

Truth, Unto Its Outermost Consequences
Rosh HaShanah Day 2, 5780

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.

Those words were spoken fifty-five years ago as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before a crowd in Stockholm, Sweden to accept the Nobel Peace Prize (December 10, 1964). He was speaking to a world which was actively warring over the notion that because all people were created equal, they should receive equal treatment under the law and in society. Dr. King was engaged in a battle for the soul of truth. He was standing up and holding onto an idea that it **MUST** be true that all people are equally deserving of rights, representation, services, respect, and a place in our society in a world which tried to deny the truth of those claims.

But I have been mulling over the idea of an “unarmed truth” for months. How do we use truths or pieces of the truth as weapons to fight our battles; battles for respect, battles for power and status, battles for our causes and our world? How is it that we each, daily, prepare ourselves for battle by arming ourselves with our own truths?

A few decades after Dr. King spoke his powerful words, I had my own introduction to the idea of what truth really means a large room, not unlike this one, with almost a thousand other young people to begin one of our first big

adult milestones together: freshman orientation. It was my first official day at Brandeis University, and after moving into a tiny cement dorm and locating my one friend from Milwaukee, I made my way with everyone else to a giant lecture hall inside the Kutz Graduate Academic Building to figure out what we were supposed to do next.

And as we each took our seats I saw a giant banner with the Brandeis logo and the words “Truth, unto its innermost parts” just behind the young man from Student Life who was leading our orientation. At the time, I thought to myself, “Hey, that’s a good motto for a school. We SHOULD be in the process of seeking out truth at a place of learning.”

What I didn’t know then is that this motto, which is always found on the Brandeis logo under the Hebrew word אמת (*emet*), meaning truth, was not chosen by accident. For those of you unfamiliar with Brandeis, it was founded in 1948, the same year as the state of Israel. One of the main reasons for its creation in the city of Boston, which was already replete with fine institutions of higher learning, was that Jewish students at that time were largely barred from entering the Ivy League schools, most notably Harvard University.

Since 1878, the motto of Harvard University has been *veritas*, the Latin for “truth.” And so Brandeis University’s founders, looking to establish their

institution amongst the elite schools of the 1940s, took a deliberate dig at Harvard's then hypocritical and discriminatory elitism and made its own motto a Hebrew version of Harvard's Latin motto.

Now thankfully, things have changed a great deal at Harvard and the vast majority of our nation's colleges and universities, but the idea of a school, whose very essence was supposed to be devoted to the pursuit of truth, but whose practices denied the now obvious truth that Jews, people of color, immigrants, and a whole host of other minorities could be just as smart, talented, capable, and extraordinary as their generally white, Christian counterparts was simply unthinkable to those incredible leaders who helped found Brandeis University. They were people like Albert Einstein, Abraham Sachar, and Leonard Bernstein. Even Eleanor Roosevelt served as one of the first members of the university's Board of Trustees. These visionaries believed they were not only creating a new learning community, but that they were doing something fundamentally different in education by encouraging all people to work together in the pursuit of truth.

I have since learned that there is a lot more to the Brandeis motto, אמת (*emet*), than I had learned in college. Besides the fact that the school's namesake, Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, was a tireless champion of truth, especially when it concerned Jews, minorities, those in need, and all those who

had been disenfranchised in American early in the 20th century, the phrase “Truth unto the innermost parts,” comes from Tanakh, specifically the Book of Psalms (51:8):

אִבְסַתֶּם חֲכָמָה תוֹדִיעֵנִי: הִן־אֱמֶת חֲפָצָךְ בְּטָחוֹת
*Indeed You desire truth unto the innermost parts;
teach me wisdom about secret things.*

Truth, as a virtue, has always been held up as an example of the goal for which we should strive. Two weeks ago, in this very building, we had a community forum with hundreds of people addressing the subject of truth, honesty, transparency and accountability within our government. Hundreds of people, from Kol Rinah and all around St. Louis, stood together with leaders of a dozen organizations and our elected County Council members, and talked about what it would take to make our government and our leaders truly and openly accountable us, their constituents. It was an incredible event, and a huge step forward in fighting for openness and honesty in our local and national government, but there is still so much to do in order to create a model of leadership in which decision making is accessible to, and influenced by, the desires of all members of the public.

On the face of it, we all agree that truth and an honest accounting of things, especially in our connections with other people, is what we should be striving for.

Or is it? We could probably all think of times where complete honesty is not warranted. In fact, our rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud, almost two millennia ago, had practical relatable examples of where honesty can be harmful. In Masechet Ketubot of the Babylonian Talmud, the schools of Hillel and Shammai argue this point in relation to how one greets a bride on the day of her wedding. The students of Shammai quote a verse from Exodus (23:7), מִדְּבַר-שָׁקֶר, תִּרְחֹק - "Keep far from lies," and so claim that one should compliment the bride based on her actual best qualities. The students of Hillel, however, reply that that is patently ridiculous. Every bride is beautiful on the day of their wedding, and we should shower them with praise, because the goal is to make them feel good, not to provide an honest analysis of their character.

We also know people, or have seen people, who describe themselves as a "straight shooter" who "tells it like it is," "doesn't pull any punches." While, at least in their minds, they are not hurtful or mean-spirited, they pride themselves on telling truths that may make others uncomfortable.

And isn't that what Rosh HaShanah is about? Aren't we encouraged, in fact required, as both individuals and a community, to give an honest accounting of our individual and collective deeds and misdeeds, of our success and where we have missed the mark, as we begin this New Year?

When we prize the truth, or at least our own perception of the truth, over the well-being and care of others, we sacrifice a living, breathing human on the altar of our ideals. We see this if we hearken back to Psalm 51:11-12, in which the Psalmist pleads with God:

*Hide Your face from my sins; blot out all my iniquities.
Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit.*

When we get the truth off our chests, we often feel clean, we feel like a weight has been lifted. But to place the clean, righteous feeling above the lives and needs of others is only exchanging one wrong for another.

It is, in fact, eerily similar to the way in which Abraham makes his way to sacrifice Isaac in the section of Torah we just read moments ago. Avraham believes that he is truly devoted to the Holy Blessed One, but fails to notice that the task he is being asked to undertake is precisely the sort of horrendous child sacrifice that was found in idol worship in the Ancient Near East and was explicitly prohibited in later Jewish ritual worship.

The Torah begins this story by telling us that God is testing Abraham, but perhaps it is not a test of his devotion to God, but rather a test of Abraham's devotion to the ethical ideals which he had championed throughout his life. This is the same patriarch who stood in the face of the Creator of the Universe to challenge God's seemingly callous and cruel decision to destroy even the innocent

residents of Sodom and Gemorrah, and reminded God of the truth that harming innocent people is never justifiable. And yet, in Abraham's desire to affirm his committed love of God, he forgets this truth, and subverts it to meet the needs of the day. Moreover, the fact that God sends an angel to deliver the message to Abraham that this is NOT the way, should remind us that truth should never come at the expense of the needs, safety, and feelings of the people around us.

Is it true that God desired for Abraham to kill his son? No, I do not and cannot believe so. In fact, I believe that the Judge of all Creation wanted Abraham to realize that the real task he was being asked to undergo was to pit the primary truth of Abraham's spiritual life, that he was in a loving, trusting relationship with the Holy Blessed One, against the equally powerful truth of Abraham's emotional life, that Abraham loved his family and children, for whom he had so long yearned. By doing this, God leads Abraham toward the realization that truth can be distorted so terribly that it becomes a weapon used to wound our hearts and souls.

Today, especially in an era of people touting that reality is "fake news" and that truth is a "hoax," we can see how truths are distorted to seem objectionable just as lies are twisted until they sound believable. But both our Jewish Tradition and our sense of justice remind us that certain things are objectively true, and

such truths should never be altered, hidden, corrupted, or confronted with lies. We should make it our mission, our guiding light to always seek truth, especially on a day like today in which we find ourselves longing to start the new year with a clean slate. The only way to come into this new year, as both individuals and as partners in this world, is to be radially honest and pursue truth in all its forms.

In a beautiful midrash from the Talmud (Masechet Shabbat 104a), our rabbis ask about the nature of truth in the Jewish collective mind, and explain its power using the very letters that comprise the word,

*“Why are the letters of the word sheker (שקר - lies) adjacent to one another in the alphabet, while the letters of emet (אמת - truth) are spread throughout the entire alef-bet? **That is because while falsehood is easily found, truth is found only with great difficulty.** And why do the letters that comprise the word sheker all stand on one foot, and the letters that comprise the word emet stand on bases that are wide like bricks? Because the truth stands eternal and falsehood does not stand eternal.”*

If you look at the Hebrew letters *shin*, *kof*, and *reish*, they all are shaped in such a way that, if you were writing on lined paper, they would touch that line on one point or an unstable curve, whereas the letters for truth, *alef*, *mem*, and *taf* all have two points at the bottom, like a person's two legs. The rabbis of the Talmud connect these shapes with meaning, linking the emotional, ethical stability that truth brings to our world with the firm shape of the letters that make up the word אמת (*emet*).

Telling the truth is difficult to achieve because absolute truth is sometimes hard to ascertain. We perceive our own version of truth as sacred, just as all people do, and it is incumbent upon each of us to constantly look at the world around us to see which things are facts and which are realities mixed with our own perceptions and feelings. Both are important and form our outlook of the world, but we need to be able to tell the difference. It is a fact that I have two arms; it is a feeling that holding my children in those arms is the best experience in the world.

But we do have ways to sort through the gray areas and the half-truths to build some sense of what is authentic. Another famous phrase appears in Psalm 51 to help clarify both the desire for clarity in life and a Jewish path toward achieving it:

אֲדֹנָי שְׂפָתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ:
O Lord, open my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise. (Psalm 51:17)

How do we know when our words and our thoughts are serving the goal of truth? When they connect with something larger than ourselves or our own interests. When someone angers you, do you confront them in order to make them feel ashamed, or do you take them aside in order to help them avoid hurting others in the future? When someone disagrees with your most deeply held ideas, do you berate them and antagonize them, or do you listen, attempt to

hear THEIR perception of the truth, and maybe open the door for them to hear yours?

In a world that constantly tries to tell us that nothing is true, that up is down and that bad is really good, if you only look at it the right way, we need to remember that some things are in fact real and irrefutable. This verse from Psalm 51, which three times a day precedes the Amidah, the central part of every service, is a cry longing to connect us each to something eternal and unchanging.

Both these words and the words of Dr. King push us to realize that unarmed truth and unconditional love are connected. We speak the truth so that we can express our love of others and our desire to help them and our world. We seek the truth to promote justice and equality in our world, and to fulfill the vision of what the One who fashioned each of us in love wants for us. And most of all, we rely on the truth to hold ourselves accountable to high ethical standards, to push ourselves to be better, kinder, more thoughtful and reasonable people, and to teach each of us to love ourselves.

I, too, believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final say in our time. I believe that sharing our truth while listening openly to the authentic experiences of others will not make us weaker, but stronger as

individuals and as a community. I believe that the world has too many shades of gray for any one of us to believe we always know best, and at the same time, there are those who take half-truths and use them for selfish ends.

Today, as we commemorate once again this day that the world was formed, as we move into a year which will likely be fraught with new ideas, new controversies, new arguments, and new challenges, I ask each of you to reach out and speak honestly, not only with those dear to you, but with everyone you can. Share your truth with others and let them learn from your experience. Listen to the call of the stranger, the one who is your neighbor, the one who, while different than you, is seeking the same life of safety, comfort, love and success that we all are.

As we enter into the year 5780, may we call out lies, proclaiming them false, even when they pain us. When we hear truths, may we accept and appreciate them, even as they run counter to what we thought we knew. And may we each, always, accept one another in unconditional love.

Shanah tova.