

**White Lies and Tall Tales
in a WikkiLeak World
Parashat Vayechi;
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Imagine the scene: Jacob dies, but even before the trip back to Long Island or New Jersey or Old Canaan to the designated family section of the cemetery, before the burial Joseph's brothers huddle together to plot a strategy of their own. Fearing wrathful retribution for childhood rivalries seemingly set aside, revenge held in abeyance while yet their father lived, Jacob's other sons conspire in the arena of tall tales and white lies: they will tell Joseph, they decide, that their father had left word, a posthumous proscription, for Joseph to forgive the brothers.

All is well in the tale we tell, but imagine a different twist. An intrepid interloper, an ancient exposé of secrets with a fetish for freedom of information, snoops and tells. Before the brothers even have a chance to present a case to their elevated sibling, leaked cables appear in the Goshen Gazette and the Cairo Daily News: "Foreign Infiltrators Conspire to Mislead Prime Minister," the headlines scream. "Leaked Cables Reveal Brothers' Pitiful Plan." And instead of reconciliation and harmony, popular Egyptian outrage leads the politician Joseph to cut off family ties. No solidarity, no moving forward with the family story, no Exodus, no parted sea, no Sinai, no Torah, no Judaism.

Flash forward, to a scene in an American university, just a few years ago. There, a course in Jewish mysticism is being offered, the esoteric tradition called Kabbalah, by a professor named Fox so seemingly pompous that his students refer to him affectionately as F-x. Before the class begins the professor looks at the students, a mixture of male and female, graduate and undergraduate students, Jews and gentiles. "I presume," he intones, "that you are all male, married, over 40 years old, Orthodox in practice, and that you know the Torah and Talmud by heart! Having said that," and here, he pounds the table for emphasis, having just recited the traditional Jewish prerequisites for delving into this slippery and perspective-altering subject matter, "having said that, let's begin."

Our tradition teaches that there are certain topics that require preparation, orientation, grounding in classic texts and communal connections before plunging in. Our tradition teaches that in a complicated world, context counts.

But the very concept that some people know some things that other do not, that there is any legitimacy to an overarching framework formulated by someone else into which facts can be fit, the notion that raw data needs time to grow, be sifted and sorted, thoughtfully and privately before being brought out in the light of day... that concept itself is apparently profoundly offensive to some people in our post-modern world.

We live at a time when time does not stop: 24/7 news cycles mean information is always available, the page is always refreshed, the past is passed over in the blink of an eye. We have grown accustomed to instant gratification, to phones that are smarter than we are – who hasn't been at a perfectly pleasant dinner table when one person has mentioned a topic or expressed uncertainty about something, and someone else has whipped out their cell and called up Google fact check on the spot. You've seen it. I've done it. The truth is out there.

I'll never forget one of my first realizations of how much the world had changed because everyone has instant access to information, communication, and their own private arbiters of opinion. It was a minor incident, but a striking one for me, and it took place on our Confirmation class trip to New York City in 2002. The bus was heading into the city, but there was a lot of traffic, and while the driver, Andy, Scott and I are staring ahead of the bus, unbeknownst to us, a half dozen of the kids whipped out their cell phones and called home. "Lincoln Tunnel blocked; what do we do?" In came the answers – at least five contradictory and equally strongly argued parental opinions, in real time from 200 miles away.

Let's raise the stakes on a similar scenario. I remember reports from our local Jewish Day School's senior year semester in Israel, at the height of the second intifada. Phone calls back and forth went like this: either kids called their folks to say they were okay in the face of something their parents had not

and probably would not have heard about, or parents woke their kids up to ask if they were okay because they heard, here, about something their kids never noticed. The communication took place in such real time that organizers of trips and programs had no time to put their heads together and give even a moment of thought to how they would present what had happened, how they would convey what they were doing to adjust their plans.

And so questions. Is “spin” automatically a four-letter word? Do we have a right to borders and boundaries, to taking a breath, to having a place to process and sift and think through what we are going to do, without constant exposure? Is there a value in trying out an idea, in exploring an opinion, or does everything have to be instantly ready for prime time? What do we do, how do we evaluate the imagery of light? Is the protective shield of privacy a shady respite from a too-glaring sun, or a looming menace, a heart of darkness?

My friends, I believe that there is something wrong in a Wikileaks World. But it is hard to say exactly what is wrong, or how much, or where the line is.

There is, of course, another side to the story. We have lived through governments that lie, and conspiracies to control public opinion, break into opponents’ offices, abuse power and manipulate the media. Just today I heard word, through an email from Rabbi Kahn, about government suppression of information regarding the hunt for former Nazis. Sunshine laws are not just

for prurient interest; they were passed for a reason, and to address real abuses.

But like the sports commentator watching a play unfold and dramatically intoning that “he could go all the way,” how far do we want openness to go? Is there not some limit to what we just have to know? I am not a lawyer, or an expert on national security, so whether what is going on is illegal or rises to the level of treason is certainly beyond me.

What I do know, though, is that there is a difference between being smart and being wise. Being smart may involve knowing things, being up to speed on what’s going on, finding all the facts and hoarding them like some obsessive collector. But wisdom requires discretion, discernment, and distinction. It involves knowing what to reveal, and when. It involves an understanding... of context.

We have just finished the celebration of a minor but well-known holiday. Chanukah purports to be the celebration of a single jar of oil which lasted for eight days. Historians, however, dispute the details; theologians claims there is more to it than this, and rabbis – or at least this one – insist on spoiling the story for adults and older students.

Why the age distinction? Because we know, or at least we believe...that there is such a thing as developmental stages of understanding, that there are age-appropriate images, and that a certain concrete expression of ideas is more suited to younger children.

But who are we to judge such a thing? Isn't that arrogant, to be arbiters of information? Shouldn't we just put it all out there, and not pre-judge who can handle which version of a story?

In my ideal world, I see shades of grey, and nuance and shadow. I believe it is appropriate to consider... what is considered appropriate. I see a mixture of sun and shade, of openness and privacy. And I believe that a certain kind of growth comes from exploration, from trying out ideas and opinions we are not yet sure of, of sharing that exploration with others in a context in which we feel safe and comfortable, before proclaiming everything in public.

And I also believe that people are... well, human. That for all of us there are outbursts of emotion which we would not want to "own" in public.

The best example I can think of in this regard is my own reaction to a heinous crime, or a terrorist attack. The very first thoughts in my head – which do occasionally make it into words which come out of my mouth – are not necessarily in full accordance with judicial procedures or political realities or contextual restraints I actually want to see upheld. I wouldn't want – I wouldn't dare, and I wouldn't endorse – a public pronouncement... of some of those instantaneous emotional gut reactions.

Maybe if you remember the Woody Allen line about peering into the soul of the student sitting next to him... many people do want to see that inner instinct, that first emotional reaction, to judge the fullness of a person.

Do you remember the presidential debate between Michael Dukakis and George H.W. Bush? Do you remember that awful question asked at the outset? “If your wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered...” I actually believe that Michael Dukakis may have lost the election solely on the basis of the flat, robot-like response he gave... to that emotional opening

Here is how I would have answered. “Bernie, what a horrible question. I understand you want to get at whether our high talk stands up when things get personal, but let’s leave our families out of this. If you want to know how I would react as a man, I would react as any husband would: I would want to find and hurt the person who did this with my own hands. In the long run, though, though, how we treat criminals is about our values as a society, and it is a better thing for everyone that we live in a world of law and not frontier justice and emotionally charged matters like personal revenge....” And then I would have given the content of the answer he gave.

I know showing instant emotion would have served Dukakis better at that moment. So I get it, that people want to know... what is going on, inside the people who are vying to be our leaders. And I get it, that unchecked privacy leads to abuse.

What I don’t get, and I don’t want, is a world in which there is no privacy at all.

Or, let's put it this way: how come so many of the people who are *exposing all these secrets...* get to be anonymous themselves? Is this tangle really about principle, or about power?

Maybe Wikileaks is really a stand in... for a new brand of theology. Maybe all they want us all to remember... is that even when we think we are alone... there is always someone watching. With words from the morning liturgy, *"l'olam y'hei adam y'rai shamayim baseiter u'va'galu'i*; at all times let us revere God inwardly, as well as outwardly."

But when only God is watching, really, that's between us and God. And frankly, given the secrets God keeps... I think even God understands a little bit about shadow and shade, the meeting place of darkness and light.

At the beginning of this *parasha*, this week's Torah portion, unique among the portions of the entire Torah... there is no space. There is no gap. The rabbis called this, then, a "closed" portion; they make a great deal – really, through quite a stretch – of the fact that our eyes are therefore "closed" during what is happening in this portion.

But there is a gap after the portion. It is a large gap, the end of the book of *Bereishit*, of Genesis, before the beginning of *Shemot*, of Exodus. And in this whole question of space, its absence at the outset, its abundance at the end, I am reminded that to tell a tale is not just about what happens on stage. It is

also about what goes on off stage, the implied, the hidden, the out-of-sight. A story is not just about what unfolds explicitly; it is also about the assumptions we bring, and the changes that go on over the course of the story. It is about what is said with words, and about what is in between the lines.

Not everything can be told. Growth takes place in the gaps. And it is the written word together with the hidden hand, the darkness dancing with the light, both, together, that bring us the full story. In the wholeness of who you are, there is a place for sharing, and there is a place for secrets. The dark truth and, yes, perhaps, occasionally, even the white lie. *Elu v'elu*, these *and* these... We need both.

Shabbat Shalom.