

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Morning 5781

Champion Truth

On a sunny Saturday morning in June of 1922, Walther Rathenau, the German minister for Foreign Affairs, left his house in the outskirts of Berlin and sat in the back of his open-top coupe on his way to his office. A few minutes later, a dark gray car peeled off a side street and blocked his car. Two young men in long leather coats leaned out of the car. One shot him five times while the other threw a hand grenade which blew his car off the road.

What prompted this vicious attack? Rathenau was a successful German businessman and journalist. His family was a German enlightenment success story – his father a leading industrialist in 19th century Germany and Walther took over the business shortly before World War I. “I am a German of Jewish origin,” he wrote. “My people are the German people, my home is Germany, my faith is German faith, which stands above all denominations.” Following the war Germany was in tatters, the country devastated by the impact of the war and the oppressive terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The Weimar government was already unpopular at the time, but it was one sentence Rathenau had written in an essay years earlier garnered the attention of his assassins: “Three hundred men, all of whom know one another, guide the economic destinies of the Continent...” Rathenau was criticizing the oligarchical business tactics that were common in that period in Europe, but others saw in that essay a reference far more sinister: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

The Protocols purports to share the notes of the leader of a secret cabal of Jews who seek to orchestrate total world domination. Its genesis is found in a novel called Biarritz published in 1868 by a scandal-mongering trash-novelist named Hermann Goedsche. The anti-Semitic novel describes a meeting held every hundred years by twelve princes of the

tribes of Israel who report on the progress of their plan to take over the world. A French author named Maurice Joly took the idea and expanded it into what was eventually plagiarized by Sergei Nilus in 1905 and passed on years later to the Russian secret police. After World War I and the Russian Revolution, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion swept through Russia and then the world.

The Protocols was quickly debunked and proved a forgery. A book of lies. And who believed them? Millions. Henry Ford said: "they fit with what is going on."

Adolph Hitler lavished praise on the Protocols in Mein Kampf, arguing that the allegations of its forgery were simply Jewish propaganda and proof of the cover-up. Within ten years, the Nazi party made the Protocols required reading in Germany's public schools, instructing readers, "... to study the terrifying avowal of the Elders of Zion, and to compare them with the boundless misery of our people; and then to draw the necessary conclusions."

The story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is just one in a long chain of conspiracy theories leveled against the Jewish people. In the medieval period, Jews were believed to be in league with the Devil, conspiring to plot against Christians with arcane knowledge and Black Magic. Jews were accused of poisoning the wells in the Black Plague, of kidnapping Christian children to use their blood in baking matzah, and more.

Why do people believe these conspiracy theories? Why are we so drawn to lies and falsehoods? All of us at times embrace things that aren't true. We lie to each other, we lie to ourselves. What is there in our psyche that leads us to dive down the rabbit hole?

Our world is extraordinarily complex, the scope and speed of change can be overwhelming, and to so many it seems we have less and less power to control our fate and our future.

There are two ways to greet the rapid changes we confront. We can approach new realities with curiosity and anticipation, imagining all the exciting possibilities that await us in the future.

Most of the time, however, we greet those new realities with anxiety and deep concern, imagining all the perils that await us in the uncertain future.

We can't underestimate the power of fear. Fear emanates from the very core of our spiritual selves. And what is there in human experience that often makes us most afraid? It's when we feel like we're powerless or we've lost control, when it feels like there are dangerous forces out there from which we cannot protect ourselves.

All of us can think of moments when we faced that kind fear, and in the past year, many of us have felt that fear acutely. The novel coronavirus presents an illness we are just beginning to understand and that we are just learning how to treat. It has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, and many who survive find themselves weakened and debilitated. And beyond that are the millions more who have suffered from economic calamity and collapse.

So many look at the world changing around us with deep apprehension and fear. Everything we thought was solid is shaken. The local factory that sustained the city is closed. Storms and flood; drought and fires, economic stagnation or calamity seem to be unstoppable. Lying in bed, awake at night, we wonder how we will care for our families, pay the bills, keep ourselves safe.

I imagine the Israelites, camped in the desert at Mount Sinai, lay awake too. It had been weeks since anyone had seen God or Moses. Where would they go? Who would protect them?

So someone gets an idea. You know, back in Egypt, we broke our backs to make statues of gods they said controlled our lives. Maybe we should make one too. So everyone starts bringing their gold earrings to Aaron, and he fashions a golden calf. You start hearing the cries: "This is your God, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt." Do you believe them? Wouldn't it be better to know that a god, any god, was there to protect you, to guide you in the wilderness, to bring you to the promised land to live in safety and freedom.

Fear activates the deepest part of our psyche, and animates the deepest recesses of the soul. Fear creates a spiritual pain from which we will do nearly anything to escape.

The antidote to fear is power. And knowledge is power. So if we can replace our confusion with clarity, and our bafflement with knowledge, then we feel like we have regained some sense of control. "When we can't be in control ourselves, we'll settle for thinking someone (or something) is in the driver's seat. Psychologists call this compensatory control."

Rob Brotherton in his book *Suspicious Minds* explains that there are two ways we compensate when we seek knowledge to overcome our fear. One is to believe we have a powerful ally out there, fighting for us in ways we cannot see. The other is to believe we have a powerful enemy that is the cause of all our problems. "The thing we want to avoid above all else is seeing the world as haphazard," Brotherton writes. If things happen to us because of pure chance, we have little hope of comprehending, predicting, and controlling our fate. Believing that someone somewhere is in control – even if they don't have your best interests at heart – is preferable to thinking that the course of your life is dictated by nothing more than chance." Is it any wonder then that we love superheroes and James Bond who battle the great global conspiracies that threaten to take over the world, or that millions of people believe that

“Q” will expose the cabal of satan-worshipping pedophiles who control the media, Hollywood, and restore the world to utopia?

Another way we compensate for our sense of impotence is by pretending to knowledge we don't really don't have. In his book *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols describes the Dunning-Kruger Effect, whereby the less we know about something, the more confidence we express in what we think we know. We choose willful ignorance and see ignorance as a virtue. We bat away expertise – “what do those eggheads know anyways?” - and then dismiss experts as elitist. When scientists and scholars share uncomfortable truths that make us afraid, we look for reasons to debunk their claims, impugn their motives, and ignore their warnings.

In the age of the internet and unlimited cable television, we all fall prey to confirmation bias, the compulsion to find validation for what we want to believe is true. We can always find a website or an article that reassures us that what we want to be right is right. Our identities become so caught up in our beliefs, that as psychologist Jonathan Haidt observed, “when facts conflict with our values, almost everyone finds a way to stick with their values and reject the evidence.” We would rather shoot the messenger than grapple with the message. We doubt the science, rather than doubt ourselves.

Our arrogance, conceit, and self-righteousness leads us to cancel out those who profess ideas we don't want to hear – in university lecture halls and in the halls of government. The only truth-tellers we listen to are the ones who make us feel good, who tell us only what we want to hear, even if the truths they profess to tell are patently proven to be false.

But what happens when we live in a society where we abandon truth as a primary value? What happens when we no longer believe that veracity matters?

Truth is not just the bond that holds free societies together – truth is the bond that ties our people to our God. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel learned from the Kotzker Rebbe, Menachem Mendl: “The meaning of living was found in commitment to Truth as the infallible standard for all decisions. The central issue is not Truth in terms of a doctrine, but veracity, honesty, or sincerity in terms of personal existence.”

Truth, honesty, integrity are the atoms that create molecules of trust, that form the bonds that create the living structures of holy life. When societies and relationships are built on lies, they crumble and disintegrate under the weight of their falsehoods, leaving bloodshed and rubble in their wake.

Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exist.” Power built on falsehood is a profane power – which may offer immediate comfort but is founded in greed, selfishness, hatred, and evil. Holy power is built on truth - on integrity, generosity, justice, and love.

The falsehoods on which we build our lives are no more capable of saving us than the golden calf we worshipped in the wilderness. And our profession of falsehood our tradition teaches is likewise the greatest of sins.

We can lie to investors and our business partners, but eventually our crooked schemes collapse in ruin.

We can lie to our spouses and our families, but eventually our unhappiness, or worse, infidelity, will destroy our marriages.

We can lie to ourselves about how the Coronavirus spreads, but our willful ignorance leads to infection, illness, death.

We can lie to ourselves about climate change and the perils of global warming, but our resistance to change will continue to alter the planet's climate, bringing ever more devastating drought, storms, sea rise, poverty and migration.

If we are to truly redeem our society, if we are to truly redeem ourselves, then we have to resolve to be champions for truth. We can no longer be complacent with a world that normalizes falsehood, denigrates truth, ridicules the quest for knowledge, and sneers at expertise.

How can we begin again to be champions of truth? It's about cultivating the humility to accept how much we really don't know, when we renounce willful ignorance and instead embrace an openness and readiness to learn. We champion truth when we are willing to subject our pre-conceptions to the rigors of investigation and analysis. We champion truth when we resist the temptation to salve our wounded spirits with easy demonizations and scapegoats of the other. We champion truth when we listen carefully and critically and with respect to those who have devoted their lives to developing expertise and experience we cannot possibly pretend to know.

In this New Year, 5781, in this time when so much is at stake, let the sounding of the shofar inspire within us the faith and courage to admit the hard truths: we're scared, we're anxious, we made errors in judgment, we hurt people, we believed in things that aren't true, we were weak, we made poor choices, we have to change. Let us call us to banish falsehood from our world, and to embrace the truths we have learned from God for centuries, that love

and justice, knowledge and wisdom, are what will lead us toward a promised land of holiness and peace.