



## A Modern Orthodox Congregation

### Message from Up High

I'm currently seated on a JetBlue flight with no available cell phone service. Takeoff has been delayed (but my grandchildren will be sleeping by the time I arrive, so I'm not in any rush). Hence, I will use the tranquility of the moment to relax and jot down a few meaningful thoughts.

Truth is no longer an absolute. It has been redefined to support the arguments on each side of the partisan divide. As an example: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address on the Iranian nuclear program is just the latest foray into this new trend. No one really cared that he showcased a half ton of material proving Iran's lies. Instead, his proofs were categorically dismissed. The United Nations, European Union, John Kerry, and the anti-Israel lobby all state that the claims of Netanyahu are nothing new and the Iranians are living up to their commitments. Only Mike Pompeo and the current administration are standing by the report.

Abu Mazin, otherwise known as Mahmoud Abbas, proved once again that he is an anti-semitic who spouts falsehoods. He stated last week that the Holocaust was not a fabrication, rather it was a premeditated plan by the Zionists to settle the land of Israel with Jews. He claims that the Zionists were in cahoot with the Nazis and happily supported the murder of Jews. He then went on to agree that some Jews perished, but only one million and not the inflated Zionist/Jewish conspiracy theory of six million. Thankfully he had pushback, but nonetheless his fictitious revision of history was portrayed by some as fact.

Am I making my case? I think that the current version of truth is often a cocktail full of surprises - three quarters fiction mixed with a tantalizing dash of honesty to create an element of intrigue and believability. My words clearly are not earth shattering. This feels like the new reality, and yet people have always fabricated the truth. Wasn't Adam convinced to eat from the tree of life through the deception of his wife and the snake? When God asked Cain where his brother was, did he honestly not know the answer? When asked by Jacob, did Joseph's brother really not know what happened? Did they justifiably create a tale to assuage their guilt and pacify their father? Did Pharaoh really intend to let the Jews out after each of the ten plagues? Don't we go to shul on Yom Kippur and ask God for forgiveness by promising him we will change our ways? The ability to lie with ease seems embedded in the human DNA. It seems that remembering the truth is sometimes more difficult than creating a false narrative.

Sadly, it appears that to a large extent we have come to terms with the inevitability of living with dishonesty. Our moral indignation blows hot and cold and we become morally outraged only when the lies impact our cocooned lives. As a Jew and a Zionist, we are upset at the blatant hypocrisy and outright distortion of facts when the subject matter depicts Israel in a negative light. But if we are only selectively indignant, then are we any better than those for whom we hold contempt?

Last Shabbat I attended services at Kehilath Jeshurun, often referred to as KJ, on the Upper East Side. I was retold a story that the emeritus Rabbi, Haskel Lookstein, shared with his congregation numerous times. He told of an impoverished woman who brought a chicken to his grandfather to ask if it was kosher. The young Rabbi Lookstein was studying with his grandfather and was asked what he thought. He immediately said that unfortunately the chicken was 'treif' (ritually unkosher) and could not be eaten. His grandfather called him into his study and showed him various rabbinic responsa that indicated that in this given situation there was indeed room to be lenient. Rabbi Lookstein repeats this story to highlight that often we are so certain that what we think is the absolute truth that we can't imagine there could be other options.

Truth is not an absolute. I may have my version of what I sincerely believe to be the truth, but I understand that while I may find it difficult to comprehend an alternative, that doesn't eliminate the possibility that one exists. Religion is mankind's pursuit for the absolute truth. In the Shema prayer we conclude with the words *Hashem elokeichem emet* - God, our God, is truth. Hidden in this message is the idea that only Hashem, God, who exemplifies truth, has no alternative to His absoluteness.

Please don't misconstrue my thoughts as promoting an acceptance of that which is inherently perverse. There are lies that are exactly that - lies. There are wrongs that have no moral standing. There is an evil that promulgates a society with an ideology that is repugnant and has no moral clarity. There can be no excusing the Hitlers, Stalins, Arafats, Abu Mazins, or Ahmadinejads of this world. And accepting the possibility of alternative truths does not mean I must give up my personal resolve and passion. Being open minded and accepting of others should never negate my right to my thoughts, values, and ideals. The Golden Rule concludes with the Hebrew word *kamocho* suggesting that my love of others should never undermine the admiration I have for my own opinions and thoughts. Moreover, the ability to accept the opinions of others is built on the notion that one has the highest regard for their own opinion.

Of course, these hypotheses are merely my own thoughts on this matter. It is not divinely inspired, and everyone is entitled to disagree. As we begin the final countdown to Shavuot we must ensure that the gift of the Torah is a legacy that keeps on giving. Our sages interpret the words: the heavens are the domain of Hashem and earth is the domain of man, as mankind's jurisdiction over Hashem's Torah. Torah is not meant to be placed in an ark for its splendor to be perused from a distance. On the contrary, it is meant to be used, to become ours. We are to toil in its meaning and perhaps often make mistakes. It is meant to allow for diverse opinions that are based on a pursuit of truth. The Talmud may be at the crossroad of modernity. It pursues truth by promoting a dialogue encouraging disagreement instead of stating there is only one truth and our aim must be to find it. It says *elu v'elu divrei Elokim*

*chayim*. All opinions, even the contradictory ones, are the words of the living God. It is the divine mission of God to give us a gift that can constantly be interpreted and reinterpreted. The ultimate dishonesty is perpetrated by those who claim that only they and their opinions are truthful.

The turbulence is getting rough and I imagine that it just might be a message from above telling me I wrote more than enough.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Jack Engel