

*Al Sh'losha D'varim*  
November 20, 2020

“It’s time to put away the harsh rhetoric. To lower the temperature. To see each other again. To listen to each other again. To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans. The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season — a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow. And a time to heal. This is the time to heal in America.”<sup>1</sup>

For many of us, President-Elect Joe Biden’s acceptance speech two weeks ago was a welcome departure from the negative, angry, divisive language of this extraordinary election. Biden’s words were hopeful and gracious as he called on all of us to reach across the aisle, to stop demonizing one another and start working together. Since Election Day, we have heard many religious and political leaders on the Left making similar arguments, calling for reconciliation, understanding, healing, and unity.

Believe me, I want all of those things too. I want to live in a country where respect, kindness, compromise, and decency are the norm and not the aberration. I want to live in a country where no matter which political party we belong to, we all feel that the government represents rather than resents us, where what we share far outweighs how we differ. But I think we can all agree that we’re not there yet. And I would argue that before we can heal, we have a lot more work to do. Before the reconciling must come the reckoning. Rabbi Sharon Brous puts it well: “Reconciliation is possible. But peace, unity, healing—these are the last steps in a long, transformative process. There are no shortcuts. Anything short of a real, honest reckoning does violence to the truth, fuels injustice, and endangers us and our future.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/article/biden-speech-transcript.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ikar.org/sermons/a-time-to-heal-not-so-fast-rabbi-sharon-brous/>

Rabbi Brous is reflecting here on a teaching from Pirkei Avot. Pirkei Avot teaches that “*Al shlosha d’varim ha’olam omeid* -- the world stands upon three things.” There are the famous three we all know from the song - Torah, Avodah, and G’milut Chasadim - study, service, and acts of loving kindness. That trifecta is attributed to a certain early sage named Shimon the Righteous (Pirkei Avot 1:2). But a different Shimon, Shimon ben Gamliel, who served as the head of the Jewish community just before the destruction of the Temple, has a different set of three. He says,

עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם:

The world stands upon three things: *din*, judgment, *emet*, truth, and *shalom*, peace (1:18). *Din*, judgment, refers either to God’s judgment or, more likely in this context, to a fair judicial system, that is, “rendering the innocent innocent and the guilty guilty” (Bartenura on Avot 1:18). Maimonides suggests that *din* is “the administration of a country with fairness.” The world can only survive, according to Shimon ben Gamliel, if justice is carried out. For justice to be done, we need *emet*, truth. Without truth, there can be no trust, and without trust there can be no relationships other than the most superficial or transactional. Valuing truth, by the way, does not mean that we think one person or one side knows the whole truth and everyone else is wrong. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory said, “In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths.”<sup>3</sup> But just because our human limitations prevent us from full understanding doesn’t mean that truth itself does not exist or that the pursuit of truth isn’t valuable. Indeed, rejecting falsehoods, striving to be honest with ourselves and with others, is a vital part of Judaism. “God’s seal is truth,” the Talmud tells us, and when we strive to

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Dignity of Difference*

understand and tell the truth, we draw closer to the Divine. We also make this world livable.

It's significant that in Shimon ben Gamliel's list, it's only after judgment and truth that we find *shalom*. We might like to skip over the first two because *shalom* feels so good. Judgment, especially when we're the ones being judged, is uncomfortable, and truth can be just as unpleasant whether we are telling it or hearing it. But peace without judgment and truth is not really peace. As the prophet Jeremiah cried, "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (6:13-14). Or as a more modern prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice."

Before we get to peace, we must journey through judgment and truth. You may remember in the 1990s, when South Africa was trying to move on after apartheid ended, they created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairperson of the commission writes, "We could not make the journey from a past marked by conflict, injustice, oppression, and exploitation to a new and democratic dispensation characterised by a culture of respect for human rights without coming face to face with our recent history."<sup>4</sup> Through a process of uncovering the truth by collecting and recording the testimonies of victims and perpetrators, the commission laid bare the atrocities that were committed with the hope that a new future could be built. As Tutu writes, "Reconciliation is not about being cosy; it is not about pretending that things

---

<sup>4</sup> TRC Report, Volume 1, Chapter 1, pg. 5.

were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last.”<sup>5</sup>

The Commission not only demanded the truth about South African leaders’ actions, it was also clear about the judgment of those actions. Again, from Archbishop Tutu:

“We have sought to carry out our work to the best of our ability, without bias. I cannot, however, be asked to be neutral about apartheid. It is an intrinsically evil system. But I am even-handed in that I will let an apartheid supporter tell me what he or she sincerely believed moved him or her, and what his or her insights and perspectives were; and I will take these seriously into account in making my finding. I do believe that there were those who supported apartheid who genuinely believed that it offered the best solution to the complexities of a multiracial land with citizens at very different levels of economic, social and educational development. I do not doubt that many who supported apartheid believed that it was the best policy in the circumstances to preserve their identity, language and culture and those of other peoples as well. I do believe such people were not driven by malicious motives.... No, I do not call their motives into question. I do, however, condemn the policy they applied.”<sup>6</sup>

Tutu highlights here that truth and judgment can and should co-exist: Tutu strives to understand the complicated motives and beliefs of those who upheld apartheid without demonizing them, but also without ignoring or denying the evil of that system.

---

<sup>5</sup> TRC Vol. 1, Ch. 1, pg. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 13-14.

We do not live in South Africa, and as deep as the divide between blue states and red states is, we still do not live in an apartheid state. But I do think the example of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is instructive. Before we can heal the divisions in our country, we all have to agree to tell the truth about what has happened, demand that our leaders tell the truth about what has happened, and then we have to try to understand why it happened. Children were separated from their parents and put into actual cages. White supremacists have been emboldened. Trust in science, journalism, and democracy has been eroded. 250,000 Americans have died from a virus that some people still think is a hoax. And too many people feel left behind or left out of this country's promise of success and abundance. How did we get to this place, where it really does feel as though we live not in two different countries, but in two different realities?

I wish I knew. But if we are ever to reach the promised land of one United States of America, we're going to have to figure it out. Figuring it out will not be easy, and it will not be quick, but at least we have a roadmap: *Al shlosha d'varim ha'olam omeid*: The world stands upon three things: judgment, truth, and peace. May we live to see all three made real - in this country and in the world.