

What Does It Mean for Something to Be True?

Tomorrow morning we will read, actually Gilad will chant, *Shirat HaYam*. The Song of the Sea. You know the story. We read it every year around our Seder tables. We've watched it countless times as Charlton Heston, with that distinctive red, white and black cloak, lifts up his staff and proclaims, "Behold the awesome power of the Lord." And then in what was unquestionably the most sophisticated display of special effects moviegoers had ever experienced, Cecile B. DeMille made the waters part. Not God. DeMille.

No doubt there are many who believe that God split the sea just as DeMille portrayed it. Because DeMille pretty much followed the script as described in Torah. But I am here to tell you, in the words of Ira Gershwin, "It ain't necessarily so." And please, don't take my word for it. Even the Bible suggests, through literary innuendo, that the story was never intended to be taken literally. Consider the following Biblical text:

*The bed of the sea was exposed,
The foundations of the world were laid bare
By the mighty roaring of the Lord,
At the blast of the breath of His nostrils.*

Sound familiar? It should. But it's not *Shirat HaYam*. It's the Song of David: 2nd Samuel, chapter 22, verse 16. Could it be possible that God parted the Sea for David just as God did for Moses and Miriam? And if so, which sea? And what then are we to make of the story when Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan river, it also stops dead in its tracks and parts for the people to cross into the Promised Land? And what of the punishment of Korach and his merry men who defied God and God responded by ostensibly reversing the "splitting of the Sea" by opening up the earth and swallowing the idolaters?

The message is clear. Don't mess with God. Because God can do anything, even suspending and reversing the laws of nature. And what would make a bigger splash, pun intended, than making flowing water stand still?

Scholars call it a literary motif. A repeating theme that drives home a sacred truth.

Do we really think that our ancestors who wrote the Torah believed in miracles any more than we do? Do we honestly believe that they saw reality differently than us? Might we not give them just a little bit of credit for being able to translate their faith into metaphor and symbolic poetry?

None of this, however, should be interpreted as meaning that the story we will listen to tomorrow isn't true. It might not be factual, but it bears truth.

The distinction is important.

More than simple fact, truth is that which binds people together. It is the common ground we share. Truth is that which gives life meaning. And purpose. The story of the parting of *Yam Suf* is true – at least for us – because it carries our truths. It reminds us of our beginnings. That we are a people who know oppression. Who know what it is to

be a stranger. It is a celebration and affirmation of the holiness of freedom. And, perhaps above all, it presents to us a God who cares about those who suffer. Even more, this God demands that we do the same. These are our truths. *Shirat Ha-Yam* may not be factual, but it is true.

By contrast, there are those who intentionally distort facts and proclaim them true. For them there are no deeper truths, just the fabrications and distortions and embellishments designed to further their own agenda for the purposes of self-aggrandizement and power. They would have us believe "their facts" simply because they say so. And their promulgation of these threatens the very fabric of our nation, because while sacred truths transcend facts, the fabrication and distortion of facts is the antithesis of truth. And at its core is the undoing of everything we hold sacred. A world without truth is impossible to abide. Because truth is the very air we breathe.

Now I'm pretty sure that most of you know where I'm going with this. But I've not come here tonight to cry "Liar, Liar." I'm not here to be a fact-checker. There are others who do that, and much better than I could ever pretend to do. Suffice to say, never have I witnessed such an assault on truth as I have seen this past year. Like the dystopian "1984", it feels as if, to quote its author George Orwell, "The very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world." Today the idea of truth as a complex intellectual and spiritual equation has been trumped by an oversimplified protestation, a sound byte, a 140 character tweet.

This is more than just "alternative facts", a statement (I would hope) Kellyanne Conway regrets but has come to epitomize this administration's approach to its confrontation with reality. This is more than simple partisan spin. This is not just opinion or interpretation. In many instances it is outright lying. And it is more egregious and shameful than any Presidential administration in my lifetime, perhaps since the beginning of our republic. And what makes it so shameful is that there is no attempt to couch it, to make it even appear reasonable. Bald-faced. That's the only phrase that comes to mind. And even worse, when confronted with it, when confronted with the indisputable facts, they dispute even those. They refuse to admit the error of their ways. But then why should they? "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." So said Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda.

To be sure, we are not unfamiliar with lies. We are accustomed to politicians stretching the truth, distorting the facts, engaging in what Stephen Colbert calls "truthiness". But if there is a boundary to be crossed, if there is a point where even lying goes too far, it must be when one engages in the destruction of someone else's truth. And no one knows this better than we Jews.

For two millennia we have been forced to endure accusations and falsehoods and mistruths and lies. From the accusation that we were Christ-killers to the promulgation of the conspiracy of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, we Jews have known only too well a world where truth has been cast aside. The reality of Auschwitz and Treblinka and Babi Yar are the consequences of a world where truth is treated as a convenience.

This is why I take your children to Amsterdam every year. Not simply so they can identify with the tragedy of a young girl, but so they can know and understand and be equipped to respond to those who would deny that truth, to those who would say it wasn't so. But it was so.

So...when the highest office in this land endeavors to memorialize that consequence yet fails to mention the primary victims of that unspeakable time, it is tragic. It is a failure of truth. But when confronted with that failure and the response is that no mistake was made, that their words and their omission was intentional, that is beyond shameful. It is complicitous with those who do evil. Indeed, worse than saying that the Holocaust is a hoax (because that is simply absurd), to intentionally disassociate the Jewish people from the Holocaust is to dismiss the victims of their very identity. And their suffering. Because it was their identity that they were...victims. As Lucy Dawidowicz correctly distinguished, between 1933 and 1945 there were two wars being fought: World War II and Hitler's private "War Against the Jews".

A number of years ago I was teaching a course on modern Jewish history here at the synagogue and I was talking about the Holocaust. At one point, as I was referencing the 6 million, a non-Jewish woman in the class challenged me claiming that just as many non-Jews were caught up in the extermination policies of the Nazis. I pushed back. While I fully acknowledged that Jews were not the only group that experienced mass deaths, Hitler's primary focus was the elimination of the Jewish people. She would have nothing of it and stood up and walked out of the class. Eventually she and her husband left the synagogue when they moved away. Today we are FaceBook friends.

I've obviously, however, not let go of that interaction. I do not know if she lost any relatives in World War II. I certainly did not want to offend her. Or cause her pain. But I felt a deep sense of obligation to distinguish between the Jews and the millions of other innocents who perished during those years. To be sure, there were others who were targeted and hunted down: Roma (or Gypsies) and homosexuals and the disabled and political dissidents. But not one of those groups were the focus of Hitler's obsession -- to rid the world of Jews. This cannot be denied. This must not be denied.

Then there is the matter of numbers. Let us be clear: No one will ever know precisely how many people died during that time. The number of six million Jews has become sacrosanct. Maybe it was even more. As for the others, we often say that eleven million died in the Holocaust. I even know rabbis who insist on putting out 11 yahrzeit candles on Yom HaShoah, so that we might be as inclusive as possible. And this attempt at inclusivity, what the White House wanted us to believe it was trying to do, does nothing more than lend credibility to those who would deny us our truth. And to make matters more complex, we now have credible reason to believe that that extra five million is itself a fabrication.

It started in the early 1970s. And it was advanced by Simon Wiesenthal, the celebrated Nazi-hunter. He would later admit that he came up with the figure to increase Holocaust awareness by acknowledging that there were others who perished, and he

wanted it to be a big enough number in order to raise sympathy for the victims of Nazi genocide, but it shouldn't be a bigger number than the six million Jews, so he came up with five million others. And then the Carter administration got hold of it, and so did the rest of us.

Here's the best facts we can come up with: Millions upon millions of people died during World War II, especially in the Soviet Union. There can be no doubt about the enormous loss of life of these innocent civilians caught up in the conflagration of the Second World War. And as for those whom the Nazis intentionally murdered, the more recent data suggests that in the neighborhood of 500,000 Roma and homosexuals and disabled and dissidents were murdered by the Nazis. Part of it was to remove those whom the Nazis determined were sub-human non-Aryans. Part of it was to eliminate those who would stand up to the Nazis. But no matter the number, whether it was 500,000 or five million, the loss of those lives was devastating and of the greatest of human tragedies.

But the Jews were different. Their murder was at the very core of Hitler's dark vision of a thousand-year Reich. The extermination of the Jew was the goal, the others were afterthoughts. The sole purpose of the now infamous meeting at Wannsee was to solve the "Jewish" problem. At the end of the war, as Germany's defeat was rapidly impending, the Nazis rerouted desperately needed troop trains in favor of giving trainloads full of Jews the right-of-way to death camps throughout Europe. None of this can be denied. This is our truth. And any attempt to gloss over this fact -- and it is a fact -- is simply disgraceful.

Boris Epshteyn, the one most believe is responsible for this symbolic revisionism, was born in the former Soviet Union. This attempt to erase the Jewish identities of the victims of Nazi genocide is standard-operating-procedure in that part of the world. I remember visiting the mass grave of the Jewish residents of Smela, in Ukraine, and how the memorial plaque in front of the burial mound notes that 3000 Soviet citizens were buried there. Not a word in Russian about their identities as Jews. This is how it begins. Make nuanced changes to facts. Steal someone else's truth. But where it leads we Jews know only too well.

Let me be clear: There are so many other issues, much more important issues that should cause us profound concern as this administration takes power. And I choose that word -- power -- with intent. Because I believe that much of what we are seeing coming out of Washington is not simply attempts to bring about new policies and the realization of partisan ideology. We are witnessing the attempt at a hostile takeover of the United States. The enemies are not Muslims and Mexicans. To those who wield power, the adversaries are the press and the courts, the purveyors and guarantors of truth.

Perhaps we are already in the midst of a civil war. But this is more than just a war "of" words; it is a war "for" and "against" words. The new President struggles with those who challenge his words. He seeks to manipulate those who would judge his words. But do

we not know that in such a conflict we -- the people -- are the final arbiters of what is true? As Orwell points out, "In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

In the closing courtroom scene of "Judgement at Nuremberg", Spencer Tracy, the Chief Justice of the trial, sums up the purpose of the trial and, for me, what it means to be an American. Speaking to the Nazi judge (Ernst Yanning, played by Burt Lancaster) standing trial for his own distortions of truth, Tracy says, "A country [is] what it stands for, when standing for something is the most difficult. Before the people of the world, let it now be noted in our decision here that this is what *we* stand for: justice, truth, and the value of a single human being."

It's an interesting play on the Superman motto, "Truth, Justice and the American Way." It's also instructive. The American Way must, at all costs, embrace "the value of a single human being," regardless of race or religion or national origin. But it starts with Justice and Truth. And we must be its champions.