

KOL NIDRE 5779

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

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Good Yontiv. I realize that it's not Passover, yet in 2018 we are suffering through several modern plagues. One of them is the plague of fake news - it's hard to tell truth from fiction nowadays. Author and filmmaker Errol Morris wrote recently, "What's scary about the present time is that people believe they can assert truth just by screaming louder than others or repeating themselves ... But we all know in our hearts that mere repetition and decibel level is no way to truth." (TIME, 6/11/18)

In the digital era, it is especially challenging to discern the truth. According to a recent TIME magazine article, Katy Steinmetz presented statistics about our habits and some of the consequences.

Two-thirds of Americans, and 9 out of 10 millenials, get their news from social media, where the news looks like birthday wishes, cute animal videos, and angry political rants. It all looks the same, but news requires careful consideration and not an emotional response. We tend to trust visuals, but photos can be doctored, and even videos called ‘deep fakes’ can be manipulated to show events that never really happened. We tend to assume that whatever appears higher in a Google search is more reliable. But Google algorithms are based on keywords, not truth, and an organization with an agenda can pack its site with keywords, so that its site is usually near or at the top of a search. We spend 24 hours each week online. Bombarded with information, many of us don’t read beyond headlines. Many young people multitask by texting, reading and watching video at once, hampering the concentration needed to question content and think deeply. But getting to the truth, especially of complex issues, is a journey and should not be decided quickly.

The stakes are high. Recently in India, false rumors about child kidnapping that spread online prompted mobs to beat innocent people to death.

How should we respond? Tech companies like Facebook and Google are doing more to police the internet. But we need to be part of the solution as well, by changing our behavior both online and in the physical world. Psychologist Sam Wineburg of Stanford and his team developed a curriculum, advising students to be more like professional fact-checkers. Fact checkers research sources, and actually read an article as opposed to retweeting it after only glancing at someone else's summary. This is good Jewish advice as well.

Our tradition teaches that truth doesn't belong solely to one individual or group. We value debate and different interpretations because we believe that such striving, when done sincerely, will blaze a path to the facts. Therefore, we study texts with a partner or *hevruta*, because the exchange of ideas leads to new insights. Getting to the truth requires investigation and patience, and you should not rely on one source of information.

The Torah advises us how to handle potential fake news. Suppose you hear a rumor, that an entire community is behaving badly - what do you do? The Torah employs three verbs –

דרשת וחקרת ושאלת הטיב “You will investigate, inquire and interrogate thoroughly.” (Deut.

13:15) In other words, we must do a very thorough check of the allegations, before acting on the knowledge, let alone before spreading the rumor in any way. And the Talmud teaches, “the more thorough the cross-examination, the more praise worthy the judge.” (BT Sanhedrin 40a)

Our tradition teaches us to listen to opposing views. Again, in the Talmud we learn that the disciples of two great scholars, Shammai and Hillel, disagreed on almost everything in matters of *halacha* or Jewish Law. Ultimately, a heavenly angel proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with Hillel. Why? First, because they were agreeable, showing restraint and not shouting. Second, when Hillel’s followers decided the *halakha* they researched and taught the opinions of their opponents along with their own. We should strive to be like Hillel. Don’t treat

your rival with contempt, rather be respectful and try to find common ground.

In Hebrew, the word for truth is **תְּהֻנָּה**. ‘Aleph’ is the very first letter, ‘mem’ is exactly in the middle, and ‘tav’ is the very last letter.

This teaches that truth demands total accuracy at the beginning, middle, and end.

The prophet Zechariah lived over two and a half millennia ago, a time of turmoil and strife in the Jewish community. He advised the people, “Speak every person the truth to his or her neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.”

(Zechariah 8:16) May our pursuit of the truth lead us to peace as well. G’mar chatimah tovah.