

Truth and Trust
Kol Nidrei 5781
September 27, 2020

A line-drawn toga-clad figure pauses in front of two Ionic columns at the entrance to a building. There, perched atop the square abacus of each column is a plague. Each one bears the same, single word: “Truth.” And in the caption of the cartoon, the figure asks: “But which one shall set me free?”

My friends, this night I want to speak with you about truth, and trust. But first... During this period, still reeling from the loss of one of the most important, certainly among the most impactful Jewish figures in American history, I note the remarkable coincidence, in English, that you cannot say “truth” without “Ruth.” More seriously, perhaps: I will draw close to conclusion tonight by sharing a blessing, I note, now, that the traditional blessing we say upon hearing bad news, on learning of death, is “Baruch Dayan HaEmet.” “Blessed is God, Righteous Judge,” or, as I prefer to translate it, “Blessed are You, Judge of Truth.” And with these words, the idea of truth and the role of robes, a judge, judgement, justice... are forever bound together.

My friends on this sacred occasion, on the holiest night of the Jewish year, at this time of introspection and taking responsibility, I have a confession to make.

It's my fault. I did it.

So what did I do? What do I mean by this?

For years, I have been among those who argued that who you are and where you come from molds and shapes what you see, and how you process the events in your life. I promoted the idea that outlook and identity and history matter. I thought that different people, from different cultures, traditions, or ethnic groups, might see the same thing in different ways.

This is the core claim of a postmodern perspective, from Quantum Mechanics to multiculturalism. The observer affects the outcome. How you ask a question influences the answer. And who we are colors... yes, colors... how we hear, and what we see.

I thought, in other words, that truth was... well, that there can be different truths. Stories are subjective. We experience the world differently from one another. Truth is relative.

And also this: that context counts. Take the following story:

The great Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard walks down the street in Copenhagen. He sees a sign in a store window, with the words, "We Sell Hats" beautifully carved and illuminated. He thought it was his lucky day, since, as it happens, he needs a hat. He steps into the store and says to the clerk who greeted him that he wants to buy a hat. The clerk looks confused and says: "We don't sell hats here." Now it is Kierkegaard who is confused. He turns and points at the sign. "Oh, that!" the clerk says. "No, no, you don't understand. We don't sell hats. We sell signs."

So, yes, of course: a picture, a story, an event, even an apparent fact has many different sides. But, still...

My God, my God! I come before you this night in contrition and confession! Because I never thought... it could come to this!

What started with an open heart now encounters closed minds. What began as a way to connect, to comprehend where others were coming from... devolved... into a tearing apart... of anything that could hold us together!

Spin, creative and convenient thinking, alternative perspectives... this has always been with us. Complete consistency is... well, generally, few people are absolutely consistent, and some of them are... scary. But, still, shouldn't we even try to hide this level of hypocrisy? Yes, on all sides. Have we no shame?

“Kol Nidrei. A whisper of wings, as promises are remembered. This night, saint and sinner alike commune with the Most High. We are at one.”

In the deepest of ways, this day is about Truth. And trust. And an annual alignment, a harmony between in and out. And you and me.

Atunement. Atonement. At-one-ment. Being at one.

The Kol Nidrei ritual, the incantation we so hauntingly sang earlier this night, is radical, and controversial. What do you mean, you can evade a pledge, and get out of a promise? What is this, some kind of absolution-in-

advance? The formula looks like an annual dispensation to escape the commitments and consequences of what we swear to do? If Jews have a work around like this, many Christians have asked over the centuries, well, what's a Jew's word worth, anyway?

But in fact, the impact is the opposite. We take what we say *so seriously*, we are so committed to the confluence between advocacy and action, that it takes *this setting, this ritual, this plea to the heavens*, intervention from another realm... to repair any breach between what comes out of our mouths, and the reality around us. There must be, there has to be a harmony between what we say, and what we do. Between assertion, and action.

This night is a way to say: facts matter. And truth is an inescapable foundation of the moral order.

So-called Reality TV may be scripted. But real life... real life is a stage upon which words must be true.

Yes, of course, "truth" is tricky. Things are not always what they seem.

To honor Ruth Bader Ginsburg, two examples of complexity, both of which touch on gender roles and relationships mediated through the lens of the male imagination -- both of which also have their own twists which obliquely support the internal needs and lived experiences of women.

In the Torah we encounter the graphic description of a woman who has just given birth. She is considered "impure" for a period of time -- seven days if

she gave birth to a boy, fourteen if she gave birth to a girl. We can argue all day about the gender discrepancy, what it might have meant, how bothered we are by it now, but let's leave that aside for the moment. After the woman's time "outside," as it were, she is ritually welcomed back in to the community, by means of her bringing... a sin offering.

Wait, what? A sin offering? Whatever for? What did she do wrong?

Here some Christian commentators get all excited. "Aha," they say, "you see! This must be a reference to Original Sin."

Um, well, wait a minute.

The rabbis of the Talmud were also puzzled by this passage. Listen to what they had to say, echoes of Kol Nidrei, affirming the idea that words matter, and must be true.

Perhaps, they speculated, that in the process of giving birth, there was so much pain... maybe the woman, in the midst of it all, screamed out a vow! "My God, I'll never let my partner..." Well, you can fill in the rest.

But then they bring her the child, bonding things happen, pain fades and – scientists speculate this is really a "thing" – even some of the memory of pain fades! And with that she forgets. She forgets the words she might have said.

But it was a vow! It was a promise. You can't just... *So important*, the rabbis said, are promises, so sacred is our word... The sin offering was a kind of blanket insurance policy, just *in case* something like this happened!

Things are not always what they seem to be. And there are times, too, when one kind of reality does not match another. Take the case of the Talmudic Martin Guerre, or an early version of *Cast Away*. A married man disappears. Time goes by. The wife considers herself a widow, and wants to remarry. Eventually, she goes to the rabbinic court, which declares her missing husband deceased. She remarries. More time goes by. And the original husband returns!

The rabbis argue: to whom is she married? Some say: her current husband. Others say: neither one. Significantly, though, *not a single sage will say she is still the wife of the man who went away!*

But he was, we assume, never actually dead! Isn't this a matter of... facts? Where is "truth," here? But... the court has ruled. Maybe he's not dead, but he is dead-ish. Or dead to her. For more than one relationship will be rent asunder if we cannot rely on the ruling of a court. So here we have a case where legal reality, and social reality, and what you might call actual objective truth, are not seen in the same way.

So truth hangs on a thread of hope. It is subject to legitimately different perspectives.

And truth suffers from the weight of unfair comparison! Beware, beware what I call "the pebble and the mountain," false equivalency between occasional exaggeration, and habitual fabrication. One person's mistake is not automatically the same as another's mendacity.

Truth suffers, too, it is under assault in a world of altered images, hidden agendas, and those for whom the only virtue is victory at any cost. How, and who, can we trust again?

We strive, we reach for a place where there is alignment, harmony, between the different parts of our lives; between what is in us, and what is around us.

How symbolic, and ironic, to argue about... masks. We cover, to recover. To uncover now, in places we should not, is not just to bare our face. It is also exposure – exposure to danger, and an exposure of who we really are.

Yom Kippur: the day of digging deep, and owning up. To acknowledge... that part of us is hidden. In Hebrew, sometimes this day is referred to in the plural: *Yom HaKippurim*, the day of atonements. Or, strangely, *yom k'purim*. A day which is like Purim. The holiday which is observed and marked most... by the masks we wear. By a story of the hidden, and revealed, and life, and death, on the wings of breath, and the edict of what seems like whim, and chance.

To move towards honesty and integrity, I want to share with you a prayer and a blessing. Each helps me hold on to hope, and keep faith in a world where words can work, we can have some sense of truth and trust.

The prayer comes from the morning liturgy. “*L’olam yehei adam yirei shamayim baseter u’vagalui, u’modeh al ha’emet, v’doveir emet bil’vavo*; always may a person have a sense of reverence in public and in private, acknowledge the truth, and speak the truth in thought and in deed.”

Here is a place where inner and outer worlds are one! In which we mean what we say, and maybe even say what we mean.

But, more. We already know that any thought we post, any email we send, any tweet we...put out there... we may mark it as private but you have to know, any of it – any of it – you may think this is just delusions of grandeur but too many people have already been shocked when what they thought was held close winds up on the front page of the *New York Times*.

A wholesome and holy life would be when you know that can happen at any time... and you are not afraid.

And, finally, a blessing. One of my favorite insights in our tradition. It is taught that when you see a large crowd of people – even on Zoom – you recite the following: “*Barukh Atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam, Chacham HaRazim*. Blessed are You, Adonai our God... Knower of Secrets.” Or: “Blessed are You, who is Wise to our Ways.”

Because who knows what is hidden and held, in any gathering of human beings? And what coincidences might we find, what discoveries we might

make, if we were able to be open to one another! That you were both in St. Louis, that both of your grandparents were *on the St. Louis*, that your families knew each other, that you sat in the same class at college, that you dated twin siblings, that you are third cousins and had no idea you were related!

To open up is a moment of truth, and trust. Ultimately, it is an act of intimacy, and love.

What will set us free? This day we open ourselves to God. Let us learn to do so with one another, as well.

Shanah Tovah.