

## Yom Kippur – Kol Nidre

2020/5781

Rabbi Allison Vann

Earlier tonight we heard the beautiful prayer for which this evening's service is named – Kol Nidre. It speaks to the words we utter, the promises we make, and the actions we take to fulfill those promises. Tomorrow morning we will have the pleasure of listening to Mrs. Wolfe chant from the Torah. She will read from the traditional Reform Yom Kippur afternoon Torah portion; a section often referred to as the Holiness Code.

These verses may be among the more well-known verses of Torah, containing the exhortations around which many of us build our life's values: do not put a stumbling block before the blind; leave corners of the field for the poor; love your neighbor as yourself.

There is also a verse – a verse that Mrs. Wolfe read this morning—that deserves significant attention.

לֹא תִגְנוֹבוּ וְלֹא תִכְתְּשׁוּ וְלֹא תִשְׁקְרוּ אִישׁ בְּעַמִּיתוֹ:

You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.

We are regularly advised to remain far from lies and deceitful behavior. We know it says in the 10 commandments: “do not bear false witness”! In Exodus, we read, “stay far from falsehood”, and in Psalm 34: Who is the man who delights in life, who loves days seeing goodness? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech...

The Talmud relays this story: Rava, who lived around the year 300, said: At the hour you enter heaven for judgment, they will ask you, “*Nasata v’natata b’emunah?* Did you deal honestly with people in your business?”

The first thing? Really? Not about scholarship? Relationships? Charity? But about your trustworthiness in the marketplace?

Yes! Why? Because in Rava’s time *everyone* and *everything* was for sale.

Therefore, the way one conducted business was a sure sign of one’s character.

I chose to speak about truth and honesty on Yom Kippur—because this is the time when we are most honest with ourselves. Today, we openly fully admit our misdeeds, and seek to rectify them for the future. Our prayers include, literally, an aleph bet of possible wrongs. You may have noted over the years in our *machzorim*, our high holy day prayerbooks, that a significant

portion of the *Al Chet*- the litanies of confession—have a significant focus on how we manage truth—commenting with regularity, for example on gossip, on lies both of omission and commission; on careless and hurtful remarks. Yom Kippur is a reminder of the power of truth to create rifts, both small and large.

As we ponder our own actions today—we recognize how powerful honesty is in our own lives. How much more so, then, for our nation!

My friends, I think we know: were our country to be evaluated for its' honesty, for its' truthfulness-- it would be found sorely lacking.

We've come to accept with great regularity the manipulation of fact and truth. Stephen Colbert is credited with coining the term "truthiness" in 2005, which "refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true over concepts or facts known to be true." It was such a popular idea it became the 'word of the year'! Not only is this concept of "truthiness" still present today, but it is more relevant than ever.

The RAND corporation, a non-partisan group, has studied how we, as a country, approach truth and facts. They published their findings in a book

called *Truth Decay* in 2018, which recognized that there is a “diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life”.

As of this summer, the Washington Post estimates over 20,000 false or misleading claims by the President. The manipulation of information is designed to chip away our trust in ourselves, in each other, and in our most precious public institutions. This is called gaslighting.

This manipulation is, I believe, is tearing our country apart. Institutions or public offices once held in the highest regard are now trivialized. Denial of a previous conversation or an agreement leaves our heads spinning, especially when there is proof it happened or existed. Scientific data produced by our most trusted institutions is being countered or demeaned, and that doesn't even address the withholding of important and often life-altering or life-saving information that occurs on a regular basis.

How often have we thrown up our hands in shock—or even confusion-- when we've heard a politician or important figure say, “I never said that” -- even when the footage might show otherwise? How frustrating it is that this single claim grants permission to bend and manipulate information to match a desired outcome!

Our distancing from the truth is doing real damage done to our country and is pulling us apart. Deborah Lipstadt, in her Ted Talk, *Behind the Lies of Holocaust Denial*, said, “Truth is not relative...There are certain things that are true. There are indisputable facts — objective truths. ... The Earth is not flat. The climate is changing. Elvis is not alive...”

She continued, “And most importantly, truth and fact are under assault. The job ahead of us, the task ahead of us, the challenge ahead of us is great. The time to fight is short. We must act now. Later will be too late.”

The Talmud has a clear lesson in responsibility: “Everyone who can protest the sins of their household and does not, is held accountable for the people of their household. If they can do the same for the people of their city and do not, they are responsible for the people of their city. And the same for the whole world-- then they are responsible for the whole world...”

It is for this reason that all our confessional prayers on Yom Kippur are in the first-person plural. We are all responsible for holding each other accountable.

Do not underestimate your power to act. Whether in your household or your city or the world—you can protest the sins; you can manage the

messages and information. We do not have to live in a “post-truth” world.

We must support, and ask each other to support, fact based, strong,

investigative journalism.

We must question and evaluate information we receive from the media,

government, and other sources—including, and especially, social media. We

must hold each other accountable.

This is important, necessary work. It is our responsibility as Jews; it is our

responsibility in the healing of our country. May we work towards holding

our country, ourselves, and each other to up to our highest ideals, embodied

in the verse: “You shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.” May

we hold ourselves and each other accountable to truth and honesty. Amen.