

A Moment of Truth Kol Nidre 2018/5779

Like so many moms, mine loves to tell stories of my childhood that ooze loving nostalgia for her, and utter embarrassment for me. I'm not sure that she shared this anecdote at my wedding rehearsal dinner, but my worst conjured memories imagine that she did.

I must have been around 2 or 3 and my mom caught me in an early shading of the truth. Of course, she immediately sought to nip that bud in my emerging character, hoping to set the course aright from the start. She pointed out that I had been caught in a fib, impressed upon me the need to always be honest, and asked why I had lied in

the first place. My unfiltered response: “Because it saves my rear.”

Despite this concession to the acceptability of light corporeal punishment in the era of Dr. Spock, my response reflects two key insights. First, I owned up to the lie and the literal moment of truth without lame excuses or justifications. And...I was utterly frank as to why lying seemed to work so well up to that point. My process of toddler *teshuvah actually* affirmed the value and usefulness of truth. It ain't exactly George Washington's cherry tree, but it got me to where I am.

I wonder how the parents of 2018 share this lesson with their children? *For the truth today is under unprecedented attack.* What stood for

millennia as a standard of consensus and community has become as pliable as putty, twisted and shaped to fit any rank agenda or perverse purpose.

Yes, there have always been those who have gilded the lily or omitted the inconvenient, especially in the world of politics. But there was always a red line—a center of gravity beyond which word or act could not go without being dismissed and discredited.

In our current moment, the truth telling that was always a mark of good character has become the burden of the sucker. The shared reality that once bound us as a society has torn and frayed into selective bubbles of opinion. We have gone so far through the looking glass that Orwell would

be envious to describe it. Outright lies are accepted on their face. Once clear facts have alternatives. Demonstrable logic is fake narrative. And gut impulse *trumps* deliberate thought.

Could our nation's founders have ever imagined a time in which their most eloquent expression of the pursuit of reason and the power of fact would be called into question, making a mockery of those first, searing words of our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." Today's truth is far from self-evident. *It's no longer even true.*

A famous axiom teaches that: "The truest things are said in jest." This is an apt description of the work of comedian and talk show host Stephen Colbert, who prophetically foresaw our

current moment in 2005 when he coined the term *“truthiness.”* Wry satire has become painful reality. Colbert defines *truthiness* as: “The belief in what you *feel* to be true rather than what the facts will support.” Seems to describe much of what ails us these days.

And Colbert’s quip is confirmed in the work of the social psychologist, best-selling author, and our Keller Family Lecturer for the spring, Jonathan Haidt (*height*). Haidt imagines the mind to be like a rider on an elephant, with reason as the rider and our feelings as the elephant. However, in this scenario, the rider serves the elephant.

Haidt concludes that feelings and intuitions are what ultimately determine our beliefs and

actions. Reason and facts, two of human history's gold standards for truth, come into it later to justify our decisions. This is why so many of us seem so rigid in our ideological positions well before they are tested in debate or dialogue. It is why so many of us are impervious to fact, whether established by science or by our *own two lying eyes*.

It's not that empirical facts and clear reasoning don't matter at all. But if we *genuinely* want to reach someone, to get them listen to us let alone persuade them of our position, we must start with their feelings and intuitions, appealing to their core values and the stories that carry them.

As you might imagine, Jewish tradition is replete with commandments to seek truth and to live it out in our lives. From the Torah through the Sages, truth was less about fact and reason than morality, integrity and alignment with God's vision for the world.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs teaches that the medieval commentator Rashi sees in the very Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, a critical lesson. Because that word is spelled with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet *aleph*, the middle letter *mem*, and the final letter *tav*, it encompasses the full span of our lives and the reality God created for us. *In all places where there is truth, God is present. In all places of falsehood, God is absent.*

That other luminary of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, goes even deeper, teaching: *It is forbidden to accustom oneself to smooth speech and flatteries. One must not say one thing and mean another. Inward and outward self should correspond; only what we have in mind should we utter with the mouth.* He could have been commenting on this morning's news.

The rabbis also saw deceit as a kind of stealing and a form of idolatry. But they were not absolutists, always amenable to the “little white lie” to preserve dignity and offer compassion, as when we must always tell a bride she looks beautiful on her wedding day. But theirs was a time of nuance and common sense, when it

seemed far easier to distinguish between personal license and lasting principles.

Even beyond the insights of our texts, our history testifies to the tragedies that have befallen our people in societies in which truth is relative, defined only by the ruling power, and perverted by vicious rumor, outright fabrication, insidious propaganda, and a crooked faith.

***Let us not buy too readily into our own hype*—that we *will always* be comfortable and protected in the America we've known for the last two and a half centuries. Times have indeed changed, and the past is a cruel but cogent tutor for our awareness and our actions. A nation that little regards a common truth comes to little care for the minority and the marginalized. And though**

we Jews may not be number one on the current hit parade of the distrusted and demeaned, we know from our not-too-distant-past that our rank is 2nd, 3rd or 4th—and climbing the charts with a bullet. We Jews are the canaries in the coalmines of history, and we must be the hawks of vigilance when threats emerge to anyone, anywhere. The present pogrom against the truth threatens all of us.

So...in the narrow scope of what I've shared about an immense topic of grave concern on the holiest night of the year, what might we take away from our tradition, from our thinking, and from the potent roots of our feelings? Nothing so novel or exotic or even much of a revelation. Just a simple idea from Western thought, Jewish tradition and

our own basic common sense—but one that we must constantly remember and embrace, for it is easy to neglect its wisdom: *We must find balance.*

Just as our sages counseled that God created the world with a balance between justice and compassion, and thus we must act in the world accordingly, so too must we seek truth by forging a balance between the feelings that compel us and the facts that convince us of the rightness of our feelings—facts that are real and beyond question.

We must rise above our tribes, our bubbles and our walls, to discern, discuss and determine the values that *we still share* as Americans and as human beings: *Hope* to quell our fears; *common*

***vision* to bind our efforts; *compassion* to extend our ideals; *commitment* to civic responsibility and global destiny; and the *demand* for equity, freedom and opportunity for all.**

We must hear one another's stories and we must tell our stories, for these are the most powerful drivers of feeling and belief. Stories are the currency of our culture and our consciousness, and for much of what afflicts us, just the simple act of caring to listen can open hearts and minds.

When we build bonds of trust, understanding and respect, *only then* is space carved out for the simple power of facts and the clear process of reason to make an impact. *Only then* will the lure of fear, rhetoric and propaganda return to the

margins of our discourse. *Only then* will we make room for God's presence in a more truthful world. *Only then* will the truth set us free.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of truth comes at the ultimate moment of truth—a moment all of us will face: our inevitable passing from this world. Our tradition mandates these words at the moment we learn of a death: *Baruch Dayan Ha-emet—Blessed is the Judge of Truth.*

Strange, enigmatic words whose immediate meaning and purpose within the context of death seem elusive. What is our tradition trying to teach in affirming God as Judge of Truth in a time of loss? Perhaps when we take a step back to examine the totality of a person's short sojourn in this world, an unblinking alignment with truth is

the ultimate measure of our worth--in the lives we've touched and the in world we've left behind —a world we hope is a bit better for our having lived in it.

Truth is an ideal--one we strive to make real, knowing we may not fully achieve our ends. But *still we pursue it*, in the often small, steady, yet ever-upward steps that define human progress, and define our lives. It is progress rooted in the trials of a fragile world, yet empowered by the rising, holy vision of the possible and the yet to be. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.