

Kol Nidrei: In Pursuit Of Truth

Who here has played the game “two truths and a lie”? This is a fun and frequently used icebreaker with kids, here’s how it works: I say three things, and you have to guess which one is true, and which is a lie. For example, I might say: When I was a teenager I:

1. attended a race car driving school
2. handicapped seven horse races in one day and lost every race
3. cooked dinner for my family every night.

Which two things are true and which is a lie? (The answer: I actually won every horse race- that was the first and last time I went to the track!).

Okay- but how do you know that *anything* I just said was true? The answer is that hopefully, by this point, you have trust in me. And, with the exception of the cooking example, I have certificates and pictures to verify the other two claims.

Tonight I want us to think about Truth.

These days we seem to be struggling with this value as a society quite a bit. Many of the divisions that are surrounding us- politically, culturally, and otherwise- are all connected to a basic breakdown in agreement about just what is true, and what is not. Many of us sense that something is terribly wrong, often listening to our own echo chambers and wondering just how someone

can believe something to be “true,” that we “know,” to be false. On top of all of this, the rapid expansion of AI and the technological revolution has not made any of this easier. These days, it is not that hard for data, facts, or events to be manipulated, causing a great deal of confusion as to what is “real” and what is “fake.”

A student can claim to be the “true” author of a paper that he turned in to his college professor, when in reality, it was auto-generated by ChatGPT after the student typed in a prompt. AI software like ChatGPT has its uses, and can be helpful in certain contexts, but it can also be used for nefarious purposes, as it can not only generate text, but voice as well. Experts warn that today, scammers can steal just a few seconds of someone's social media posts to recreate someone's voice. When you get a call from your grandchild asking for huge sums of money- watch out- it may not really be them!

Between arguments about just what is “objective” fact, and the easy ways anyone can manipulate digital data - these days, “truth” can be hard to discern.

This is not, however, a new phenomenon. We human beings have always been known to lie, cheat, and be otherwise less than honest just to “get ahead.” Even God understood this.

According to one midrash, just as God was preparing to create humankind, an argument broke out between four different angels: the Angel of Righteousness, the Angel of Peace, the Angel of Love, and the Angel of Truth. The Angel of Righteousness knew that human beings could act with justice and righteousness towards one another and encouraged God to proceed with this creation, but the Angel of Peace knew that human beings would be prone to fighting and urged God to reconsider. The Angel of Love believed that human beings might act lovingly toward one another. But the Angel of Truth knew that human beings were prone to lying and thought it was a terrible idea. Seeing that the matter was a tie, God took the Angel of Truth and threw him to the ground. God then went ahead and created Adam, holding onto the hope that the optimistic angels of love and righteousness would be right.¹ Even God, it seems, was willing to cast aside Truth.

How can this be, we wonder, if truth is so important? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book about Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, entitled *A Passion for Truth*, explains that this episode with God and the arguing angels was necessary, "*in order to make possible our greatest adventure, to live in search. If Truth has not been concealed, there would be no need to choose, to search.*"²

¹ Genesis Rabbah 8:5

² p. 297

In other words, our entire purpose on this earth is to live in search of truth; to prove that this “Angel of Truth” who believed all of us to be liars, was wrong.

Unfortunately, we struggle mightily with this task: The Kotzker rebbe (as explained by Heschel) understood that:

Falsehood is not merely a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. It twists and distorts the basis of man's life, deceiving him into believing he lives in a reality that does not exist. A person living a life and taking it to be the Truth moves in a world of self-delusion.³

This book, *A Passion for Truth*, was the last book that Heschel wrote. It came out in abridged form in English just after he died. The Kotzker rebbe's teachings were very important to Heschel, inspiring him to protest the Vietnam war and the trauma that ensued, which was in part (as was later discovered) based on lies.

Sixty years later I am not sure how far we have come when it comes to our success with pursuing “the truth” as a spiritual goal to heal a fractured society. While there have always been occasional conspiracy theories – JFK's assassination, Area 51 and aliens, the moon landing that “didn't really happen”, 9-11 being an “inside job.” – today conspiracy theories abound:

- Alex Jones insisting that the Sandy Hook mass shooting was staged and that the kids who were killed are really alive

³ (21)

- Or Jones' claim that Covid-19 was a hoax designed by the global elite (that's often code for Jews by the way) to take away American freedoms.
- And even stories of Jewish space lasers starting California wildfires (somehow it's always our fault)!

There is no factual evidence for any of these wild and outlandish claims. They are simply not factually or empirically "true." But in many parts of our country and society these ideas are taken for granted as true.

As Jews, we must not remain complacent. We must be on the lookout for the truth, wherever it may lead us. This is not a sermon about how there can be multiple sides to various issues. Sometimes that is certainly possible. And this is not a sermon claiming that one political side or another has a lock on what is "true." The point I am trying to make is how essential it is for us, especially as Jews, to prioritize the pursuit of empirical, measurable, verifiable truth.

Each morning our liturgy reminds us:

אמת אתה הוא ראשון ואתה הוא אחרון ומבלעדיך אין אלהים

"Truth, You are first and You are last and without You, we have no ruler."

We can understand this verse as focused on God who is true. Or we could read that "emet," truth, is the subject, and truth is the thing that is first and last and that rules over us.

And the psalm we say each day leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur describes Israel's foes as people who tell lies, people who are false witnesses (*eydei sheker*). In other words, we are a people taught to be in pursuit of that which is true- at every turn- even when it seems that the world around us has "gone mad."

Just listen to this story told by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov called "The Tainted Grain."

A king once told his prime minister, who was also his good friend, "I see in the stars that whoever eats any grain that grows this year will go mad. What is your advice?"

The prime minister replied, "We must put aside enough grain so that you and I will not have to eat from this year's harvest."

The king objected, "But then we will be the only ones who will be sane. Everyone else will be mad. Therefore, they will think that we are the mad ones. It is impossible for us to put aside enough grain for everyone. Therefore, we too must eat this year. But we will make a mark on our foreheads, so that at least we will know that we are mad. I will look at your forehead and you will look at mine, and when we see this sign, we will know we are both mad."⁴

Many of us wonder how we've reached this state. It is a question that we all can share, even if we do so coming from different cultural and political perspectives. Notice that in the story of the king and the prime minister, it is not clear if they ever truly solve the problem of knowing who is "sane" and who is "mad." *What is clear* is that in a world gone mad, we need strong signs and

⁴ (Rabbi Nachman's Parables, 481)

reminders to “wake us up” to what is really true and real, even when everything around us is often distorted by the news, social media, our own fears, anxieties, biases, etc...

Yom Kippur is exactly this reminder. Tonight, we begin a holiday that highlights one undeniable truth: *that we will all eventually die*. This stark truth should humble us all, and help us shift our focus to what is really important as we start this new year.

Yom Kippur also gives us a strong reminder of how much our words matter when it comes to what is “true,” and what is “real.” That is why we must be so careful with our words. That is why we seek to annul not only the words we said last year, but also even the ones we haven’t even said yet (just in case they weren’t true or they don’t “come true”).

The words we listen to, re-post, share, or speak, are incredibly powerful. They can create and they can destroy. God in the Torah created the world by speaking it into being, and also used words to destroy with plague and destruction. As beings who are made in the image of God, our words also have the power to create and destroy, and so they must be based on truth. Our words are too powerful, too dangerous, to be sullied by lies.

Lies (with the one exception of lying in order to save someone from public shame and ridicule) have no place in Judaism. In Kol Nidrei we read about the vows, shevuot, that we are annulling. The Mishnah⁵ understands this to be referring to things that we say “in vain” like when a person falsely describes a stone column as made of gold, or insists that camels really can fly through the air! In other words, we begin Yom Kippur by proclaiming that these types of outlandish claims are to be annulled from a society that seeks to be healthy and holy.

This is something that we in particular, as Jews, should understand clearly by now. From our earliest history until today, lies and conspiracy theories have caused great harm to our people and our communities.

- In the Torah, when Abraham lied to King Avimelekh that his wife was really his sister, they were both nearly killed.⁶
- Later Pharaoh lied, telling his people that the “Israelites” had grown too mighty and might join Egypt’s enemies in a war against them one day. This lie led to generations of Jewish slavery.
- Then there was the great lie claiming that the Jews were directly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.⁷
- And the blood libel conspiracies of the Middle Ages that claimed that Jews drink Christian blood at the seder (which by the way is the historical

⁵ (Shevuot 29b)

⁶ Gen. 20

⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-killed-jesus/>

reason we open the door for Elijah, to show our neighbors that “no, that is not what is going on here”).

- Anti-semitism has its roots in 19th century with both the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a Russian pamphlet claiming to be the minutes of a secret meeting by Jewish wise men plotting to control the world; and the “Dreyfus Affair” at the beginning of the 20th century when Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of selling French military secrets to the Germans.
- And even in our contemporary times, we have heard the dangerous false assertions that the Holocaust was somehow “exaggerated”; we know that the shooter in 2018 who killed 11 Jews one Shabbat morning at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh believed that HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, was bringing invaders into our country; and the attacker at the Colleyville, Texas synagogues who wanted the rabbi to call the rabbi of the “Central Synagogue in New York City,” because he somehow believed she had influence to help with the release of a Pakistani woman convicted of terrorism.

Are we exhausted yet?

All of these conspiracies and lies remind me of the joke about two Jews riding the subway together. Mendel turns to Shlomo, who is reading the paper, and says: “Why are you reading *that* secular piece of garbage?!” To which Shlomo replies: “Well, when I read the Jewish press, all I hear is about all our problems, anti-Semitism, how we are under attack in America and in Israel. But this paper is much better. What do I find here? We control the media, the government, and we even rule the world! This news is much more uplifting!”

It wouldn't be so funny if it weren't so true. The point here is not to depress us, but rather to warn us. Because, of all people, we should know better than to buy into, or remain silent, in the face of the falsehoods and lies that are an ever growing destructive force in our society.

*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, We abuse, we betray... **Tafalnu Sheker**, we fall upon lies.*

Al Het She Hatanu b'timhon levav- For missing the mark by succumbing to confusion; by forgetting who we are- pursuers of truth; children of a God whose name is Truth (ה' אלקיכם אמת)

So what do we do? How do we learn to be more discerning about what is actually true? How do we promote relationships, among family and friends, among neighbors, between citizens, where we are able to agree on "facts?" Sometimes it is easy, other times it is not. But this evening, when we declare that our words matter, that our words should be "true," we must commit ourselves to creating a society where we are careful not only with what we ourselves say, but also discerning when it comes to information that we consume, digest, and share with others. We must focus on healing rifts with friends and family members that have come from disagreements over what is true and real, and we should remember that the loving bonds between us and our friends and family members are the things that are really true.

I have said this many times before, but I hope that our synagogue community can be a place where we can safely and respectfully share differing perspectives, and where we can rely on our shared Jewish values and wisdom to help us discern what is “true” and what is “false.” I am not suggesting that our synagogue be a place for political battle. But I am suggesting that this *might* be a place where we come together to talk about the issues that we care about, as Jews and American citizens, in a way that demonstrates our shared commitment to *kavod*, respect, *chesed*, loving-kindness, *tzedek*, justice, and **emet**, truth.

This may make some people uncomfortable. But if we can't make the most of these opportunities to come together as Jews and Americans, to search for truth and to respond using a lens of Jewish values, where else can we go?

Most of us, I would hope, understand all of this intellectually. We can commit to pursuing the truth, to being careful with our words, written and spoken, to being thoughtful and considerate about the pursuit of knowledge, and to leading with our values. But emotionally, so many of us seem to feel overwhelmed, exhausted, broken, and even shattered because of the prolific and dominating falsehoods and confusion in our society and our communities.

Tonight, as we pray for a clean slate, I want us to consider, as individuals, and as a community, what we might do about that. How we might bring some healing and truth into families, relationships, and indeed a world filled with so much brokenness, with so many lies.

You all have heard me repeat the line from Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, explaining how important it is to "seek to understand before being understood." How can we seek to understand where someone else is coming from and why they believe what they believe to be true? Can we learn to ask one another for specifics, for evidence, for the source of their information and why they believe a particular source to be reliable? Can we do all of this in a tone that is as compassionate as it is critical?

Rabbi Dennis Sasso, in a sermon that he wrote about this topic a few years ago pointed to one:

...scientific study suggests that by confrontational argumentation and countering with corrective facts, we only make things worse. If your side shouts, the other side will shout louder. The sounds we hear today are deafening.

What makes things better? Dialogue; don't attack. Stay calm; do not get emotional; don't shout. Listen and try to articulate the others' position correctly. Show respect, acknowledge that you understand that someone might hold a different opinion. Try to show how changing facts do not necessarily mean changing world views.

...this does not mean that we ignore objectivity and facts. Respect of others' opinions does not mean that each side, regardless of its merits, is given equal time on the public stage. For example, when Holocaust deniers and historians of the Holocaust are given equal time and

credence in the name of balanced reporting, we create false and dangerous equivalencies...⁸

Compassion, understanding, commitment to relationships, and objectivity. These are the key ingredients in the pursuit of truth, in repairing our relationships.

A note of caution: by now, all of us should understand that this simply does not work on social media. A few years ago, social psychologist Jonathan Hadit wrote that:

.. Social media has put us all in the middle of a Roman coliseum, and many in the audience want to see conflict and blood. But once we realize that we are the gladiators—tricked into combat so that we might generate “content,” “engagement,” and revenue—we can refuse to fight. We can be more understanding toward our fellow citizens, seeing that we are all being driven mad by companies that use largely the same set of psychological tricks. We can forswear public conflict and use social media to serve our own purposes, which for most people will mean more private communication and fewer public performances.⁹

What is true about our lives on social media? Do we really have the facts to support half of what we post? We must approach everything from social media with caution, reminding ourselves we can *only be as manipulated as we allow ourselves to be*.

Being thoughtful, analytical, and looking at issues from multiple sides, is a very Jewish thing to do. I would never say otherwise. As we begin a new year, let us

⁸ Sasso, *Embracing Love & Truth*, 2018

⁹ **Hadit, Yes, Social Media Really is Undermining Democracy**

strive to do that in a way that is based in reality, endeavoring to get at a higher truth by embracing a shared goal of creating a society that places the sacredness of our world, and of all its inhabitants, at the center. Because *the truth* of Yom Kippur is that our time is limited. The clock is ticking. We would do well to focus more on what is “real” and less on what is distraction and noise.”

That is the legacy that the Kotzker rebbe left his Hasidim, and in turn, to us.

Again, Heschel wrote:

(The Kotzker rebbe) published no books, left no records; what he wrote he burned. Yet he taught us never to say farewell to Truth; for God laughs at those who think that falseness is inevitable. He also enabled us to face wretchedness and survive. For Truth is alive, dwelling somewhere, never weary. All of mankind is needed to liberate it (ibid. 323).

In this moment in time, this then, is our task: To liberate truth.

On this Yom Kippur, as we start with a clean slate, may we never tire of this sacred obligation. As we knock on our hearts in atonement, may we both forgive one another, and be forgiven for those times when we have forgotten to pursue the truth.

Gmar **Hatimah** Tovah. May God seal us in the Book of Life. And may we remember the teaching of our sages, that **“חֹתֶמּוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא” אֵמֶת** -God’s **seal** is truth (Shabbat 55b).