

Truth Decay

I've just had one of those conversations last week that leave you scratching your head at best. I was sitting with an individual who was trying to convince me that the research he had done was better than anything the rest of the scientific world had done. That he, not a scientist, knew the truth about the Covid virus. He enthusiastically began to tell me about how Big Pharma was pulling a fantastic scheme over on us. His claim was that there existed absolutely no proof of any virus called COVID-19. There I paused him, and I said, I really don't think I want to see this conversation through to attend." He said, "but this is really important." And so, I told him that he had three minutes and that was about all I was going to spend on this. He continued and, when I asked how it was possible that 6 million people had already died from it, he said, "really? How do we know that those pictures weren't staged?" By that time, we had already surpassed the three minutes I had set, and I told him that I needed to stop this discussion because what he was saying was making me angry. That I had lost too many friends and had comforted too many people who lost loved ones to be able to tolerate this kind of discussion.

A few months ago, I referenced a story on CNN based on a recent poll.¹ It seems that an astonishing one in six Americans is not entirely convinced that the earth is actually round. I wanted to cry when I heard that. It also seems that the concept of the "post-truth" era is a real thing – so much so that it was admitted as a term to dictionary in 2016. Post-Truth? That prefix, "post-," means "something that comes after." Does that mean we are living in the time after truth? Apparently, we are but it is also not a new phenomenon. Do you want to guess who wrote: "There has been more new error propagated by the press in the last ten years than

¹ Picheta, Rob. The flat-Earth conspiracy is spreading around the globe. Does it hide a darker core? Cnn.com, November 18, 2019.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/16/us/flat-earth-conference-conspiracy-theories-scli-intl>

in an [sic] hundred years before..."² That was our president, John Adams, in about the year 1800.

There's no question that the speed and proliferation of misinformation has sped up in the digital age but it is nothing new. But in this time of truth decay, we are mourning the loss of something that felt reliable. As Tony Rehagan writes:

"When Edward R. Murrow described the blitz devastating London, shocked listeners didn't question what they were hearing. When Walter Cronkite teared up and told America that John F. Kennedy had been shot and killed in Dallas, the public never wondered whether it had truly happened. When Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, under the trusted banner of the Washington Post, broke the Watergate scandal and eventually connected it and the subsequent cover-up to Richard Nixon, the country reluctantly accepted that its president was, in fact, a crook."³ And it was easier when we all listened to one news source and trusted that what they shared was the truth.

The, now famous, sociologists Yuval Noah Harari has suggested that the reason we are experiencing this post truth era is because we are a post-truth species. We have thrived as Homo Sapiens thanks to our ability to weave tales that are accepted as truth amongst a large number of people. For example, we know that a dollar is only a flimsy piece of paper, but we all choose to believe the story that it is worth more than the paper it's printed on. Similarly, we know that a corporation is nothing more than a figment of our collective imagination written up in documents that almost none of us could understand and yet we seek to hold it and not the people running it, accountable for their behavior. How can something imaginary act well or badly? Harari says, "as long as everybody believes in the same fictions, we all obey the same laws and can therefore cooperate effectively... when 1000 people believe some made up story

² Adams, John. c. 1800. These words were written by John Adams in the margins of a book, next to a passage in which the French philosopher Condorcet extolled the virtue of the new "free press" and it's potential to inform the general public.

³ Tony Rehagen. Welcome to Post-Truth America. Summer 2020. <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/sites/bc-magazine/summer-2020/features/welcome-to-post-truth-america.html>

for one month, that's fake news. When 1 billion people believe it for 1000 years, that is a religion."⁴ He doesn't suggest that religion is bad, simply that we must understand the nature of its teachings.

This probably sounds right to you. One religion argues that there is one god and another stakes its claims on the truth of multiple gods. One religion claims that Mohammed is God's final prophet and another says that it is the Israelite, Malachi. Either Jesus is the Messiah or it is Shabbtai Tzvi or Jacob Frank or Bar Kochbah or none of them! Every one of these beliefs emerged one day and, as they gained traction in their communities of believers, they were shouted down as "fake news" by others.

We know that everybody manipulates the truth – in fact, we almost have to. Rabbi Jeffrey Rubenstein comments on an experiment by AJ Jacobs in Esquire Magazine entitled, "I think you're fat." He tries to live for 30 days speaking only the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the absolute truth. At the end of the month, he is grateful "to be able to return to the white-lies, half-truths, and other deceptions that most of us practice on a daily basis. He concludes that had he been honest 100 percent of the time, rather than the 90 percent he achieved, he "would have gotten beaten up, fired, and divorced."⁵ Judaism even requires the telling of white lies in certain situations when another's shame can be avoided, and honor preserved.

I bet our classic rabbinical voices could never have imagined the world today in which we actually have to devote our attention and energy to refuting the claims made by some about Jewish Space Lasers! And then, we have to listen to the defense, when challenged about accuracy, of "using alternative facts." This is dangerous.

And the chancellor emeritus of the Jewish theological seminary, Arnold Eisen, said a couple of years ago to a class of graduates,

⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah. Are we living in a post-truth era? Yes, but that's because we're a post-truth species. Ideas.ted.com. September 7, 2018. <https://ideas.ted.com/are-we-living-in-a-post-truth-era-yes-but-thats-because-were-a-post-truth-species/>

⁵ Rubenstein, Jeffrey. To Tell the Truth or Not: A Talmudic Perspective. ReformJudaism.org. November 5, 2018. <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/tell-truth-or-not-talmudic-perspective>

“If perpetrators of evil can get away with their deeds, see them laundered in the wash of forgetfulness or error, then goodness itself seems threatened, and with it the meaning of our lives. We cannot draw lessons from history if the facts of what happened are not known... We know how easily the truth can be manipulated to their own advantage by those with power...The facts must be heard, loud and clear.”⁶

How does it work, and why does it work? Francis Bacon was already writing about it in 1620, noting that it is human nature to “seize eagerly on any fact, however slender, that supports his theory; but will question, or conveniently ignore, the far stronger facts that overthrow it.” You might know this as Confirmation Bias – the preference to find truth in the things we already believe or in the words of people we *want* to believe.⁷ And it has been used plenty times since then. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda maestro, showed the world his hand when he said, “A lie told once remains a lie, but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth.” He also believed that “it is the absolute right of the State to supervise the formation of public opinion.”⁸ Harari once again cautions us that “Truth and power can travel together only so far. Sooner or later, they go their separate ways. If you want power, at some point you will have to spread fictions. If you want to know the truth about the world, at some point you will have to renounce power... Scholars throughout history faced this dilemma: do they serve power or truth?”⁹

This, then, might be our most significant insight and our most valuable warning: the people in power are the ones who have most often used misinformation as an effective way to preserve that position. Hannah Arendt was right, “it can seem that truth and politics are always at war with one another.” Political, religious, and social leaders far too often violate our trust toward the end of holding onto their position of power. On Yom Kippur, a day in which we

⁶ Eisen, Arnold. The Truth—and Nothing but the Truth. Commencement Address 2019.

<https://www.jtsa.edu/the-truth-and-nothing-but-the-truth/>

⁷ Dunner, Rabbi Pini. THE TRUTH ABOUT FAKE NEWS. April 15, 2021.

<https://rabbidunner.com/the-truth-about-fake-news/>

⁸ Joseph Goebbels, German Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. c. 1939.

⁹ Harari, Yuval Noah. 21 Lessons for the 21st Century. Random House, 2019.

fearlessly look our own Truth in the mirror, we should also be renewing our commitment to examining all the truths that are shown to us by others. Our awareness and acknowledgment of the pattern does then demand more of us than we have been giving. It means that, when we hear a story on the news or read something amazing on Facebook, it is incumbent on us to be more discerning. Remember, just because it is on the internet, doesn't make it true. To ask ourselves what is the source, does that source, perhaps, have an agenda? Oscar Wilde wrote, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."¹⁰ Is it possible that others' contribution to the topic may hold some inconvenient truths that we would do well to hear? Particularly as a people who have been at the mercy of the lies told by totalitarian rulers for centuries, our Jewish community ought to be vigilant about this.

Historian Michael Henke wrote, "a future based on the clay feet of half-truth cannot prevail, as history has shown us repeatedly since ancient times."¹¹ From Bolsonaro in Brazil to Kim in North Korea to Putin in Russia, tyrants will promote whatever facts and ideologies it takes to preserve their own power and we see the dire consequences to the vulnerable. This marvelous country of ours is too precious in its role on the world stage to allow it to crumble from within. Erosion of trust and our inability to engage with one another are frightening precursors to a future that I prefer not to imagine.

In this coming year, renew your commitment to examining the sources of your information. Ask yourself, repeatedly, "who stands to gain from my trust?" "Can this really be true?" And remember that there are others who stand to gain influence and a strengthened position by your gift of support – are you supporting the right people? And, it is said that George Orwell once wrote, "in times of universal deceit, telling the truth will be a revolutionary act."¹² Be a revolutionary.

Good Yontiv

¹⁰ Wilde, Oscar. [The Importance of Being Earnest](#).

¹¹ Henke, Michael. PhD. [Speech to the Sword](#). May 28, 2022. <https://www.lut.fi/en/news/speech-sword-professor-michael-henke>

¹² Orwell, George.