

To Tell the Truth
Yom Kippur Morning 5779

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Have you ever noticed that when you have a deadline, a day is so short, and passes so quickly, but when you are waiting for important news, it is excruciatingly long?

Which is true? Is a day too long or is it too short?

Have you ever tried to reassure someone who is afraid that the thing they fear isn't, in fact scary?

Are roller coasters scary, or aren't they?

What about the assertion, "This statement is false." It has been called the liar's paradox because if "this statement is false" is true, then the statement is false, which would in turn mean that it is actually true, but this would mean that it is false. Similarly, if "this statement is false" is false, then the sentence is true, which would in turn mean that it is actually false, but this would mean that it is true.

When I was in Rabbinical School oh so many years ago, Leonard Fein, of blessed memory, Jewish activist and founder of Moment Magazine and Mazon, came to speak to us at HUC. He began his talk by saying "I'm going to tell you a story. It is a true story I made up about 5 years ago." The compelling reason we love stories, he said, is that they do not have to have happened in order to be true.¹

I was very moved by this and have repeated it many times in response to the question of whether or not the Torah is true. "Yes," I always say, "I believe the Torah to be true. Not factual, not even historically accurate, but true nonetheless." Because I do not think of the Torah as a history book, or a science book. Purporting to be either one of those, Torah would be a sad failure – full of inconsistencies, factual errors, biases. I think of the Torah as the unfolding story of my people and our God. Remember back in the 1960's when feminists came up with the neologism "herstory?" Well, I'll coin a phrase now, and call the Torah a book of "Ourstory."

It doesn't matter to me whether the stories are factual, they are still true. They just offer different truths than science and history do. History can tell us when things happened, and science can tell us how. Torah prompts us instead to ask, whether factual or fictional, what do the events mean for our lives as human beings and as Jews. What

¹ He recounts this same tale in <https://forward.com/opinion/139892/we-dont-hunt/>

makes the text sacred is that it teaches us how to live holy lives in God's image and God's presence.

I think it comes down to defining our terms. To my computer's thesaurus, "factual and accurate" are synonyms for "True." To me, where Torah is concerned, they are not. And in fact, *Emet*, the Hebrew for True, is NOT given as an option for the Hebrew translations of factual עובֵדִיתִי- , or accurate מְדוּיָקָה, *Emet*, comes from the same root as *Emunah*, belief, or faith. And the very definition of belief and faith is that they are *not* matters of fact. Another interesting thing about *Emet*, is that it is made up of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, symbolizing that it contains within it all possible words; it is all encompassing, and we have to expand our minds to embrace it. Take for example, the Torah that we read here on Rosh Hashanah morning: בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..." I believe there is great truth in the Torah's story of creation, although I do not take it literally. Science tells me otherwise.

So, I assert that the Torah is true, though not necessarily factual, and that Evolution is factual, but not the whole story, Rabbi Barry Block writes:

Most creationists relate to evolutionists as if they have no soul, and most evolutionists relate to the creationists as if they have no brain. Since according to Jewish tradition, we all possess both, this is where our discussion should begin -- no small feat in a culture in which the absolute obliteration of the other side's views is often the only basis for thinking that one's own position is correct. Such thinking is totally inconsistent with the Jewish intellectual tradition of healthy debate, the acceptance of multiple positions on complex issues."²

As Jews, we are used to the idea of pluralities of interpretations. Of multiple truths. It is famously expressed in Tevya's tavern conundrum, when, caught in the middle of an argument between two men, he agrees with each of them. A third man asks, "how can they both be right?" and Tevya answers, "You know, you're also right."³ This is Jewish Biblical Interpretation in a nutshell. A disciple of Hillel taught in the Mishna: הִפְךָ בָּהּ וְדָכְלָהּ בָּהּ Turn it and turn it, for all is included in it.

The question of multiple truths comes up in another Torah story from the book of Numbers: As the Israelites are poised to enter the Promised Land, Moses sends 12 scouts out as an advance team to report on what lay ahead. Upon their return 10 of the

² <http://www.rabbiblock.com/archive/creation-vs-evolution-no-contest/>

³ *Fiddler on the Roof: Based on Sholom Aleichem's Stories* by Joseph Stein New York, NY: Pocket Books 1964 Pg. 26

scouts say: "We came to the land you sent us to; ... the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. "The land ... is one that devours its settlers. The people are giants. We cannot overcome that people. We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them."

But Joshua and Caleb say, "The land ... is an exceedingly good land...a land flowing with milk and honey...Have no fear of the people there...God is with us."⁴

They all went together into the same territory. 10 saw scary giants, two saw milk and honey. Which group was telling "the truth"?

According to the Torah, the ten scouts committed a terrible sin by speaking against the conquest, which resulted in the denial of admission to the Promised Land to that whole generation, except for Caleb and Joshua. But did the 10 scouts say anything that was "untrue"? They merely described what they saw and offered their opinion about their chances for success. Why were they punished so severely for doing the job they were sent to do?

Perhaps the reason for their punishment is that they insisted that their perception was "The Truth." The great Chasidic sage Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once said, "The truth is not necessarily as things appear." The 10 scouts believed that their perspective was the only truth and refused to acknowledge that perhaps a different or greater truth may have been hidden from their view.

So often we, too, insist that there can be only one truth, and too often we insist that our truth is the only truth. We adhere so ardently to our perspective that we lose sight of the great wisdom that can be found in another's understanding of what is real and good and true. Like the scouts, when we seal off our souls and ward off truths different from our own, we commit idolatry of the self and condemn yet another generation to wander in the wilderness.

So, where truth is concerned, we can learn from Genesis that there is a difference between factuality and truth, from the scouts we learn that conflicting perspectives on the same fact can both be true.

Which brings me back to defining our terms. How do we understand truth? Over the last few years, I have become more cautious expressing my views about the truth of Torah, because truth itself has come under attack, and it seems in our current political climate, the meanings of truth and fact have become blurry.

⁴ Numbers 13:27-33

In April 2016 Time Magazine's cover asked, "Is Truth Dead?"⁵ In December of that year, Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year was "Post-Truth." Since then, no less than 15 books have been published with "Post-Truth" in the title. Post-truth is defined by Oxford as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."⁶

If my view about Torah and truth holds (which I still think it does) then as Jews we have lived in a Post-truth era not just for the last few years, but since we all stood at Sinai to enter into the covenant.⁷ Israeli Scholar Yuval Noah Harari writes "Are we living in a post-truth era? Yes, but that's because we're a post-truth species. Shared fictions — in the form of news, religions, novels, sports, money, even brands — fill our lives, but that's OK. It's these shared beliefs that have helped humans cooperate and conquer the planet."⁸

What I think should give us pause is not that we are influenced by emotion and belief, but rather our inclination to accept any given truth without question. Facts are important. Perspectives are important. But questioning is crucial. As Jews we are taught to question what we are taught. Our Patriarch Abraham is our role model for questioning when he challenges God's impulse to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah.

In one of the many recent "Post-Truth" books, Boston University philosophy professor Lee McIntyre says, "At some level all ideologies are an enemy of the process by which truth is discovered,"⁹ if those ideologies are accepted without question, if they become closed systems of absolutes.

Cambridge University philosopher Simon Blackburn writes that truth is attainable, "only at the vanishing end points of enquiry," adding that, "instead of 'facts first' we may do better if we think of 'enquiry first,' with the notion of fact [humbly] waiting to be invited to the feast afterward."¹⁰

⁵ Interestingly, this April 3, 2017 cover was made to be an exact replica of the April 8, 1966 cover "Is God Dead"? <http://time.com/4709920/donald-trump-truth-time-cover/>

⁶ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>

⁷ Deuteronomy 29:14, and its interpretation that all Jews, past, present, and future, as well as Jews-by-choice were present for the covenant at Mount Sinai

⁸ <https://ideas.ted.com/are-we-living-in-a-post-truth-era-yes-but-thats-because-were-a-post-truth-species/>

⁹ Lee McIntyre, The MIT Press (February 9, 2018), p. 62

¹⁰ Simon Blackburn, On Truth, Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (July 2, 2018) cited in https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2018/07/13/feature/can-truth-survive-this-president-an-honest-investigation/?utm_term=.de2cfd3249af The original quote reads: "with the notion of fact modestly waiting to be invited to the feast afterward."

Which raises another important aspect required of truth: humility. In the practice of Mussar - the cultivation of positive character traits, or Middot - Humility is almost universally taught first, because it is a fundamental component of all other Middot. Humility in the Mussar tradition is finding the golden mean between self-effacement and arrogance. We can only really ascertain truth when we approach it with humility, and openness to the possibility of another perspective.

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon studied science before she became a rabbi. She says that in the science laboratory the facts themselves are uninteresting; what makes or breaks the scientist is what they do with the facts. “Truth has to be meaningful,” she writes. “A truth is a story we tell, based on the facts we know. And it is in that leap, from fact-finding to story-telling, that all types of misunderstandings, mistakes, and sometimes even deceptions, can slip in. She notes that in the laboratory a scientist has the power to control the parameters of her experiment. Each experiment yields a limited set of facts, around which the scientist can tell a small story. But outside of the laboratory, we don’t have the luxury of building our truths one careful pixel at a time. Events rush past us at every moment, far too many for any one mind to contain. Our brains select out the data that are most important to our stories. That’s why it’s so important to seek out diverse voices as we go about trying to understand our world.¹¹

The well-known story of 3 blind men describing an elephant,¹² reminds us that no individual can ever claim full understanding of the truth. “We humans have partial knowledge with many limits: our own experience, our cognitive bias..., our cultural framework, our limited time compared to the vastness of possible knowledge. [But, together] we are much more than 3 blind men feeling out an elephant – [Consider] 300 people or 3000 people of many backgrounds and experiences exploring what would have to be a very patient elephant? They might discover where the ear meets the head, how the leg leads to the torso, where tusks and trunk intersect. Perhaps we would never know everything about the elephant for all times and for all elephants, but we could certainly know a lot.”¹³ The more you know...

Staying open, and truly listening to others’ perspectives, and also to inconvenient or uncomfortable facts which might undermine our own views, is essential in the pursuit of truth.

¹¹ <https://bethjacobrwc.org/rosh-hashanah-seeking-truth/>

¹² The story originated in the first century BCE in the Indian subcontinent.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant

¹³ Rabbi Adam Chalom <https://hjrabbi.wordpress.com/2017/09/22/post-truth-rosh-hashana-57782017/>

I want to be clear that I am not arguing that just because somebody tells a story, that makes it true. Alternative facts are not alternative truths. Deception for personal gain is not truth. Lying is lying and it is not acceptable. Just moments ago in our Viddui we beat our breasts and said “טפלנו שקר” We have dealt in lies.” Isaiah says (5:20) הוֹאֵר הַטּוֹב וְלַטּוֹב רָע “Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil.” Truth requires honesty.

Truth also depends on trust. In Hebrew, truth - Emet - and trust - Emunah - both arise from the same root. In a 2016 review of three new “Post-Truth” books Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that “free society depends on trust; which depends on honesty in public life, which depends on truth as a norm.”¹⁴ Trust depends on honesty which depends on truth. I would argue also, that truth depends on honesty when engenders trust. “Honesty and trustworthiness are foundational ideals upon which we build our most important relationships – in a marriage, within families, between and amongst friends, in business, in healthy political discourse, in our communities. Without trust...without faith in the words and deeds of others, all of these would breakdown.”¹⁵

Truth requires intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual honesty, which is why we are all here today. Yom Kippur calls on us to reflect deeply on the truths in the stories of our lives, seek out and correct the misunderstandings, mistakes, and deceptions that have crept in. It demands that we inquire of ourselves: am I living a life of integrity aligned with what I know to be true? Am I listening the truths of others with an open mind and heart?” Do the stories I hold to be true lead me to create a better, more just, caring, happier, and holier world?

Shimon Ben Gamliel said the world is sustained by three things: Emet, din, and Shalom: truth, justice and peace¹⁶. There can be no peace without justice, and there can be no justice without truth. The wise King Solomon urges us: “אַמֶּת קִנְיָה, וְאֵל-תִּמְכַר; הַכֶּמֶה וּמוֹסֵר” Attain Truth and keep close: wisdom, discipline, and understanding.”¹⁷

It is not so easy to attain truth. It requires wisdom, discipline, and understanding, trust and integrity, acceptance of the facts, including those we don't like, and rejection of falsehoods, including those we wish were true. It requires the ability to listen openly and hold paradox.

¹⁴ <http://rabbisacks.org/post-truth-erosion-trust/>

¹⁵ Rabbi Jay Perlman, https://www.tbsneedham.org/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/jp_rh_5777_sermon_-_truth.pdf

¹⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:18

¹⁷ Proverbs 23:23

We recite in our morning liturgy *Emet atah hu rishon; emet ahat hu acharon*. Truth, you are first, Truth, you are last. Emet: formed of the first, middle and last letters of the Alef Bet; born of trust and the foundation of peace. May we aspire to live lives of truth in the coming year, and may God help us to succeed. May we be the truth we wish to see in the world.¹⁸

¹⁸ An adaptation of “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” This is usually attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, who actually said “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change.” For attribution of the quote as we know it see: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/10/23/be-change/>