



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

How Firm are Truth's Legs?

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Rabbinic Beit Midrash
April 22, 2020

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I. The Crucial, Saving Importance of Truth

1. Aleph Bet of Rabbi Akiva, Version B

מפני מה ראשו של אל"ף זקוף ועומד ויש לו שתי רגלים כבני אדם? מפני שהוא נחשב כאמת, ואמת יש לו רגלים. ושקר אין לו רגלים, שכל האותיות של שקר עומדין על חודן.

Why does the top of the letter *aleph* point upward, and why does it have two legs, like a human being? Because it is considered to stand for *emet* (truth), and truth has legs. *Sheker* (falsity), on the other hand, has no legs, for all of the letters of *sheker* are perched on a sharp point.

2. Ezekiel 9:3-6

וּכְבוֹד | אֶ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִעְלָה מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב אֲשֶׁר הָיָה עָלָיו אֶל מִפְּתֹן הַבַּיִת וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־הָאִישׁ הַלְבִּישׁ הַבָּדִים אֲשֶׁר קָסַת הַסֵּפֶר בְּמִתְנָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו] עֲבֹר בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר בְּתוֹךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם וְהַתִּיחַתָּ תָּו עַל־מִצְחֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים הַנֹּאֲנָחִים וְהַנִּנְאָנָקִים עַל כָּל־הַתּוֹעֲבוֹת הַנַּעֲשׂוֹת בְּתוֹכָהּ: וְלֹאֲלֶהָ אָמַר בְּאָזְנִי עֲבְרוּ בָּעִיר אַחֲרָיו וְהָפוּ עַל־[אֶל־] תַּחֲס עֵינֵיכֶם [עֵינֵיכֶם] וְאַל־תַּחְמְלוּ: זָקֹן בְּחֹר וּבְתוֹלָה וְטָף וְנָשִׁים תַּהַרְגוּ לְמִשְׁחִית וְעַל־כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־עָלָיו הַתָּו אֶל־תִּגְשׁוּ וּמִמִּקְדָּשִׁי תִּחַלּוּ...

Now the Presence of the God of Israel had moved from the cherub on which it had rested to the platform of the House. He called to the man clothed in linen with the writing case at his waist; and the LORD said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who moan and groan because of all the abominations that are committed in it." To the others He said in my hearing, "Follow him through the city and strike; show no pity or compassion. Kill off graybeard, youth and maiden, women and children; but do not touch any person who bears the mark. Begin here at My Sanctuary."

3. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 55a

ומאי שנא תיו אמר רב תיו תחיה תיו תמות ושמואל אמר תמה זכות אבות ורבי יוחנן אמר תחון זכות אבות וריש לקיש אמר תיו סוף חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא דאמר רבי חנינא חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת.

And what is special about Tav? Rav said: Tav [is the first letter of the word] tiḥye -- you shall live -- Tav [is also the first letter of the word] tamut -- you shall die [indicating that the wicked shall die]. And Shmuel said: [The letter Tav is the first letter of the word] tama -- ceased -- indicating that the merit of the Patriarchs has ceased. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: [The letter Tav is the first letter of the word] taḥon -- will have mercy -- indicating that the merit of the Patriarchs will bring mercy. And Reish Lakish said: Tav is the last letter of the seal of the Blessed Holy One, as Rabbi Ḥanina said: The seal of the Blessed Holy One is truth [emet].

4. Isaiah Horowitz, Shenei Luhot Ha-Berit, "The Letters - Derekh Eretz"

פה בירושלים עיר הקודש תוב"ב היה רגיל אצלי חסיד גדול מחסידי עליון מהספרדיים, ואם היו נותנים לו כל חללי דעלמא לא היה ח"ו מוציא מפיו דבר שאינו אמת בבירור. וסיפר לי מנהג אביו בעודו היה נער הוא ואחיו, ובא קובלנא שנעשה איזה ענין שלא כהוגן. אמר מי שיודה על חטאו ויאמר אמת, אזי אמחול לו, רק יזהר מהיום והלאה שלא ישנה באולתו. ואיזה שיכפור, ואני אחקור ואדרוש שאחז בשקר וכפר, אזי אעשה לו עונשים בכפלי כפלים. וכן עשה, מי שהודה מחל לו ונתן לו מתנה עוד איזה מטבעות בעבור שהודה באמת. ולהאחר ששקר, ענשו בעונשים גדולים. כך היה מגדל בניו במדת האמת.

Here in Jerusalem, the city of the Holy One (may it be rebuilt in our day), I conversed often with a very pious and holy man, a Sephardic Jew, who, even if he were offered the entire substance of the world, would never, God forbid, allow anything but the clear truth to leave his lips. He told me about his own father's practice. When this man and his siblings were young, and a complaint was leveled about something improper that was done, his father would say: "Whoever confesses and tells the truth will be forgiven, as long as he is careful from now on not to repeat the infraction. But as for one who denies responsibility, and my investigation shows that he lied, his punishment will be doubled and redoubled." That is just how he did it: anyone who confessed, not only was forgiven, but given coins as a present as a reward for telling the truth. Anyone who lied was given a severe punishment. In that way, he raised his children in the value of truth.

5. Excerpt from the Liturgy for Yom Kippur Katan

רבונו של עולם מנהג בית דינך הצדק לא כמנהג בתי דינים של בני אדם. שמדת בני אדם כשהוא תובע את חברו בממון אל בית דין או אל השופט אם יכפור ינצל מן הממון ואם יודה יתחייב ליתן. ובית דינך הצדק לא כן הוא אלא אם יכפור אדם אוי לא ואוי לנפשו ואם מודה ועוזב אתה מרחמהו.

Master of the Universe: Your court of justice does not operate as do human courts. The practice among people is this: when a person sues his neighbor for money and it comes before a judge in court, if the defendant denies the claim, he will be spared any consequence, but if he admits the claim (in whole or in part), he will be required to pay. But Your court is justice is not like this: if a person denies the charge against him, woe to him and woe to his soul; but if he admits the charge and renounces his behavior, You bestow mercy on him.

II. What Breakdowns of Truth Look Like

6. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 97a

תניא ר' יהודה אומר דור שבן דוד בא בו בית הוועד יהיה לזנות והגליל יחרב והגבלן יאשם ואנשי גבול יסובבו מעיר לעיר ולא יחוננו וחכמת הסופרים תסרח ויראי חטא ימאסו ופני הדור כפני כלב והאמת נעדרת שנאמר (ישעיהו נט, טו) ותהי האמת נעדרת וסר מרע משתולל

It is taught: Rabbi Yehuda says: During the generation that the son of David comes, the hall of the assembly of the Sages will be designated for prostitution, and the Galilee will be destroyed, and the Gavlan, i.e., Bashan, will be desolate, and the residents of the border will circulate from city to city and will receive no sympathy. The wisdom of scholars will seem repulsive, and sin-fearing people will be despised. Those of that generation will present themselves as if they were dogs, and Truth will be no more; as it is stated: "And the truth is no more [ne'ederet], and he who departs from evil is negated" (Isaiah 59:15)

7. Hannah Arendt, comments made in 1974 in an interview with Roger Errera, reported in "The New York Review of Books," October 26, 1978

If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.

8. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton, 2005, pp. 53–6, 61, 64–6

The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to.

This is the crux of the distinction between him and the liar.....

It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says.

By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

9. Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*, 2018, pp. 55–6

People trying to win respectability for clearly discredited theories – or, in the case of Holocaust revisionists, trying to whitewash entire chapters of history – exploited the postmodernist argument that all truths are partial. Deconstructionist history, the scholar Deborah E. Lipstadt observed in *Denying the Holocaust*, has “the potential to alter dramatically the way established truth is transmitted from generation to generation.” And it can foster a climate in which “no fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast. There is no ultimate historical reality.”

III. The Quest for Truth: Are Convictions Possible?

10. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1981

Internalism is not a facile relativism that says, ‘Anything goes’. Denying that it makes sense to ask whether our concepts ‘match’ something totally uncontaminated by conceptualization is one thing; but to hold that every conceptual system is therefore just as good as every other would be something else. If anyone really believed that, and if they were foolish enough to pick a conceptual system that told them they could fly and to act upon it by jumping out of a window, they would, if they were lucky enough to survive, see the weakness of the latter view at once. Internalism does not deny that there are experiential *inputs* to knowledge; knowledge is not a story with no constraints except *internal* coherence; but it does deny that there are any inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts*, by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them, or any inputs *which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices*. Even our description of our own sensations, so dear as a starting point for knowledge to generations of epistemologists, is heavily affected (as are the sensations themselves, for that matter) by a host of conceptual choices. The very inputs upon which our knowledge is based are conceptually contaminated; but contaminated inputs are better than none. If contaminated inputs are all we have, still all we have has proved to be quite a bit.

.....truth is an *idealization* of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement ‘true’ if it would be justified under such conditions,. ‘Epistemically ideal conditions’, of course, are like ‘frictionless

planes': we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them. But frictionless planes cannot really be attained either, and yet talk of frictionless planes has 'cash value' because we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation.

11. Arnold Ehrlich, Mikra Ki-Feshuto, Exodus 33:23

וְרָאִיתָ אֶת אַחֲרֵי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרָאוּ: אם יש לדברים האלה סוד אני לא ידעתי, כי אנכי לא עמדתי בסוד ה'. ואשר אראה לי אני בהם נשקף לי מתוך דברי חכם אחד גרמני, שכתב לאמר: "לו עמדתי לפני הא-להים והאמת בימינו וחקר האמת בשמאלו ואמר לי בחר באחד מהם, בחרתי בחקר האמת". וכעין זה אמרו במשנה (אבות ד': י"ז) יפה שעה אחת בתשובה ומעשים טובים בעולם הזה מכל חיי העולם הבא. ואמרו כן לפי שהבא עד האמת והמגיע לחיי העולם הבא נח מיגיעתו, כי בא אל מחוז חפצו, והיגע לדבר רם ונשא יגיעתו טובה לו משכרה. וכמו כן הדבר בדעת ה' ודרכיו, שאלו עלה בה האדם המדרגה העליונה שאין למעלה ממנה, מה יעשה אחר כך? ולכן לא יראה האדם פני ה', וה' מראה ליראיו אחוריו, כדי שיהיו דורשים וחקרים ודנים מאחוריו על פניו ויגיעים כל ימיהם לדעת אותו ידיעה שלמה וברורה, ויגיעתם היא שכרם.

You will see My back, but My face shall not be seen. If there is an esoteric meaning to this phrase, I am not privy to it, because I am not part of the divine inner circle. What I see in it reflects the words of a German sage [Gotthold Lessing], who wrote the following: "Were I to have stood in the presence of God, whose right hand was holding Truth, and whose left hand was holding The Search for Truth, and were I to have been given the choice of one or the other, I would choose The Search for Truth." A similar thing was said in the Mishnah [Avot 4:22]: "A single hour spent in repentance and good deeds in this world is more delightful than an entire lifetime spent in the World to Come." They said this because one who arrives at Truth, and thus to the life of the World to Come, is now at rest from all striving, having arrived at the desired destination; and when one works toward something of supreme value, the striving itself is a greater good than the reward yielded. It is just the same with the matter of knowing God and God's ways: were a person to be able to ascend to the highest rung bar none, what would that person do subsequently? Therefore, a human cannot see the face of God; only God's back is shown to the God-fearing, so that they will study, search out, and infer things about God's face from that back. Thus they will strive all their days to know God with a full and clear knowledge, and that striving is their reward.

12. Michael Gelven, *Truth and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*, 1990, pp. 35–6, 124ff

There is a famous story told by Lessing in which he imagines that God visits him in observable guise and offers him a reward for his goodness. In his right hand, God holds truth, and in his left he holds the search for truth. God asks Lessing which of the two he desires. Lessing claims his answer would be: “I’ll take what is in the left hand, and leave the truth for God alone.” This is not a mere charming story about Lessing’s humility or his acceptance of finitude. The story is deeply paradoxical. For if Lessing genuinely desires to seek the truth, then is he not disingenuous in turning down the offer of truth itself? If I desire gold and someone offers me gold or a stake in a possible gold claim, I would take the gold. By denying God’s offer of truth Lessing seems to be denying any *meaningful* sense of a search for truth. Why search for truth if, when offered it, one turns it down?

Yet this fable of Lessing’s suggests a deeper insight than mere frustration with someone who does not know what he wants. There is the suggestion in this little story that only an infinite being can possess truth, and that to accept the right-handed offer is to forfeit one’s humanity.

13. Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 1986, pp. 185–6

Some degree of skepticism about our current moral intuitions is not unreasonable, in light of the importance to moral belief of our starting points, the social influences pressing on us, and the confusion of our thought. If we aspire to objective truth in this area — that is, truth that is independent of our beliefs — we would be wise to hold many of our views more tentatively than we are naturally inclined to do. In ethics, even without the benefit of many clear examples, we should be open to the possibility of progress as we are in other areas, with a consequent effect of reduced confidence in the finality of our current understanding.

It is evident that we are at a primitive stage of moral development. Even the most civilized human beings have only a haphazard understanding of how to live, how to treat others, how to organize their societies. The idea that the basic principles of morality are *known*, and that the problems all come in their interpretation and application, is one of the most fantastic conceits to which our conceited species has been drawn. (The idea that if we cannot easily know it, there is no truth here is no less conceited). Not all of our ignorance in these areas is ethical, but a lot of it is. And the idea of the possibility of moral progress is an essential condition of moral progress. None of it is inevitable.

The pursuit of objectivity is only a method of getting closer to the truth. It is not guaranteed to succeed, and there is room for skepticism about its specific results in ethics and elsewhere.....It has to be suited to govern our lives day by day, in a way in which theoretical understanding of the physical world does not. And to do its work it must be far more widely accepted and internalized than in areas where the public is willing to defer to expert opinion.

There might be forms of morality incommensurable with our own that are appropriate for Martians but to which we do not have access for the same reason that we do not have access to the minds of such creatures. Unless we can understand their lives, experiences, and motives from inside, we will be unable to appreciate the values to which they respond in a way that allows us to objectify them accurately. Objectivity needs subjective material to work on, and for human morality this is found in human life.

14. Stanley Fish, “Condemnation Without Absolutes”, New York Times, Oct. 15, 2001, and “Don’t Blame Nietzsche for Donald Trump”, in Foreign Policy, Aug. 9, 2016

During the interval between the terrorist attacks and the United States response, a reporter called to ask me if the events of Sept. 11 meant the end of postmodernist relativism. The problem, according to the critics, is that since postmodernists deny the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively, they leave us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back.

Peter Pomerantsev writes in a recent issue of *Granta* magazine: “This equaling out of truth and falsehood is both informed by and takes advantage of an all-permeating late post-modernism and relativism.... This school of thought has taken Nietzsche’s maxim, there are no facts, only interpretations, to mean that every version of events is just another narrative, where lies can be excused as ‘an alternative point of view ’or ‘an opinion ’because ‘it’s all relative’ and ‘everyone has their own truth.’”

Not so. Postmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one. What postmodernism says is that while the material world certainly exists and is prior to our descriptions of it, we only have access to it through those descriptions. The only thing postmodern thought argues against is the hope of justifying our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies. Invoking the abstract notions of justice and truth to support our cause wouldn't be effective

anyway because our adversaries lay claim to the same language. (No one declares himself to be an apostle of injustice.) Instead, we can and should invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend.

What this means is that despite the dire pronouncements of critics like Pomerantsev, the categories of right and wrong, true and false are never empty or up for relativist grabs; it is just that they always being renegotiated. At any given time we always know what is right and wrong, true and false, even though, in the course of time, what we know can take a different form.

At times like these, the nation rightly falls back on the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for. That understanding is sufficient, and far from undermining its sufficiency, postmodern thought tells us that we have grounds enough for action and justified condemnation in the democratic ideals we embrace, without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes to which all subscribe but which all define differently.

Postmodernism doesn't do anything more positive than urging that truth.....Blaming a set of largely academic arguments for the source of our troubles is a combination of irresponsibility and ignorance, a shallow response to problems that are left unaddressed.

15. Sifre Deuteronomy, Shoftim §154

על פי התורה אשר יורוך, על דברי תורה חייבים מיתה ואין חייבים מיתה על דברי סופרים. ועל המשפט אשר יאמרו לך תעשה, מצות עשה. לא תסור מן התורה אשר יגידו לך, מצות לא תעשה, ימין ושמאל, אפילו מראים בעיניך על ימין שהוא שמאל ועל שמאל שהוא ימין שמע להם.

"In accordance with the instructions (torah) given you": It is a capital offense to disregard a matter of Torah, but not so with rabbinic laws. "You shall act in accordance with the ruling handed down to you": This makes it a positive command. "You must not deviate from the verdict": This makes it a negative command. "To the right or to the left": Even if their directive seems to you to be making right into left and left into right, you must heed them.

16. Jerusalem Talmud Horayot 1:1

תני : יכול אם יאמרו לך על ימין שהיא שמאל ועל שמאל שהיא ימין תשמע להם? ת"ל
ללכת ימין ושמאל - שיאמרו לך על ימין שהוא ימין ועל שמאל שהיא שמאל.

It was taught: "Might you think that if they tell you right is left and left is right that you should heed them? The Torah therefore says: 'To go to the right and to the left' – i.e. provided that they tell you that right is right and that left is left."

17. Gordon Tucker, "A.J. Heschel and the Problem of Religious Certainty", *Modern Judaism* 29:1, 2009

Heschel took issue with the attempt to harmonize reason and faith, one of the most pervasive themes in medieval Jewish philosophy: "[Faith's] certainty is intuitive, not speculative. Many of its elements can neither be tested nor verified".

This is why Heschel loved Menahem Mendl of Kotzk's reading of Psalm 14:2

היש משכיל דורש את אלהים?

Usually translated as "is there a man of understanding, a man mindful of God?", the Kotzker read it as "Is a person who has nothing but reason capable of seeking God?"

Heschel's study of the prophets – which had such a strong effect on him in terms of bringing him out into the world – also convinced him that the ancient prophets were among those who first experienced that there is a divine will for the world, and that our expressible knowledge about it may exceed our attempts to systematize what we know of it.....

In Heschel's words: "Not all that is evident is capable of being demonstrated."

18. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, 1989, pp. 51–4

.....the person who believes on faith does not do so because he has passed through this inferential argument; rather, his belief arises directly out of his being deeply touched and moved in encountering something.

Perhaps the faith involved is a faith *in oneself* and one's own responses, a faith that one would not be *so* deeply touched by something in *that* way unless it *was* a manifestation of the divine.....to *not* have the belief then would be to distrust one's very deepest responses and thus involve a significant alienation from oneself.

.....

This affirmation and trust in one's deepest experiences is not the same as dogmatism, holding these experiences to be infallible. Still deeper experiences might undercut these or show something different. Faith then can be investigative, guiding further inquiry into the range and validity of the experiences. The affirmation can be wholehearted and yet tentative, open to being superseded. A trust in your own deepest experiences guides your own life and inquiry; it is not something to demand others have too.