look away.

And then he turned back toward the horizon, answered his officer, and spurred on his horse.

And that was that.

The girl made her way home. The sun sank behind the advancing troops.

The year wore on. Battles were fought. Men were killed. The leaves changed color and fell. Napoleon retreated and, in due course, was overthrown.

Not long thereafter, the girl was led beneath a wedding canopy where she traded the name of her father for the name of her husband, and from that day on, she lived in his house, cleaned his mess, boiled his chicken soup, and waited for him to return home at night.

But something odd happened: one day, the girl looked into the mirror and found that the face staring back at her was no longer her own. She had loosened, wrinkled, worried herself into something that no longer resembled her at all. Only her lips remained the same—locked in a light, tight frown.

That evening, her husband did not come home.

It was not long before she knew that he would not be returning at all.

The frown deepened.

Before the week was out, the lady who had been a girl took her son Zalman and moved far away from the village of her birth to a place where no one knew, and where no one would whisper: all the way to a tiny, out-of-the-way shtetl called Tupik.

She took a small room in the attic of the baker’s house and apprenticed her boy in the bakery on the first floor.

The baker died. The bakery passed to the lady’s son, Zalman.
She remained in the attic.

And as if in a chrysalis of silence, the lady in the attic turned into an old woman. Before long, as she was eldest, the women of Tupik began to call upon her to attend the births of children, and for more than a generation, every boy and girl born into the shtetl of Tupik was caught by the old woman's hands.

But only two of them made any lasting impression on her.

The first was a scrawny boy, born before his time into a blustery rain-soaked evening. When his tiny eyes blinked open, bright and clear and icy blue, they focused perfectly into hers.

She had seen that expression before: once, as a girl, long ago, crouched in the brambles, fingers stained, fear in her heart, sweetness on her lips.

Eight days later, breaking with her custom, the old woman went to the synagogue to hear what name the boy would be given.

It was Yehuda Leib.

And that very evening, the child of her son Zalman was born—a girl named Bluma—and as the baby emerged, pink and squalling, the old woman found herself filled with a sense of unutterable gladness.

But when she looked down at her granddaughter’s face, another feeling stole into her heart: a sort of guilt, of pity and compassion.

There, as if reflected in a little mottled mirror, was her very own mouth, locked in a light, tight frown.