

## **Pursuing Truth – Yom Kippur 2016/5777**

### **Rabbi Micah Citrin**

There is an iconic and climactic scene from the 1992 movie *A Few Good Men* starring Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise. Cruise plays a navy lawyer, Lt. Caffey who investigates the death of a marine on the Guantanamo Bay Naval base in Cuba. His investigation leads him to indict the commanding officer of the base Colonel Jessup, played by Jack Nicholson, whom he accuses of ordering a “code red,” an illegal corporeal punishment carried out by soldiers in a unit against a fellow soldier who shows a lack of discipline. The “code red” goes wrong, the soldier dies, and Lt. Caffey realizes that the responsibility for the murder and the subsequent cover up goes all the way to the top.

In this iconic scene, Cruise’s Lt. Caffey has Nicholson’s Colonel Jessup on the stand in the midst of a heated cross-examination. Colonel Jessup is defiant in the face of a barrage of tough questions. Finally, he begins to break, “You wants answers?” he yells at Lt. Caffey. “I want the truth,” Caffey fires back. To which Jessup responds, “You can’t handle the truth.” Then silence falls on the courtroom.

This scene reminds me of what we are doing here today on Yom Kippur. God asks us to be truthful, to do away with the facades of falsehood and the lies we tell ourselves. God wants the truth, and we have to be able to handle it. Our liturgy forces us to handle it. A few moments ago, we recited a section called “For Failures of Truth” in which we acknowledged lapses in honesty. Soon, we will open the ark. As we take out the Torah scrolls, we will declare the traditional attributes of God, “*Adonai, Adonai*, a God of mercy and grace, patient, full of compassion and truth.” As we seek *teshuvah*, a return to God, we try to emulate these qualities. Of all of them, truth may be the hardest one to attain.

I have been thinking a lot about the value of truth as we have watched this election year unfold. Candidates deny having made statements or claims on positions that had been captured on video only days earlier. If something is said enough times, tweeted enough times, or denied enough times it becomes the truth. We find candidates bending the truth, offering half-truths, or doing everything possible to avoid transparency in order to skew the full picture of what is really going on. While candidates play fast and loose with the truth, members of Congress mold an idol out of truth, as if they own it, making compromise unacceptable, even unethical.

And too often the media subjugates facts for entertainment. Honesty gets buried under the next sensational statement or news headline. Debates are not about policy and its impact in our society, but just another version of a sporting event. Like a football game, a good verbal hit in a debate can be replayed over and over again in slow motion and from reverse angles regardless of the veracity of its content.

At the foundation of our Jewish tradition is a commitment and a passion for truth. The Hebrew word for truth, *Emet* contains the letter *alef*, first in the alphabet, *mem*, the

middle letter, and *taf*, the final letter of the alphabet. *Emet*, truth, represents the fullness of our ability to communicate. From a Jewish perspective, our words and our deeds should point toward truth. *Pirke Avot*, the rabbinic wisdom found in the Talmud teaches that the world stands on three things, on justice, on truth, and on peace. One might even say that to arrive at justice and peace, truth is the pre-requisite. This Yom Kippur, I want us to consider three Jewish understandings of what it means to take truth seriously in our lives.

First, our tradition has a nuanced and mature view of truth. Truth with a big “T” exists, but it is the realm of God. None of us gets a glimpse of the complete picture. Even, when Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to receive Revelation and pleads to see God’s Face, the Holy One responds, “You cannot see my face, for humans can’t see my face and live.” Our human limitations make it impossible for us to exist and know everything. We have the ability to discern aspects of truth, to cultivate deep insights, to observe our world. A Talmudic tale illustrates the tension Judaism finds in our relationship with the truth. For three years, the story goes, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued over a single piece of Jewish law, coming to exact opposite conclusions. Finally, a *Bat Kol*, a heavenly voice went forth declaring “both the words of Hillel and the words of Shammai are the words of the living God - *Eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim chayim* (Talmud *Eruvin 13b*).” From a Jewish point of view, truth speaks in many voices. Since we can never fully apprehend ultimate truth, there are many valid perspectives, even those in tension that can co-exist. At the same time, this does not mean that everything is relative or left to opinion.

Rabbi David Hartman, the late founder of the pluralistic Shalom Hartman Center in Jerusalem, reflects on the tension that resides in Jewish notions of truth. He taught, “The strength of your convictions is not dependent on a belief in their absolute status, which would condemn those who disagree with you to blindness...or to stubborn ill will. A framework of rational moral argumentation without absolutes is not equivalent to relativism,” and then he continues, “Not every point of view is equally legitimate because it is someone’s point of view. A point of view must always be subject to and vulnerable to counter arguments and evaluation. (p. 35).”

Truth is not a destination at which we arrive, something we can own, or subject to our personal whims and interests. Rather, truth is process built on integrity and honesty, a pursuit that we try to practice and refine in our lives. We live in the tension of *eilu v’eilu*, that within God’s truth there are many truths. Finding these truths takes humility and honesty and commitment. Hillel and Shammai remind us that we seek truth for the sake of heaven, for ideals and values greater than ourselves and our self-interest.

If only these principles could be applied to our national conversation. We could actually have a national discussion about racism and ongoing systemic inequality. We could face the truth that our nation is out of balance when 1% of the population has amassed approximately 20% of the nation’s wealth. What truth does this reveal about our values when 42 million Americans struggle with having enough to eat? We could honestly look at the persistent evidence by our world’s scientists that our consumption

of energy is unsustainable for our world and for life on the planet. The Jewish pursuit of truth calls us to lift these heady ideas out Torah and Talmud and apply them to reality of our lives.

The second Jewish notion regarding truth is that it is the foundation of our relationship with others. Speaking in the name of God the prophet Zechariah declares, “These are the things you shall do, speak truth to one another, truth and justice that brings peace you shall pursue in your gates. (Zech. 8:16).” This verse envisions how our relationships change when they are built on truth. What would it look like to bring down our defenses and to allow ourselves to be profoundly open with our loved ones? To be truthful with our spouse about our fears, hopes, needs, and struggles. To tell our spouse why we love them. To acknowledge to our children that we sometimes don’t live up to our own expectations, that we know that we hurt them and fall short. To remind our children that we love them for who they are, not the false expectations we foist upon them. To tell our parents who we are, even if it risks hurting their feelings. To call a friend and let him know how much you appreciate him. To call a friend when you feel she has hurt you.

Speaking truth to one another also means that we have to be open to hearing our loved one’s truths, even if it hurts, even if like Hillel and Shammai, our truths come from very different experiences. And it goes a long way when we can admit the truth, that we make mistakes. We are not perfect parents, spouses, friends, children, or colleagues. Rabbi Karen and I are not perfect rabbis. This honeymoon period at the start of a new rabbinate will end. We will make mistakes and ask your forgiveness. But Judaism does not ask for perfection. It asks for honest effort. Speaking truth to one another is the first step toward forming relationships of shalom, wholeness and peace.

Finally, Judaism says that we have to look at ourselves and tell the truth. We cannot commit to the pursuit of truth or fostering honesty in our relationships without being honest with ourselves. Moses Chayim Luzzato, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian scholar and mystic spoke of the dire consequences when we are dishonest. He writes, “Lying is a spiritual illness by which we lose contact with our own souls.” The spiritual estrangement from the self through dishonesty also estranges us from God. If our souls are not at peace, if we live our lives on lies, we become spiritually bankrupt and we drive away a sense of the Divine.

On Yom Kippur, we return to being honest with ourselves. We pull ourselves out of spiritual bankruptcy by engaging in what our tradition calls *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*. *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* literally means taking an account of our souls. We look inside and pull out the receipts of our interactions with others, with God, and with ourselves from the past year. We try to figure out where they add up, and where our personal balance sheets are off. This process only works if we commit to telling ourselves the truth.

This is not easy. We all have habits of rationalization, making excuses to ourselves and others, thinking that we can ignore the truth and keep living as if nothing

is off kilter. In order to break this pattern, we have to uncover our true selves. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells a story of spending a summer as a crewmember of a sailboat that sailed on Lake Michigan. He reflects on the disorienting feeling of the onset of night and how it would be hard to keep one's bearing were it not for small lighthouses on the horizon dotting the shore. The points of light could be seen for miles even to the extent that they were barely visible, looking like nothing more than flickering candles. Of the lighthouse Kushner writes, "With her you were oriented, without her you are not only alone in the dark, you cannot be certain where you are. Each lighthouse has its own distinct pattern of flashes, a coded-light message which enables an approaching mariner to identify his location on the chart...They are all that any lighthouse ever says: 'This is who I am. This is who I am. This is who I am.'"

When we tell ourselves the truth, we begin to remember who we are. We can set our course and navigate in the darkness. This process brings us back to the question we began to consider 10 days ago, what is our why, what is our purpose. Ironically, finding ourselves, our purpose, and embracing truth means overcoming our own egos. In his book, *A Passion for Truth*, the last book Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote before his death, Heschel writes, "The most preposterous falsehood is the most common, most cherished one: self-centeredness." (133) For Heschel rejecting falsehood is the same as rejecting self-centeredness. When we push out ego we gain humility and can accept the multifaceted, sometimes contradictory nature of reality, we can hear the truths of others and respond in kind bringing peace into our relationships. And in the process, we cultivate our souls, uncovering who we really are.

I will conclude with one final story about the deep significance of the truth in Judaism. For thousands of years, we Jews have attributed special powers to the word "*emet*." One man in particular actually made this word come to life. His name was Rabbi Judah Loew, and he lived in 16<sup>th</sup> century Prague. During that time, the Jewish people of Prague lived in fear of being attacked. As legend has it, Rabbi Loew decided to protect the Jews against pogroms by creating a golem, a creature in human form made from the earth. Using his knowledge of secret kabbalistic teachings, he went down to the riverbank and there made a man's shape out of clay. He followed the prescribed rituals and recited the special Hebrew incantations. Finally, he inscribed one word on the creature's forehead, and it came to life. The word was "*emet*."

The golem obeyed the rabbi's every order and helped to protect the Jews of Prague. However, as the golem grew bigger, he also became more violent and started spreading more fear. Rabbi Loew was promised that the violence against the Jews would stop if the golem was destroyed. The rabbi agreed. The rabbi removed the first letter from the word "*emet*", thus changing it to "*met*" (meaning "death"), and life was removed from the golem.

We are not so different from the golem. We, too, are made from the dust of the earth, and to the dust we will one day return. Like the golem, we need truth to fully live. In the year to come, let us find the courage to inscribe truth before our eyes, so that we may be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.