

The Death of Truth

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On this night of truth, many of us come here struggling to comprehend the events of the past year and the state of our society. We are shocked at what has become the new normal. We fear that our nation is, in the words of a friend of mine, “spiraling, devolving perhaps.” We get together and ask one another, “What is going on? Can you believe this? Who can we trust?”

A rabbi has a unique role. Whatever I personally feel about the events of the world, I must consider on a near-weekly basis what to comment on and what to let pass by. I have contemplated which issues are worthy of a Shabbat sermon, or which might demand a rare public statement to our entire congregation. Most importantly, I have deliberated over when to encourage our congregation to take action. Tonight, especially, I pray that I have gotten it right more often than I have gotten it wrong.

I want you to know that I have hewed to the principle that we cannot respond willy-nilly, shifting our focus with the latest headline. Rather, I want us always to respond, to speak, to act based on eternal values that we and our people have long held dear. Our truth is constant; it doesn't depend on who is in office.

That is why in my eyes the most disturbing and most harmful pattern of the past year has been the death of truth.

A story told by our sages... Rabbi Shimon said, “When the Holy One of Blessing decided to create human beings, the angels formed themselves into factions. Some of them were in favor of God's decision, while others urged God to reconsider. According to the Psalms,¹ the angels of Righteousness and Peace fought with one another. The angel of Righteousness said, “Let human beings be created, because they will perform righteous deeds.” While the angel of Peace said, “Let them not be created, because they will create war and strife in the world.” So too the angels of Love and Truth fought with one another. The angel of Love said, “Let human beings be created, because they will perform acts of love and kindness.” While the angel of Truth said, “Let them not be created, because they will be full of falsehood.” In that instant the Holy One took Truth and cast it to the ground.”²

¹ Ps. 85:11

² Bereshit Rabbah 8:5

God was willing to listen arguments for and against creating human beings – even the argument that creating human beings would lead to war and violence. But God was unwilling to hear that human beings would not be truthful. God simply could not tolerate that.

Yet, on this Kol Nidrei it seems to me that truth has often been cast to the ground. Truth has been evaded, obscured and trampled. I fear that we now live in a society that has precious little regard for truth. That is scary. And we wonder, what can we possibly do about this?

Tonight let us speak about truth, plainly and clearly. Let us speak about the role of truth – first in the public sphere and then later in the private sphere.

These days, it seems, it is difficult to know what is true in the public sphere.

- Journalism used to be respected as the arbiter of facts and the watchdog of democracy. It has now become eclipsed by “fake news” and “alternative facts.”
- Social media has enabled each person to broadcast his or her own opinion. However, as Rabbi Jonathan Blake says, “Unfounded opinion is not an acceptable substitute for observable fact.”
- We see that climate change deniers are routinely given an equal platform with scientists.
- We are no longer certain whether an article we read is a recommendation from a trusted friend or a plant by a phony Russian bot.
- We have found that major corporations knowingly deceived consumers. Bank of America, Equifax, Volkswagen, Uber – just to name a few – lied quite baldly, and with seemingly miniscule consequences.
- Heads of state hurl unfounded boasts and insults across the Pacific Ocean, at once seeming to play a macho game but simultaneously threatening nuclear war.

Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee from the Nazis, said, “The chances of factual truth’s surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed.”³ Sure, we’d like to blame those in Washington, in corporate headquarters, in the media. But that doesn’t accomplish anything. It is all too easy to blame others for this disturbing trend. What will we do this year to resuscitate truth?

Once upon a time, about 400 years ago, the Jews of Prague were in difficult straits. According to legend, the community was being attacked, under the provocation of the Holy Roman Emperor. So the Chief Rabbi of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew, devised a plan. He used clay from the banks of the Vltava River to fashion a Golem, a superhero monster of sorts; a Jewish Frankenstein. As a finishing touch Rabbi Loew inscribed the Hebrew word *Emet*, “Truth,” on its forehead. Instantly the Golem sprang to life. It

³ “Truth and Politics,” *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967.

patrolled the neighborhood, protecting the residents of the Jewish ghetto from those who would do them harm.

The Golem was animated by *emet* – truth. Truth is what saved the community. In the public sphere truth exposes evil and defends the innocent.

But in a society in which truth has no value, in which leaders cannot be relied upon to speak objectively, in which our sources of information do not verify facts, any action can be justified.

History has shown that any society in which truth has been warped, devalued or invalidated is a society in which we Jews have ended up being the victim. It happened in Iran, in the Soviet Union, and of course in Nazi Germany. Let me be clear: I am not comparing the United States to Nazi Germany; to do so is to make a mockery of Holocaust victims and survivors. But today in the public sphere, we must insist on objective truth. For, as George Orwell is reputed to have said, “During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”⁴

If you are as troubled as I am by the decline of truth, then we all need to speak out in public – loudly, confidently and repeatedly. There are specific truths that we need to give voice to:

- We need to say that climate change caused by human action is real. Moreover, governments, corporations and individuals are each responsible for mitigating its effects.
- Abraham Lincoln said, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”⁵ Today we must paraphrase him and say, “If racism, bigotry and xenophobia are not wrong, nothing is wrong.”
- We must say plainly, anti-Semitism is unfortunately once again a present danger. We must also state that linking all progressive causes with anti-Zionism in what is called “intersectionality” is entirely invalid and untrue.
- We need to say that any war with North Korea is guaranteed to result in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths across several nations.
- We need to say that children who were brought to this country by their parents, and who know no other home, deserve a path to citizenship.
- We need to say over and over again that everyone should have access to quality affordable healthcare.

It is incumbent upon us to speak these truths because in a society without truth, morality becomes subjective. That, too, is a state we cannot tolerate. Each year I take up this topic with our Confirmation class. They have been raised in a world of pluralism, and that is good. Fashion, interests, family structures, sexuality, gender identity – there

⁴ Though often been attributed to George Orwell, research has left doubt as to the original source.

⁵ Letter to A.G. Hodges, April 4, 1864.

is no single definition of what is acceptable and good; mores vary from group to group or place to place. However such cultural relativism has its limits. If there is only my opinion and your opinion, who is to say that one is better or more correct?

Taken to a logical conclusion, one might eventually say, “I personally don’t prefer to kill other people because of their religion or ethnic background, but if you want to do that who am I to stop you?” No, that would be absurd. In the end, moral relativism ends up justifying terror, murder, genocide. Who are we to stop you? We will stop you because we insist on truth; on objective morality. There is no world in which Nazism is good. There is no world in which racism is acceptable. There is no world in which terrorism is okay.

Yes, we are obligated by our values and our history to insist on truth in the public sphere. Judaism asks us to focus on what is eternally true, not ephemeral. So let us not spend our time distracted by tweets. Let us not countenance a society in which truth is devalued, invalidated, or cast to the ground. Let us instead re-create a society defined by the truths that are insisted upon and spoken out loud.

When you talk with friends, don’t just lament the latest outrage – articulate what you know to be true. When you’re at the dinner table with your family, don’t let yourself be distracted by the day’s sound bites – engage in conversation about facts and principles. Choose the truths that are most important to you, find your place to speak them proudly and with conviction, and commit to upholding them in the public arena.

At the same time, Judaism has always viewed the public sphere and the private sphere as separate and different from one another. While we insist on the centrality of truth in the public sphere, it is important to recognize – especially tonight – that the private sphere of home, marriage, and relationships is another question altogether. In Jewish tradition truth occupies a place of surprising ambiguity in the private sphere.

“What ambiguity?!” you should be saying. “What about the 9th commandment!? Doesn’t it say, Don’t lie?” Ahh, the 9th commandment. Specifically, it says, *Lo ta’aneh b’re’echa eid shaker* – “Do not give false testimony.” In other words, do not lie under oath. The 9th commandment is entirely focused on public court proceedings. Technically it says nothing about interpersonal relations.

I am not advocating lying – especially not on this night of truth. Nonetheless, Jewish tradition asserts that there are times when other positive values take precedence over truth.

Let me give you an example. In one of my favorite Talmudic passages the sages are debating a question. What is the appropriate way to greet a bride at a wedding? They

consider various phrases one might use. Finally they settle on an answer. They agree that one should say, "What a beautiful and graceful bride!" Nice, right? Well as Talmudic arguments do, they next turn the question around on themselves. They ask, "But what if she's not so beautiful and not so graceful?" In that case, the sages agree, one should say, "What a beautiful and graceful bride!"⁶

Our sages insist that on her wedding day every bride deserves to feel like she is most beautiful and graceful person on earth! In essence, the sages are telling us that between individuals, there are sometimes things more important than truth.

Of course honesty is an essential aspect of the bond between spouses. And we all know that close friends are those with whom you can speak truthfully, without concern for consequences.

Yet if we were to speak *only* truth, no marriage could stand, and no friendship could endure. We often erroneously insist on making truth our highest priority. As a result our homes and our relationships suffer.

Tension builds when facts take precedence over the feelings of those we love. Discord arises when I am sure that only I am right. Truth unchecked can be destructive.

Think for a moment about your relationship with your spouse or partner, your children, your siblings, your parents. Decency and honor are more important than hard facts. Empathy and compassion take precedence over being correct. Pride and love are valued over accuracy. Peace is more important than precision.

I have learned that very often the choice comes down to this: You can be right, or you can be loved. Which one will you choose?

Let us be honest about our truthfulness. Was there a time when your need to be right overwhelmed your desire to be loved? Was there a time this year when you shared the truth (as you saw it) with a loved one or friend, and ended up hurting him or her? Could you have shown empathy, compassion, honor instead? Would you like to go back and do it over?

We all want to have happier marriages, closer friendships, better relationships with our siblings, parents and children. So let's try this... The next time we have an opportunity to tell someone how right we are, and how wrong they are, let's honor them with compassion, decency, patience and love instead.

⁶ BT Ketubot 17a

After the Golem – that Jewish Frankenstein – saved the day, it began to run amok. It threatened destruction within its own Jewish community, endangering innocent lives. So Rabbi Loew carefully approached the Golem and erased the first letter of the word “Truth” on his forehead. The rabbi knew that if you take away the *alef* from *emet*, you are left with the word *met*, which means Death. Thus the Golem died.

In Jewish mystical tradition, the *alef* represents God. If we remove God from truth we are left with death. Tonight we need both God and truth.

Yes, on this Kol Nidrei evening, your rabbi is asking you to pursue two somewhat divergent paths.

In public, let us articulate the truth clearly and confidently and repeatedly. We must maintain truth in public discourse, otherwise there will be no objective standard of morality. Spend time in conversation about what you know to be true. It is of the utmost importance.

Meanwhile, in private let us recognize that there may be times when honor and compassion are called for, above truth. Let us sometimes choose to be loved, rather than being right. Let’s help our marriages thrive, our friendships flourish, and our homes achieve peace.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be so.