

A Better Way to Seek the Truth

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Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, MD

Maybe it was a reason for hope. I never expected it to happen. On August 3, Rakefet Ginsburg, CEO and Executive Director of the Masorti/Conservative movement in Israel, met with Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, ultra-Orthodox head of Yeshivat Har Bracha, and his wife Inbal, at their home in the heart of the West Bank. It was not a meeting to change minds. Neither party expected to convince the other they were right or wrong. It was just a conversation, a three-hour conversation to acknowledge the humanity, the yearnings, the sincerely held beliefs of the other. It was an attempt to begin to bridge a divide. And perhaps it is an opportunity to imagine how courageous leaders – and we ourselves – might somehow redirect our political, religious, and family discourse away from the crash-course we seem to be on.

You may have heard how, on Tisha B'Av – ironically, the day marking the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as punishment for the sin of *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred – a group of ultra-Orthodox youth from an organization called Liba disrupted egalitarian prayer services in Ezrat Yisrael. Ezrat Yisrael is the small area, far away and out of sight of the “regular” Kotel plaza, where egalitarian worship is permitted. On that night, a woman was chanting Lamentations for a Conservative *minyan*, and the group came in with portable walls, set up a *mechitza*, and began singing in an effort to drown out the service. To their credit, many Israeli political leaders, including President Buji Herzog and others, condemned this group's actions. And so did Rabbi Melamed, which was a big surprise.

Recall that in 2016, a deal was brokered by Natan Sharansky, then head of the Jewish Agency, between the American non-Orthodox movements, the Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation, and Women of the Wall, to turn that makeshift space into a permanent structure for non-Orthodox prayer with an entrance near the main Kotel plaza. In exchange for official recognition of that space, all agreed that the rest of the plaza would officially become an Orthodox synagogue supervised by the rabbi of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, where the prohibitions against women gathering, singing, reading Torah, or wearing *tallit* or *tefillin* would be enforced. At the time, we celebrated the compromise; we got and we gave in the name of Jewish unity and pluralism.

But there was a backlash. The ultra-Orthodox media described the compromise as a “declaration of war.” And in 2017, the Haredi members of the governing coalition forced Prime Minister Netanyahu to freeze implementation of the deal.

The average American has a hard time understanding what all the fuss is about. You may know the story of the American journalist who heard about an old rabbi who visited the Kotel twice each day for over 50 years. She decided to check out the story and went to watch him one afternoon, standing for 45 minutes in the back while he prayed. When the rabbi left the plaza, the journalist introduced herself.

“I understand, dear Rabbi, that you have been coming to this place to pray for more than 50 years. What, may I ask, do you pray for each day?” The Rabbi explained that he prays for peace between Jews and Arabs, peace among Jews, happiness and prosperity for all. And the journalist asked how it feels to have been praying so fervently for 50 years at Judaism’s holiest site.

“It feels,” the Rabbi explained, “like I have been talking to wall!”

In America, we have Orthodox synagogues and Conservative and Reform and Reconstructing and unaffiliated synagogues, and everyone prays peacefully in their own way in their own spaces. But, to paraphrase Natan Sharansky, nobody tries inserting written requests to God into the cracks of our American synagogues; there is only one Kotel. And it isn’t just a pile of stones. The Kotel is the top destination for every Jew who visits Israel. I remember fielding the questions on our own trips: When are we going to the Kotel already? It is a monument to Jewish history, a symbol of national Jewish identity.

And the disagreement has an air of zero-sum game. Which version of Judaism are we going to promote – mine or yours? I don’t understand yours and we can’t have both. That’s the mindset behind the stinging things some have said – when they call Conservative and Reform “counterfeit” or “idolaters” or “clowns who stab the Torah.” In their minds, they are protecting Truth (with a capital “T”), something we talk about a lot during the Days of Awe.

On this day, [we say in Unetaneh Tokef,] Your sovereignty is celebrated. Your throne is established with kindness and you sit upon it in Truth. EMET, it is true that you are the Judge and the Prosecutor and the Expert and the Witness, who writes and seals and enumerates and counts and remembers

Emet. What is Truth? How do we know Truth? Who gets to decide what is Falsehood and what is Truth? This day is all about affirming Truth. And if there is only one Truth. ...

It isn’t just ultra-Orthodox Jews who claim to possess absolute Truth. It doesn’t matter which political party you support; approximately 50% of voters in this country believe you voted the wrong way. And neither “they” nor “we” can understand why. Do they not know what I know? Do they not care about what is right and good and just? Are they just bad people?

Think about all the seemingly innocent words and phrases that have become politically charged and dangerously divisive. End Racism. Be inclusive. Proclaim Liberty. Black Lives Matter. Blue Lives Matter. Follow the science. Choose life. Protect my body. Support Israel. Peace Process. Palestinian Rights. Two states for two peoples. Each of these phrases espouses Truth. And each, when interpreted in certain ways by certain groups, becomes acrimonious and contentious.

Or personal relationships that have gone sour. Is it always the other person who must take the first step? Do they always have to admit they were wrong and I was right, or is there another way?

That is what made the meeting between Rabbi Melamed and Rakefet Ginsburg so extraordinary. It came about after Ms. Ginsburg called Rabbi Melamed to thank him for comments he had made in support of the Ezrat Yisrael arrangement. “Since there are many Jews who identify with the Conservative and Reform movements,” he wrote in part, “and ... they arrange for themselves common prayers for men and women in a style and with rules that are not according to the *halacha* ... it would be right that in the Ezrat Yisrael section they should be able to hold their prayers with due respect.”

Rabbi Melamed did not concede his interpretation of Jewish law; he did not concede his Truth or legitimize our approaches to worship. He simply acknowledged that the Jewish world is a family bigger than any one faction. God is bigger than any one understanding of Truth. And we have to understand what a difficult concept that is. For an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who fervently believes his way is the right way. ... It took incredible courage. And we must take note.

It reminds me of a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevya the Milkman is chatting away with the men of the town when Perchik, the radical and worldly student from Kiev, happens upon them. “Why are you talking about your provincial matters?” Perchik asks condescendingly. “You should know what’s going on in the outside world!”

Mordcha the inn-keeper responds, “Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head.”

Tevya looks at Perchik and proclaims, “He’s right. As the Good Book says, ‘If you spit it the air it lands in your face.’”

But Perchik does not concede. “Nonsense,” he says. “You can’t close your eyes to what’s happening in the world.” And Tevya looks back at his friends and proclaims, “He’s right.”

At which point Avram the bookseller has had enough. “He’s right and he’s right?” he asks. “They can’t both be right.”

Tevye looks at him for a second, thinks, and responds, “You know? You’re also right.”

You’re also right. My question this morning is: Is there room for this pluralistic approach to Truth in other areas? Is there a way to affirm my beliefs without delegitimizing the other? Is there a way to learn, to encounter, to engage those with whom I disagree without betraying my own values? Is every person who holds a different view really dangerous or heretical or “disastrous”? Is there hope for our relationships beyond the zero-sum polarity of: “I am right or you are right, but one of us is categorically wrong”? Our Rabbinic tradition suggests the answer is yes.

A *midrash*¹ expounds on the letters that make the words “*emet*/truth” and “*sheker*/falsehood.” The three letters of *emet* – *aleph*, *mem*, *taf* – each rest on two legs, while the three letters of *sheker*/falsehood – *shin*, *kuf*, *resh* – each have only one leg. Truthful actions stand firm; actions based on falsehoods do not. Furthermore, says the *midrash*, the letters of *emet* are far apart – *aleph* is the first

¹ Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis 3

letter in the alphabet, *mem* the middle letter, and *taf* the last one – while the letters of *sheker* are bunched together – these are three of last four letters of the alphabet. Truth is hard to attain, while falsehood is readily at hand.

Falsehood emerges from “group-think.” It is easy. But you have to look beyond your safe zone to acquire Truth/*emet*. Falsehood is partisan. Truth needs more. One who seeks Truth must have the humility to hear ideas from the other side.

What happened to change Rabbi Melamed’s view on Reform and Conservative worship at the Kotel? How could someone who so disapproves of our approach to Jewish law come to laud our efforts to fight assimilation, strengthen Jewish identity and advance *tikkun olam*? Why is he willing to speak with the non-Orthodox when his colleagues are not?

The story as reported in *Israel Hayom* goes back to November, 2020, when he met my colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous in Los Angeles. *Newsweek* once called Rabbi Brous one of the most influential rabbis in America. But she has written and spoken critically about Israeli policies towards Palestinians on the West Bank. And Rabbi Melamed visited her because he was angry. He looked Rabbi Brous in the eyes, wagged his finger, and said, “You are hurting me. I’m a settler and I live near Nablus. I’m a man of *halacha* and a very moral man, and you are calling me evil.”

And Rabbi Brous froze. She looked at the rabbi for a long time, and then began a conversation. They discussed things about which they did not agree. And then Rabbi Brous said, “Rabbi Melamed, the next time I’m in Israel, I want to spend a day or two visiting you and your wife Inbal at Har Brakha. I’d truly like to get to know you and listen to what you have to say. I don’t know if I’ll change my mind, but at least we’ll get to know each other.”

To paraphrase Yitzhak Rabin, *alav hashalom*, you can’t create Truth with just your friends. You have to take risks. You have to accept the possibility that you might learn something even from your adversary.

The ancient Rabbis spoke of “*shivim panim la-Torah*, seventy faces, seventy interpretations of Torah.” They said the Torah was given in 70 different languages. And you have to understand – for them, 70 is like a million. There are 70 nations in the world, 70 languages. “70 faces” amounts to a concession that there are an infinite number of paths, an infinite number of ways to uncover God’s absolute Truth.

The Talmud records how for three years, the schools of Hillel and Shamai debated, with each side proclaiming “*halakha k’moteinu*, the law follows our interpretation.” Until a Heavenly Voice proclaimed, “אלו דברי אלהים חיים, Both sides are speaking words of the Living God, והלכה כבית הלל, but the law accords with the school of Hillel.”

Now, the Talmud asks: If both sides speak Truth, then why does the law follow Hillel? The reason is because the school of Hillel was humble enough to teach their views together with those of

Shamai. Moreover, the Talmud continues, they taught the views of Shamai first, before teaching their own. Truth requires an understanding of all sides of the argument.

But still, there is only one law. There aren't an infinite number of ways to observe Shabbat or recite the Shema. And if there is only one law and there is no pope-like authority who can interpret it with infallible certainty, what are individual practitioners to do?

The 1st-century sage Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria suggests we must try harder. “עשה אזנך כאפרכסת, Make your ear a hopper to take in the teachings of those who say “unclean” together with those who say “clean”, those who prohibit together with those who permit. Because it is all Torah. It is all God's word. As the Torah states, “*Va-yedaber Elohim et kol had'varim ha-eleh*, God spoke **all** these words.”

The principle is not restricted to Jewish law. Political debates, interpreting scientific data, creating public policy. ... We have to temper our claim to Truth with humility. Sometimes I have to contemplate the possibility that even when I win, I might not be completely right; or at least that the other guy might not be completely wrong. As Brad Hirschfeld put it in his book *Finding Faith without Fanaticism*, “you don't have to be wrong for me to be right.” Think about that.

At one point during the negotiations over the Kotel, someone asked Natan Sharansky who was the real enemy in the crisis. He could have blamed politicians, religious leaders, rabble rousers. But Sharansky laid the blame elsewhere. The enemy is “Arrogance,” he said. “This sense, from so many battle stations, that we know we are better than you, that we chose a better path than you ... and therefore don't need you anymore...”. Arrogance leads to delegitimization. And we all do it. Who among us has never feigned an inability to understand how someone could possibly support “that” position? But that is not Truth. Arrogance in pursuit of *Emet*/Truth will bring us only *Sheker*/Falsehood.

You may know the passage from Pirkei Avot: “כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, any controversy for the sake of Heaven will have lasting value, while controversy not for the sake of Heaven will not endure.” There are many interpretations of what constitutes a controversy for the sake of Heaven, but the best comes from Professor Raphael Jospe, who suggests that an argument for the sake of Heaven is an argument that cannot be resolved. “An argument which is not for the sake of heaven, for example, when a person sues another person for a debt, has to be resolved by the court...”, Jospe writes. “But when the argument is for the sake of Heaven, there is no winner and there is no loser. The truth can never be closed; it must always continue to be sought through the open exchange of diverse views.”

That, to me, is the challenge of navigating our polarized world. In family squabbles as in political debates, we want there to be a final-status agreement. We want there to be a definitive fight. We want our Truth to win. We yearn for the day when Isaiah's promise will be fulfilled “when all peoples will go and say ‘Come, let us go up to the Mount of Adonai ... where we will all walk in God's paths.’” We dream Zechariah's dream, that someday “Adonai will reign over all the earth; *bayom ha-hu*, on that day, *yih'yeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad*, Adonai will be one and God's name, God's Truth one.”

But we are not there yet. And until then, the question is: can we find another way? Can we reach out to those with whom we disagree? Can we muster the strength to see and hear and love the other? Can we trade our crash course of division and mistrust for a new path of understanding and love?

Can we come to accept that our Truth, my Truth is dependent on the validity, the humanity, the legitimacy of the Other? For as we say in our liturgy on this holy day, when God sits on the Throne of Truth and opens the Book of Truth, וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ, God will find the seal of **every** human hand. Shanah Tovah.