

A Very Narrow Bridge

Earlier this year, my wife and I took our very first vacation without our children. Our son is coming up on his 9th birthday which gives you an idea how much we were looking forward to this. We planned the trip months ahead and decided on Barcelona. A city full of the things we craved like architecture and museums. We visited the masterpieces of the architect, Antoni Gaudi, and we went to the Picasso museum. We ate leisurely at a late hour and woke up calmly to sit in a cafe reading while drinking our espressos. It was the perfect escape from children! While we were taking our time in the Picasso museum, Julie decided to try to help me understand the work of the artist. We spent time on a series of works based on a masterpiece by Diego Velasquez called “Las Meninas”.¹ While the original was classical renaissance style – very realistic, Picasso developed the characters and the setting using his own modernist style. He created hundreds of studies and developed each individual subject over and over again until he captured just what he was searching for. Each person in the original was still in the same location and the composition was the same but, beyond that, it was almost unrecognizable as a recreation of Las Meninas. Then, while we were talking about it, Julie said something that stuck with me. She said “Picasso is painting what he sees. He is not lying.” What an interesting way to think about the work of an artist. By the way, his full name is Pablo Diego Jose Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso. That has nothing to do with the rest of the sermon, I just think it's a pretty nifty fact and an unarguably cool name.

I had not thought to apply the word “lie” to the work of an artist but, if I’m being honest, I suppose that’s a pretty good word for how I felt about Picasso’s work. I can’t imagine that he looks at a human and sees their nose coming off the side of their face and their eyes placed in bizarre locations – so, transforming the outcome on the canvas feels a bit like a like.

¹ Picasso, Pablo. Las Meninas (1957). The Museu Picasso, Barcelona.
<http://www.bcn.cat/museupicasso/en/collection/mpb70-433.html>

When does creativity and imagination cross the line of truth? There's a lot of discussion today about truth and how important it is. What is the line between one presentation of truth and another's presentation of the same facts leaving us with a completely different narrative? Last year, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani famously said, "truth is *not* truth."² I understand and agree with exactly what he means even if I disagree with most of the rest of what he says.

Earlier this year, a group of us from Temple Sinai went to the city to see the Broadway play, The Lifespan of a Fact. It was a marvelous presentation of a very difficult matter. It portrays an epic battle based on a true story between an essayist and an earnest fact checker with the magazine's editor caught in the middle playing referee. The author wants to tell a powerful story of one teen's suicide that will reach far beyond this particular event and, like Picasso, he enriches the details to make the impact greater. He says, "I'm not interested in accuracy, I'm interested in truth." The fact checker on the other hand, played by Harry Potter - I mean Daniel Radcliffe - is concerned that modifying the seemingly-insignificant details undermines the piece and could hurt the readers who know (and care about) the discrepancies. Radcliffe's character would be deeply uncomfortable with letting details slide. The editor sees both sides of the valid argument. She understands both intellectually and emotionally that they are each correct and leaves us challenged, as well.

Picasso's art, the essay at the center of the show and matters of religion all share some important connections. There is an experience and an outcome which is the goal. Some amount of accuracy is sacrificed for the sake of "Truth." It is akin to the very narrow bridge that Rabbi Nachman writes about - on one side is the truth of details and accuracy, on the other, the truth of experience and mystery. We fall off either side of the bridge at our own great peril. If we try to intellectualize our faith, we're going to find that the details will get in the way. And, conversely, if we allow our faith to push aside our intellect, we're liable to slide into fanaticism. It is one

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² Kenny, Caroline. Rudy Giuliani says, "Truth is not Truth". August 19, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/19/politics/rudy-giuliani-truth-isnt-truth/index.html>

theme which led me to choose Milton Steinberg's classic novel, As a Driven Leaf,³ to explore this connection between this tension of Truth vs. Lies.

I recommended this book to you because I think the main character's struggle is primarily about truth and lies and it so powerfully reflects the challenge of most of us today. Like Elisha, the son of Abuya, we are all raised immersed in the formative input of our adult caregivers. Until we reach the age where we challenge authority, we assume that our guardians' opinions must be correct. Then, when it is time for us to step away, it is time to undertake an exhilarating process that is an absolutely essential stage of maturation.

Elisha ben Abuya is raised into the world of 2nd century Judaism by a father who encourages open-minded thought and *embraces* a relationship with science, philosophy and progressive Western ideas. Once an orphan, stewardship of the lad becomes the responsibility of his uncle – a different sort of man, whose *conservative* worldview gives preference to the strictest, most dogmatic teachings of Judaism. A sharp intellect and still malleable, Elisha shows exceptional aptitude for Talmudic forms of thought and he becomes a great sage. But he never shakes his deep-seated, intellectual curiosity...a spirit that is uncomfortable with the certainty of dogma. He grows increasingly agitated with the faith-based assumptions of Judaism and gathers his most trusted three rabbinic peers to tackle a project with him: nothing less than determining what can be known about the universe.

A priori knowledge refers to ideas that are theoretical rather than those based on experience. It is common, as religion is transmitted to its followers to present its beliefs in this form – teaching the dogma as if it simply, “IS.” Elisha simply cannot accept the starting points that are assumed by those around him. Read on their surface, the classic Jewish texts are based on a faith that cannot be reconciled with the more rational approaches of Greek thought. To his friends, Elisha says, “the Greeks’ success, I am convinced, [is a result of] the fact that they *started* from the foundations of knowledge. We Jews, on the contrary, have always tried to bolster a preestablished case.”⁴ If I were saying it, I would point to the Orthodox belief that God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. If one chooses to accept *that* as literal then all the rest of

³ Steinberg, Milton. As a Driven Leaf. Behrman House Publishing, 2015.

⁴ *ibid.* Kindle loc 2451. Emphasis mine.

Jewish tradition becomes incontrovertible and an Orthodox lifestyle makes a lot of sense. Elisha is saying that this starting point does not allow for critical thought. As one who does not accept this basic fact, he can only feel left out of everything that seems obvious to those around him. One of you wrote me asking if it was possible that Rabbi Steinberg, who was a well-known, non-Orthodox rabbi in New York City, used the historical character of Elisha ben Abuya to reflect elements of his own theological struggle. It's a good insight shared by the author, Joe Epstein, who writes, "One imagines that in writing [the book], Milton Steinberg was writing about his own intellectual conflict over the issue—faith or reason, and in what proportions?—that remains fundamental to thoughtful people to this day."⁵ Epstein seems to be describing, in particular, those of us who have proudly formed the progressive Jewish community.

So, surrounded by the world of Talmudic law and thought, Elisha tries so very hard to close off that part of himself and to fit in. But he just can't shake the feeling that he's living a lie. Everyone here can identify a chapter or area of their life in which we felt (or feel) we're living a lie. We tow the party line. We follow the lead of those with whom we cannot authentically agree, Our parents, our bosses our friends...and we do our best to push the dissonance deep down and make it work. But, once the foundation of faith began to crack for Elisha, he and his friends set out to disassemble what tradition has taught them and they begin from the beginning. This is risky...he sees that he is standing on Nachman's "very narrow bridge." He cannot shake the concern that everything Judaism has taught him is just myth and that the "real truth" lies in science and philosophy. But, his friendship with his colleagues is challenged by his relentless obsession with truth – the four of them are struggling to determine where to stand on that narrow bridge of certainty. In fact, of the four who worked together, only Rabbi Akiva was self-confident enough to open his mind to new, contradictory information and to reconcile it with his traditional beliefs. The two remaining rabbis of the foursome, both named Shimon, suffer terribly in the angst created by the effort. One goes mad with the possibility that he's been wrong all along and the other cannot live any longer in this world and succumbs to a miserable death as a

*The whole world is a
very narrow bridge.
~Rabbi Nachman
from Bratslav*

⁵ Epstein, Joe. Balancing Faith and Reason. The Wall Street Journal, 1/2/205.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/balancing-faith-and-reason-on-milton-steinbergs-as-a-driven-leaf-1420251623>

result of the project. Elisha decides that it is better to suffer excommunication than to live the life of a lie. The climax of the story is when Elisha, despondent in a world beyond his understanding, proclaims to the other rabbis that, “there is no God.”⁶

There are lots of reasons that you, who have read the book, might imagine that I chose it. But I received one particular email that asked if, perhaps I recommended it because Elisha is a reflection of Jay TelRav. Without hesitation, I answered, “yes, of course he is.” Both of us rabbis, I regularly feel like Elisha in my inability to speak my theological truth when others expect that I believe something other than I do. Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove says that “The person who believes himself to be in exile from God stands in self-imposed exile from the Jewish community.”⁷ Unlike Elisha, I believe very powerfully in God. Maybe not the simple deity of the Bible. However, I understand Elisha’s, inability to express his own beliefs and it sometimes leaves me feeling like an imposter – allowing others to *think* I believe something I do not. If you’ve ever found Biblical Jewish descriptions of God troubling, then perhaps you feel like I’m also describing *you* in certain ways. Hopefully, this means that you might be able to find yourself in this character, as well. I also feel a kinship with another main character: Like Akiva, I love the western thought of science and like Akiva, I maintain it in healthy relationship with my faith. My expectation is that there are countless ways that you might be able to connect with the experiences of this character.

What must it have been like to live in Elisha’s skin?!? He was raised to embrace one kind of knowledge and was then told that he must abandon that for the sake of a different, more fundamental approach. How many of us were provided the Bible stories when we were really young as a basis for understanding the world? “God created the world in 7 Days exactly 5780 and 10 days ago.” “Rainbows are a reminder of God’s promise not to wipe out the world with a flood ever again.” “Abraham was the first Jew and God promised the Land of Israel to him and his descendants forever.” ... And then our secular teachers unapologetically and unsympathetically turned our attention to western forms of science and rational thought? “The world

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⁶ Steinberg, Milton. *As a Driven Leaf*. Behrman House Publishing, 2015. Kindle loc. 2557.

⁷ Elliot Cosgrove, Park Avenue Synagogue, 5775 <https://pasyn.org/resources/sermons/driven-leaf>

came into being 4.1 billion years ago and we evolved very, very slowly.” “Rainbows are the refraction of light through water particles in the air.” “Abraham is a mythological character employed for the purposes of a gripping Origin Story.” Must the Red Sea have *actually* split in order for one to find **Truth** in the Biblical stories? Just for a moment, put yourself in the shoes of the creationist today who still believes in the bible’s seven-day version with Adam and Eve and without dinosaurs...in the shoes of the fundamentalist who is in constant battle with the world of science. There are some of those sitting with us today. The world is doing battle with your closely-held understandings of the world. And there are a lot of rationalists, on the other side of the Narrow Bridge who reject all elements of the myth sitting with us today. But, what would a healthy reconciliation of the two approaches look like?

And then, when Elisha can stand it no longer and rebels against the very system of which he is a respected leader and over-reacts, he deeply hurts those around him and leaves much damage to be repaired. I’ll bet I’m not the only one who can relate to his experience of feeling trapped and breaking free at all costs? Think back to the episodes in which you over-reacted and would handle it differently today if you had the chance for a do-over.

Then there is the idealized relationship he sought his whole life with a soul mate; The failed relationships with the three significant women in his life: his wife, Deborah, the idealized wife of his student, Beruriah and his affair with the unavailable consort, Manto. “The grass is always greener” is a trap that everyone has fallen into and the insatiable romantic in Elisha is left broken and despondent at the end of life.

And, finally, Elisha has made the “Revelation of Truth” his life’s work and has unforgivingly pursued it all his days. When the realization crashes down upon him that there really is no such thing as Truth with a capital “T”, he is forced to admit not just his failure but his error. Failure is painful – nobody ever likes to admit that an effort was beyond them. But admitting error is pure agony – to acknowledge that we were mistaken from the outset is gut-wrenching.

It is my hope that nobody here is contemplating the notion that their entire life has been misguided and that they have squandered what limited time they have but I can easily imagine that everyone has considered what it would mean to be flat-out wrong about the most

closely held beliefs of your heart. And, I'll remind you that it is specifically at that point of acceptance of one's error that we are able to redirect and grow into a new direction. Something that was never possible before and would not have been possible if we hadn't arrived at our lowest point.

It seems to me that these final pages of the book – this final stage of Elisha's tragic story – is the moment he experienced the greatest growth. You've heard the riddle in the Talmud⁸ but of Stoic origin, about a man in the middle of the desert with one bottle of water – his father and his teacher are both struggling to escape the desert and he has only enough water to save one. Rabbi David Wolpe suggests that perhaps we're mistaken about the premise of the riddle. The man feels torn between the two poles of his life – his father represents "Tradition" and the teacher is "Knowledge". The one who gets the water represents where the man will place his allegiance. Instead, Wolpe says that the question is not about getting out of the desert at any cost, it is about how a person walks the journey and "lives" in the fullest sense. The one who focuses, unapologetically on getting out, cannot really live – having denied an important part of himself. And so, says Wolpe, the best course of action is to divide the water. To embrace the conflict of living with both sources as essential.⁹ In other words, if you put all of your faith in science or all of your faith in religion, your body will survive but you won't be living fully.

Many of us believe that choosing one approach is required for us to maintain internal consistency. But, Wolpe cautions us, "Beware of the man of one book."¹⁰ We see people guided by only one book all around us – for example, Religion vs. Science, Capitalism vs. Socialism or Democrat vs. Republican. In other words, the person who is so certain that her beliefs are absolutely right is in for a tortured life. Instead, we are wise to actively embrace the conflict of multiple truths.

In fact, we go to some effort to *create* conflict for ourselves: This day, those who are able, are fasting. We want food, we deny ourselves the food and in doing so, we create the conflict. Steinberg wrote later in his life, "you cannot live in this world aware and alive and not

⁸ [b. Bava Metzia, 62a](#)

⁹ Wolpe, Rabbi David. [The Divided Self](https://www.sinaitemple.org/worship/sermons/emor-divided-self/). Sinai Temple, Los Angeles. Delivered, 5/1/2010.

¹⁰ Wolpe in response to Steinberg's character, Amram. Kindle loc. 347.

feel the divisions around you. Every voice you listen to has a little fragment of the truth.”¹¹ Listening beyond the attention-grabbing headlines for the issues at stake and the deeply held values of those on the “other side” leaves one with a more nuanced understanding. CNN, MSNBC, Fox – they’re all “one book” and a great many of us have become “Men and Women of One Book.”

And, this becomes particularly valuable when the debate moves inside our mind. Wolpe again writes, “the person who argues with the other, it is to win. But to argue with oneself, beauty emerges. To admit this actually allows one to begin to listen.”¹² And, perhaps the most important stage of growth occurs when one can acknowledge that the

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answer does not lie on either side of the argument – **the answer is the argument itself** – embracing the mystery of the unanswerable is when the individual is living their most integrated whole self. And, for those of you who have participated in spiritual practices, I would suggest that raising oneself into this space is absolutely one way to create existential peace out of internal conflict – Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Jewish meditation, they all train the individual to sit with the messiness of life and to settle into it. This sort of truth-chasing, recognizing the absence of success becomes the success itself. This is one way of lifting oneself quite high.

If Elisha had arrived at *that* understanding and been able to return to Palestine, as it was called at the time, and reenter the community of his ancestors with that sense of integrated mystery – he would have resumed the behaviors of his people and at the same time maintained the commitment to Western ideas. He would have embraced the rational thought of the Hellenist philosophers and, at the same time, admitted that they did not lead to an ethical and just society.

If I take one personally valuable, enduring message from Steinberg’s book, it would be that we are wise to set aside certainty and to listen to every source of truth – not with the goal of discerning our final answer but with the goal of continuing to wrestle and continuing to listen.

¹¹ Citation needed.

¹² Wolpe, Rabbi David. [The Divided Self](#).

Picasso seems to have found his balance of splitting the water in the desert so that he could maintain his unwavering commitment to Velasquez's original while insisting that there was more to it – he expressed his faith through the alternate presentation of the characters even if others would refuse to see it. I'm still not sure I *like* Picasso's work any better than before Julie tried to open it for me, but I certainly appreciate it anew. And, I promise you, we're already dreaming of our next vacation...without kids.