

**Truth and Dare:
Doing Yom Kippur Right**

**Yom Kippur Morning 5780
October 9, 2019**

Friends: Last night I spoke about uncertainty. Today, I want to touch on things we know. Last night I spoke about Judaism as a post-Biblical religion. Today I want to show how seeds of a more nuanced and new view of the world are hidden in the Bible itself.

A cartoon depicts a man in a toga, walking in between two Roman-style pillars, both of which have, emblazoned upon the top, the word “Truth.” The caption reads: “But which one shall set me free?”

The Hebrew word for “truth” is *emet*. Rabbi Elyse Frishman notes that the three letters of the word, *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*, are, in fact, the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Her conclusion is that “truth is all inclusive.” The way I see it: we cannot know the truth, until we look at something in many different ways.

Some aspects of real truth may make us squirm. Not all we will see with open eyes is easy. Others ways of being true involve authenticity, integrity and... presence... in how we are there for others.

It is Yom Kippur. It is the Day of Atonement. It is the time for the deepest dive, a searing honesty, introspection pushed past comfort and well into the zone of the vulnerable and insecure.

But we begin... somewhere else. I am still thinking about this morning's Haftarah. Now, our Reform movement did change the Torah reading for this morning, away from the cleansing and atonement, the expiation rite performed by the High Priest in the ancient Temple, sacrificing one goat and sending another off, escaped, the "scape-goat" into the Wilderness, replacing it with a more relatable, a more "spiritual" Torah reading. But the Haftarah we read, from Isaiah, is, in fact, the traditional portion from the prophets for the morning of Yom Kippur.

And what a reading! "Is this not the fast I desire: to break the bonds of injustice, and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home, and never to neglect your own flesh and blood. Then, when you call, Adonai will answer, and when you cry will respond 'I am here.'"

These are challenging words. And bizarre. Because, as my teacher Micha Goodman notes, there are 929 chapters in the TaNakh. This is the *only one* which criticizes people who fast. And *this* is the chapter the sages chose for us to read on this day of fasting?

What God really wants is not for us to starve ourselves, but to feed people who are starving. To look not inward, but out, and around. Or: our abstinence and deprivation is meant to help us respond more authentically, and more effectively... to the needs of others.

Since the very beginning of Reform Judaism, liberal Jews just loved the prophets. Morality over ritual, the primacy of ethics! This was the foundation which let us leave law and ritual behind! And this, these words we read this morning, this is the heart of the prophetic critique of priestly religion.

But there is something... off...about Isaiah's logic. Or, perhaps, it hits home, but does not go far enough.

The priests claim: if you cling to the cult, follow the details precisely, if you *do the rite right*, God rewards you. The prophets argue: no, only if you *do the right* do you get the goods.

Only one step happens here, then. The prophets challenge *the content*, *the character* of the reward system. They do *not*, as Goodman points out, question its existence. There is still a formula; there is still a way, things we can do to get what we want. We can still, as it were, manipulate God.

How many of us, even now, are engaged in an internal dialog, a secret session of bargaining with God? There you are, negotiating, you, and you, and me too: if only this, I will that. I don't believe God works this way. But, yeah, kind of, I really do. Or at least, on this day which demands total honesty, I am going to play theological make believe. On this day of no pretense, I am going to pretend. If only I "do Jew" right, say the right words, act the right way, health and happiness and a beachfront villa follow, all in short order.

And yet, there, hidden in plain sight, one of the only books never read in a ritual setting, never part of a Haftarah, never included in the liturgy, a book with no associated holiday, there, right there, inside Bible itself is a critique of the critique. It asks a question so deep it would rock our world if we let it in. The paradox, the mystery, the majesty of our tradition is that the Bible itself... preserves a book... which undermines the entire Bible.

On this day, with all its demands, let us, for a moment, tackle the toughest book of all. Look with me, if you dare, at Job.

The Book of Job throws out the entire concept of an ordered, rational, predictable universe. It certainly ditches the reward system. Here was a good man, a God-fearing man, with fortune and friends and family. And then, victim of a metaphysical and likely metaphorical bet, an argument in the heavens over whether human beings can be good just for the sake of being good...all he has is taken. Not because of anything he did. But just to prove a point to Satan. This upstanding citizen, this God-praising paragon of virtue... let's see if he'll stay true to God now!

Can human beings be good? Forget that! This book forces us to ask another question. Is God is good? (Blasphemy? But it seems to me the one pushing us to ask that very question... is, well... God!)

But let's not bother God for a moment. Let's look at the interaction Job has with his friends. His "friends." These are the people he thought he could count on to be there for him. They *are* consumed by his plight. But they are hardly helpful. For the way they try to make sense out of what is happening to Job is driven by their need to save, to protect their view of the world.

So how do they square bad things happening to a good person? Obviously, he can't really be good. But he was! So they turn time upside down. They say: you are not perfect, Job, because you are not accepting your punishment. That is, you do not accept that it *is* a punishment. Bad things are happening, so you *must* have done something wrong. But you won't admit it! You won't own your role. And, therefore, paradoxically even if your error is only *after* the onset of your suffering, *that* is what you did wrong! The "friends" are so desperate to save their ordered and understandable universe that they don't see the reversal of cause and effect their answer implies!

But Job knows something. He knows that he is a good person. And, astonishingly, he stands up for himself. And here is the most amazing lesson.

God checks God's own Facebook feed and Twitter account. Who mentions Me? What are they saying? So, does God want only and always five-star reviews? Or for us to say what we know? Are we to be obsequious, or real?

In Goodman's words for a moment: Job's friends believe that being religious is about praising God. Job says that being religious is speaking the truth to God.

Sometimes we think of being religious in terms of making sacrifices. Not just the sheep I spoke about last night, but prayer itself is modeled on the ancient sacrifices. We think of what we give up: our time, our preferences, not eating when we want to, or, for some of us, not eating what we want.

But, my teacher asks: is our intellectual honesty one of those sacrifices? When we walk into a synagogue, are we supposed to, are we expected to become naïve in order to function? [Micha Goodman.]

What the Book of Job says, in between the lines, is: no! *It is a sin* to sacrifice our honesty. Our truth, our story, our experience is what we are here to give voice to. With open-heart. And integrity. Always. And especially today.

To tell, to hear, to live out truth. How does this work? What might it look like? Two examples. The first is about discomfort. And the other is about being a friend.

Speaking one's truth requires the ability to be... uncomfortable. We are not here just to feel better. Or, rather, we get there... by sometimes not feeling better first.

Last month, a couple I know came to services. I won't say who, but you will be able to tell when this happened in just a moment. After observing our ritual and tradition, at the Oneg, the husband asks me a question. Whether he was serious or not, I don't know; it was said with a twinkle in his eye, but it's actually a pretty serious, and very uncomfortable question.

"So," he asks, noting our practice of naming names in memorial towards the end of the service, "how come you didn't say Kaddish... for..." And he goes on to name a certain notorious neighbor who, finally facing the prospect of real charges, had just committed suicide while in jail.

My jaw dropped. I'm still... pretty sure he wasn't serious. Maybe he was even being...playfully provocative. But...

Look, there are many possible responses. No one asked us to, he was not a part of our community. We could cite traditions about suicide. Or we could hide behind the fact that the nature of the crimes put him outside of our religious views of redemption. (What he seems to have done counts as one of the three actually unforgiveable acts in our tradition.) Or that it never occurred to us. Really, not once. Or that we just... don't want to.

But wow, is there raw honesty there. Where is the line of behavior, what is the border, what is the boundary of a tradition? When does a human being, based on behavior, stop being seen or treated as a human being? And if he was over that line, what about someone a little closer? Or closer still?

A similar question was posed by a young person. On the Shabbat after the Boston Marathon bombing, the rabbi at the time read names of the injured and recovering in the Mishebeirach list, our prayer for healing. A child here that night asked him afterwards: one of the bombers survived. He is in the hospital. Why didn't you include that name, along with the others? And maybe, after all, he needs even more healing, in ways which go beyond the physical.

He thought about her question. I am told that, with explanation and caveats included, the name was included the following week. Mayhem may not have followed immediately. But discomfort certainly did.

I don't know the right thing to do in either case. I don't know that there is one right thing. But...wow, these questions come from people who think deeply, who see clearly – and also see outside the usual lines we draw. These are the kind of questions which make us think about who we are, what we stand for, what our words mean, and what we are doing here. Those... as uncomfortable as it may be, and whatever we decide to do in giving answers, I hope that none of you would ever want to sacrifice, or suppress, uncomfortable questions like these.

Being a real friend involves... being real. Not long ago, a colleague posed a question online. He had a... particularly challenging funeral coming up. The circumstances of the death made the mourning... more difficult. He was looking for... well, partly he was sharing as part of his own process of dealing with it. But he was also asking for advice.

So here is what I said. There are times when... look, everyone's thinking the same thing, but no one is saying it. What to do?

In English it is called an elephant in the room. Everyone sees it, but, bizarrely, no one is willing to say anything about it.

Real friends will know. They will know that something has to be said. And they will somehow know the right words, and the right way to say it. Even if it is just acknowledgement. "Look, I know everyone is thinking about this. There are no right words, but I wanted you to know we are with you."

Honesty, openness, support mean... you find a way to give voice to a truth. You don't have to dwell on it. But there are times when not saying something is too weird.

Friends find a way to be real, and sensitive, at the same time. If I have a... I don't know, a bad hair day, or a frog sitting on my shoulder I hadn't noticed... I want someone to say something. But I don't want *everyone* to say something. And then go on and on about it.

You know who you are, for the people around you. You know if you are the one to speak, and you know how much, or how little, to say.

What we want, what we need, what we expect from true friends, from loving family, from a caring community... is to be real. What moves us from transactional interactions to sacred relationships, what makes a holy community, is the ability to tackle tough topics and handle uncomfortable conversations.

Beyond even the prophetic call to morality, what we take from Job is the need for being there, the right way. With honesty and sensitivity, truth without arrogance, and genuine, gentle, compassionate presence.

Truth, and dare. It is Yom Kippur. It is a day of utter integrity, looking deep, but done with love.

L'shanah Tovah.