

Kol Nidre 5779

Gamar chatima tova. May we all be written and sealed for a year of Good.

The Kol Nidre service initiates our day of prayer and repentance on YK. It is somber and reflective. The melody of Kol Nidre - sung so beautifully by Cantor Marcello - is haunting, and the mood of the service echoes the foreboding we have for our future, knowing the many shortcomings of our past. No heart remains untouched.

And yet, Yom Kippur is a hopeful day. We hope our prayers for forgiveness are answered, we are confident that our *cheshbon nefesh*, the accounting of our souls that we've been doing during this holiday season, will result in our being better people in the year to come. So at this season I try to encourage my own kids: yes to think about things they are sorry for, but also to focus on the things they would like to change, things they can aspire to in the New Year. The other night after sitting quietly and looking deep in thought, my 6 year old came to me and asked: "Abba, does the Torah say you are not allowed to be a party-pooper?"

"It should, my son, it should," I said, and then I too started thinking of other ideals and values we should be living up to, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the Torah.

The truth is that the Torah itself forbids us from adding to it, but that hasn't stopped Jews and others from wondering what other "do's" and "don'ts" might have been included...

Carl Reiner, for example, in one of his interviews with Mel Brooks, the famous 2,000 year-old man, asked:

"You've lived so long, I'd like your thoughts on the effects of the 10 commandments on civilization..."

“There were more,” interrupted the 2,000 year-old man.

“More what?”

“More commandments, but they weren’t, they weren’t important.”

He gave an example: “Thou shalt not squint.” “Where’s the big message there?”

Sometimes we project onto the Torah what we wish the Torah had commanded. For example, whenever my wife Tamar has a sniffle, or even feels a little tired, I find myself muttering “*asor l’Ima lachlot!* – The Mommy shalt not get sick!” Rashi’s commentary would say: Because you can bet that Abba cannot handle things on his own...

In contrast to the humor of the 2,000 year-old man routine, the poet Yehudah Amichai also suggested an additional set of commandments. Amichai was probably the greatest poet of modern Israel, and so beloved in our family that we named one of our kids after him. Those who came to Torah study here at MJCS on Saturday mornings during the summer learned some of his poems in connection to the weekly Torah portion.

He wrote a poem about the kindly way in which his father taught him how to live in the world:

My father... gave me

The Ten Commandments neither in thunder nor in fury; neither in fire nor in cloud

But rather in gentleness and love. And he added caresses and kind words

and he added “I beg You,” and “please.”

Amichai concludes the poem:

And he put the palms of his open hands

On my head with the Yom Kippur blessing.

“Honor, love, that your days might be long

On the earth”

[and] later on he turned his face to me one last time

... and said

I want to add Two to the Ten Commandments:

The eleventh commandment – “Thou shall not change.”

And the twelfth commandment – “Thou must surely change.”

Life seems to teach that there are more than 10 commandments. Our sages count 613 commandments in all the Torah, though they disagree as to what exactly those 613 are, and there is even more disagreement as to the details of how, exactly, we perform each of them, and which of them we can still actually do today. Many of the mitzvot are important on the level of destiny-of-society, destiny-of-the-world!

For example:

- “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
- “You shall not disregard the rights of the stranger or the orphan.”
- “Stand up before the aged.”
- “Do not destroy.”

To name just a few.

The philosopher and Holocaust survivor Emil Fackenheim, z”l, one of my teachers to whom I was deeply devoted, tried to prove that there is in fact a 614th commandment...He claimed that just as the original 613 commandments were heard in the world at Sinai, this new 614th commandment was also heard in the world...not at Sinai, but at Auschwitz: “Thou shalt not give Hitler posthumous victories.” He meant that what happened in the Holocaust must change how we behave in the world: We must ensure Jewish

survival with an enduring Israel and a meaningful Jewish education for our children and grandchildren; We must resist the erosion of democracy towards the autocratic impulse; We must speak up against hatred and injustice everywhere; We must never again equivocate on condemning intolerance, or remain neutral until it is too late; We must insist on Truth in the face of falsity and distortion.

On this Yom Kippur eve for the year 5779, on this evening of Kol Nidre in which earlier tonight we declared the vows we could not live up to in the previous year as null and void rather than have them remain unfulfilled, rather than have them become lies that crossed our lips, on this night I humbly suggest that we observe in this New Year and for all time...not another commandment, but another commitment, a commitment to the most crucial of all the values that is the very foundation of everything else in the Torah, in all the world: A commitment to *emet*, to Truth.

All of us are aware that truth is under assault in our world these days. Forget the politics of it, and make no mistake, examples of blame exist for every side of the political spectrum, whether here in the US or in Israel, or anywhere else. Sure, we have no illusions that Truth has always been manipulated and spun, even manufactured and sold for one agenda or another...But at least Truth has always had a status that was acknowledged, that is to say, those who lied always tried to pass their lies off as the truth because the truth was the standard we could all agree upon, the measure of reality. Truth contained integrity, as even the liars recognized that “truth is truth”, that what makes a fact a fact is its empiricism, not its relativism, or the passion with which it’s presented, or and the number of times it’s repeated. All of us operated under the same laws of gravity so to speak – even the liars – in sharing a basic respect for the truth!

What is so upsetting of late is the cynicism of the blatant lies we see today, the purposeful elimination of Truth as the standard for how we define our shared reality. There is a moral bankruptcy in undermining the validity of Truth itself as our means to measure anything, of destroying Truth as the epistemology of value, in elevating the transient and empty goals of whatever today's lie tries to achieve by slaughtering Eternal Truth like a sacrificial animal at the altar of ego, or profit, or power...

I'm not going to discuss the ongoing investigation of Truth's assailants, the roles played by today's tech and their business model, the internet itself, post-modern relativism, political correctness, "safety-ism", human psychology, possible conspiracies...the hilt of every sword thrust into the heart of Truth has many hands upon it.

But what I do want to focus on, is why our Jewish tradition demands we embrace and support and love Truth.

I. What is Truth?

What is Truth? How can we be committed to it, after all, if it is so precious and – seemingly – so rare and difficult to identify?

The Hebrew word for Truth is אמת Emet, spelled א Aleph (the first letter of the alphabet), then מ Mem (the middle letter of the alphabet), and ת Tav (the last letter of the alphabet). It's as if the word for Truth itself demands a wholeness from the beginning, through the middle, to the end, that truth must be all inclusive, and that it has a proper order.

When it comes to defining truth, the first thing is that it is thoroughly truthful. Like I said – it has integrity: It's no longer truth if you pick only strategic parts of the story and – conveniently – leave out the parts that undermine that strategy. That's no longer

truth but a narrative, and a false one at that. Look, we were all kids who struggled embarrassingly at some point to contend with the real consequences of our deeds and our words. We all wrote some papers for classes in high school and college that, let's say, weren't our best work: we know what falsity is, just as surely as we sense truth and beauty when we encounter them:

If you shorten "emet" by taking the first letter out of the word for truth, by removing the letter "aleph" which in Hebrew has the numerical equivalent of 1 – like God is One - and which in fact is the first letter of God's name "Elohim", the ultimate measure of what is real and what is false; if you take out that "aleph" and all it represents then you're left with only the "mem" and the "tav": "mem-tav" is the word מַת "met", which means "death".

By swallowing all the lies and half-truths swirling around us, we let them poison us. Falsity diminishes the divine in each of us, slowly killing the living soul inside us...we know what truth is; we are allergic to lies in our very beings.

II. Just How Important is Truth?

Just how important is truth?

Well, according to Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel in Pirke Avot 1:18, "On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace.

Judgement, Truth, Peace. The world depends on them.

Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel's prooftext is a verse from the prophet Zachariah (8:16), which in full reads: "These are the things you are to do: Speak the Truth one companion to another, render true justice and peace in your gates".

רָבֵן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלִשָּׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת
וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם, שְׁנֵאָמַר (זְכוּרִיָּה ח) אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ דְבָרוֹ אֱמֶת אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ
אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שְׁפֹטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:

One commentator (Malbim) suggests that Zachariah foresaw as a prophet that the Second Temple would be destroyed by “Sinat Chinam”, causeless hatred, and he tried to give us the remedy, the inoculation, before the illness: “Speak the Truth one companion to another.”

The first point to make is that perhaps by speaking truth to one another – having an honest dialogue about real issues, makes the people “companions”. If they aren’t speaking at all, there is no chance for companionship, and if they speak platitudes, sounds bites, half-truths or lies, again, there is no chance for companionship. The void of companionship, the absence of common ground, will ultimately be filled with fighting and causeless hatred. Society depends on communication, and we all know that lies are no basis for real communication. Unfortunately, the people did not listen to Zecharia and in the end it was indeed the collective societal sin of causeless hatred that led to the destruction of the Second Temple, the loss of our independence, the forfeiting of our nation, and 2,000 years of bitter suffering and exile.

In our own United States today, discourse is equally threatened by the assault on Truth. We say that democracy is predicated on free speech. But the premise of free speech is that the truth will win out, that truth can be “crowdsourced”. This is why we have, for example, the jury system for judgement – we believe that Truth can be discerned by a group of people who share the goal of finding it, who share an understanding of the idea of Truth itself. Without a basic honor and commitment to serve Truth, without the collective goal of learning the truth - if we cannot even agree that there is such

a thing as truth - then there can be no judgement, no justice either. If there is no truth to be discerned by free speech, then there can be no meeting of minds, no compromise, no way to find a middle road upon which to move forward.

The prophet Zecharia says as much: “Speak the truth one companion to another, render true justice and peace in your gates.” Only a shared commitment to truth can yield the justice and peaceable ability for civil society to function. This is why Rabban Gamliel goes ahead and claims so dramatically that ‘The entire world depends ‘on judgment, on truth and on peace’...for without Justice, Truth, and Peace, and without them interacting through the dialogue of Truth between companions, society inevitably collapses.

III. We Are the Source for Truth

I mentioned a few moments ago the great catastrophe that the prophet Zecharia foresaw for Israel, and the remedy ‘Speak Truth one companion to another’ that he prescribed to prevent it from happening. He was unsuccessful, but I think it is important to note how our tradition took up Zecharia’s charge after we lost our 2nd Commonwealth. We learned our lesson. What we did was to commit to the rigorous pursuit of Truth through that dialogue between companions.

We invented the idea of *chavruta*, the root of the word is *chaver* – friend, but a *chavruta* is more than a friend. A *chavruta* is your study partner, the person with whom you struggle to decipher the world and your role in it. You do this – traditionally – by reading the text in question aloud to one another and then challenging one another through discussion, sharpening your questions in response to your partner’s answers and sharpening your answers in response to your partner’s questions. To be a true *chevruta* is to push your partner

closer to the Truth just as you want and need your partner to challenge you to get closer to the Truth.

This exchange of arguments, this dialogue predicated on the ability to identify Truth through our challenge and discussion with one another, became the essence of how we see and practice Judaism. It produced the Mishnah and the Talmud and innumerable commentaries – they are all arguments and discussion in the pursuit of Truth! - all of which preserved our nation dispersed around the globe and led us to regain our freedom as an independent country 2,000 years later. This *chevruta*-dialogue-for-truth is perhaps the most characteristic quality of the Jewish People, and it has sharpened our minds and souls for millennia. It's made us who we are – to be Jewish is to strive for truth.

Some people think that democracy is an unnatural form of government for our modern State of Israel, reasoning that - you know - two Jews, three opinions, how are we going to agree on anything as a democracy. To the contrary, I think the *chevruta* model not only confirms Judaism's democratic foundations, I think its model of 'Speak Truth one companion to another' is the only hope we have of remaining unified as a People instead of self-destructing as we did 2,000 years ago.

A commitment to Truth in this New Year is not an additional commandment to the Torah, it is the essence of Torah. Truth is one of the Names of God. We have to love Truth, commune with Truth, honor Truth, demand Truth, be passionate for Truth.

In this new year, let us echo the poet Yehudah Amichai 'with all the gentleness and love you have in you, with caresses and kind words, I beg you, please, Honor and Love Truth that your days might be long on the earth.'

Kein yehi ratzon, May it be God's will.

Gmar Chatima Tova.