

Holding Up the World: Justice, Truth and Peace

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Dr. Abraham Twersky, in his book, Do Unto Others, relates an amazing story that he personally witnessed. Early in his career as a psychiatrist, he would teach psychiatric residents by having them accompany him to psychiatric institutions. There, he would introduce the young observers to live subjects, with diagnoses rarely seen outside of text books.

In a chronic care facility, Dr. Twersky pointed out a most difficult situation, a male patient who refused to communicate with anyone. No doctor had been able to make any headway with this patient.

The patient had lived in that institution for 52 years. And for 52 years his routine did not vary. Immediately following breakfast, every morning, he would go to the far corner of the community room, contort his arms outward and upward, and stand there until lunch. After lunch he would resume his position until bedtime.

No treatment, medication nor any amount of cajoling was successful in convincing this patient to get off of his feet once he had taken his position. As a result, the patient developed an excessive amount of fluid in his legs and feet. That caused its own problems.

On one visit, one of the psychiatric residents of Dr. Twersky asked if it would be alright for him to speak with the patient. Dr. Twersky wondering what the younger doctor might offer that they had not already tried. But the young doctor seemed anxious to try and Dr. Twersky agreed.

After a brief conversation, the man stared blankly at the young doctor. At that point the doctor assumed the identical position of the patient and said to him, "I'll stand here like this. You can go sit down". The patient complied. Afterward, Dr. Twersky asked the resident what he had said to the patient. The young doctor replied, "I guessed that, in his own way, he believed that he was holding up the world. I asked him to sit for a while and I would hold up the world in his place until he was ready and able to return".

What does it mean to hold up the world? The psychiatric patient had one notion. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, had Atlas, the mythological hero presumed to be the physically strongest among gods and men who was punished for waging war against Zeus and who was condemned to hold up the earth for eternity, certainly an unenviable assignment for Atlas. Yet, this belief that Atlas held the earth on his back, gave the Greeks the confidence they needed to live their lives in a world that stood firm. Most of us, however, do not find comfort or reassurance in Greek mythology.

We live in a world so badly damaged by violence and war, a world in which death, torture and hunger are commonplace and accepted as "just the way things are", that one wonders if the earth isn't already teetering on the brink. We routinely witness rampant cruelty and behavior which can only be described as inhumane. Fixated upon Jews for nearly all human history, ours is a world which has reserved for the Jewish People a special place, at the top of the list of people and nations in the world that are hated. We even have own, unique name for Jew-hatred, a brand of hatred which defies all rationality and reason. It is such a world which prompts us to ask:

Can such a world exist indefinitely? Shall the combination of animosity toward others coupled with the ability of an increasing number of nations which possess the ability to destroy the world, create the volatile mix which, this time, might knock the world off its axis?

In great part, Judaism's response to our hateful and volatile world, our antidote for our sick world to is for the world to internalize the values, upon which Judaism is built and which enable us to be optimistic about our future. If the world rested on a foundation of these values, the world could become a place of safety and security. It is in that hope and spirit that I turn to those values.

Rabban Shimon Gamliel, the famous Rabbi of the Mishnah, lived two thousand years ago, gave expression to this concern about the world in the following words:

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אמר על שלושה דברים העולם עומד על הדין ועל האמת ועל השלום

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say:

The world stands on three pillars: On justice, on truth and on peace. (Avot 1:18)

When the world rests upon three legs, it is safe and secure. Remove a leg, however, the structure collapses. And so, according to Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the world finds its stability when each pillar carries equal weight, each indispensable to the other: That tripartite formula, the indispensable values for the stability of the world are justice, truth and peace. I begin with justice:

I would define justice as the application of law through a process which is, for the most part, objective. Emotions and personality are irrelevant here. There are facts and evidence needed to prove the case and determine culpability. The law is exacting: if you commit this illegal act, this is the penalty (or the range of penalties), regardless of who you are. This is the image conjured up in the *Unetaneh Tokef*. There we read of how each person is judged:

מעביר צונו תחת שבטו / as if each of us pass before God, like sheep beneath the shepherd's staff, one at a time, God judges.

That is the image we conjure and repeat. We cannot hide in the crowd. Like the shepherd counting his flock, God sees us individually. We cannot pretend that we were not there. We can neither avoid judgement nor be overlooked. That is why that particular prayer is so powerful and frightening. We must take responsibility. And we come together each year because there is a part within us that wants to be judged, frightening as that may seem.

I believe that we all want to be judged, not because we feel guilty, but because we have done lots of good things which we are happy to put into the mix. I believe that we want to be judged because ultimately, we want to know that what we have done matters to those around us and to God. And we want to know that, despite what we have done to ourselves and to others, we can still be good people. We are concerned, most of us, at least, about our reputation and our good name. To preserve our reputations and standings, we must be accountable, responsible and judged.

Much of the counselling I do involves very difficult situations and, frankly, bad behavior: substance abuse, spousal abuse, extra-marital affairs. And when someone comes carrying with them such a heavy burden, I must tell you that I say very little. Instead, I sit and listen and the stories flow, and the explanations and, often, rationalizations and excuses flow. And I listen. And, at the end of the meeting, the person will often remark as they leave, "Thank you. I feel so much better".

What did that person find so helpful? I have come to realize that people are not looking for advice. They were not turning to me with the hope that I might be able to solve their problems. They came, they spoke, they poured out their hearts because they wanted to confess, they wanted to be judged and they wanted to be done. And I understand from these encounters, that acknowledging what one has done, admitting bad behavior is an indispensable step toward healing and toward forgiveness. That apology, difficult as it may be, is a necessary part of the price one must pay for justice to be served. You apologize because a deeply felt and honest apology allows **you** to move on. That is the power of **justice**.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, however, adds a second ingredient into the mix. He identifies a second pillar upon which the stability of the world rests: **truth**. And what does he mean by truth? Unlike justice which is clean cut, objective and scrupulously fair, truth is different. Truth can, at times, be at odds with Justice. Indeed, one person's truth can be another's falsehood.

Prior to his achieving international fame, the great artist, Pablo Picasso, agreed to allow a gallery to host an art show and sale. Other artists, news reporters and other gallery owners came to see the work of this new artist who was gaining quite a reputation. Among those in attendance was a collector, a wealthy and discerning patron of the arts. Toward the end of the evening, the collector made a purchase of one of the paintings at a high price which would later become an incredible bargain. The new painting owner stood opposite his new painting, looking at it again and again, observing the brushstrokes and scrutinizing the canvas. Picasso walks over. This is their conversation:

Mr. Picasso, I just purchased your painting. Picasso does not respond.

The use of color is magnificent. The brush-work extraordinary and unique.

The collector continued to speak, extolling the virtues of his new acquisition. Picasso is silent.

Finally, somewhat exasperated, the collector finally says to the silent artist, "Have you nothing to say"?! Picasso turns to him and says, "It's a fake".

"This is not a fake", the collector insists. "I just purchased it from **you!**".

"It is a fake", Picasso insisted. "The artist is a scoundrel and a fraud. The painting is a fake".

But you painted it Mr. Picasso!

Sir, I have painted many fakes in my career!

The collector, of course, was correct. Picasso had painted the painting. But Picasso's point should also be taken seriously. Perhaps the way he wanted it to look had not been achieved. Perhaps the painting was too dispassionate or the opposite. Maybe it lacked heart, emotion, integrity.

True, Picasso held the paint brush, but the real, authentic Picasso, the one who the artist wanted to paint this painting, that Picasso never appeared. That Picasso never showed up. Moreover, what is true and what is fake or false is often a matter of opinion and perspective.

Truth is less about fact and objectivity, and more about emotion and belief...and that makes truth particularly elusive and subjective. Truth is more about how I see the world than about how someone else sees it. Truth is more about my experience and less about yours.

Educated, is the name of a book, a story of a daughter, Tara Westover, who is also the book's author. It is the story of a religiously extreme, fundamentalist Mormon, his wife and children. The plot recounts, from the daughter's perspective, what her life was like growing up an impoverished, militant and physically dangerous environment.

Within the book are painful recollections laced with anger and vitriolic accounts of physical abuse, negligence and indifference of the father to the well-being of his children. Each member

of the family endured painful injuries and horrific scars, remnants of the father's psychological and physical abuse, which remained as permanent reminders of the family's life in Idaho.

In the end, she wanted her father to acknowledge the abuse he had inflicted on her and her siblings. She wanted her mother to apologize for abandoning her daughter. But none of that ever came.

Why did Tara Westover write this book? Tara wrote this book because those who needed to write it would not or could not. She wrote as part of her process of healing. She wrote the book, I believe, to give a voice to her pain, to focus with clarity on the members of her family, to restore control and purpose to a life to which she, by necessity, in order to survive, had become emotionally numb. Only a tale of the hard and unadorned truth would provide Tara with a way safe and healthy way forward. This story was Tara's truth.

I saw many parallels between Educated and another book I read, The Apology, by Eve Ensler. Ms Ensler is also the well-known author of the book and play about a "Monologue". It was her success with "Monologue" which gave her both the audience to read and the courage to write.

Ms. Ensler wrote her book in the voice of her deceased father. Her father was a cruel and abusive man. He denigrated his daughter every chance he had, he threatened her emotionally, he attacked her physically and sexually.

This book was not written to provide for the author an opportunity to air her dirty laundry. This is a book written, similar to Educated, to bring abuse and violence, perpetrated by the father, into a light where it could be exposed rather than swept under the rug. Eve Ensler wanted to move on. One would have hoped that her father, even if only on his death bed, might have acknowledged, admitted, confessed, apologized, if not for his own sake then for his daughter. An apology was a crucial piece of her own healing, a crucial ingredient for moving on with her life, rebuilding a new life, replacing or repairing the narrative of her life which had been so battered and torn by her father. But the father's words would never come.

The authors of both Educated and The Apology faced similar situations and similar turmoil as a result. As hurt, as resentful and as angry as each was, each wanted their abusive father to confess and apologize. Each wanted to forgive. Each wanted to move on. Unfortunately, neither had that opportunity.

What is most amazing to me, however, is that each wanted to forgive. Why? Because each daughter was forced to live with and endure the inner turmoil and ongoing pain of a victim, with memories which would relentlessly invade her every-thought. Each woman needed to state her own truth, unvarnished, raw and unadorned. Each needed to tell their painful story. Each needed some degree of validation. And for each, their story was true.

In a similar way, these examples of subjective truths we live with, shed light on the intractable conflict and the ongoing war between Israel and her Palestinian neighbor.

Palestinians and Israelis see the world differently. They see the facts differently. They understand and express themselves differently and they come to this matter from different directions. We remember history differently. And, one should not be surprised that our truths are very different.

And here, right here, comes Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's challenge and perspective. Here his question resonates: Do you want peace? Because it is the promise of peace, for us, for Israel and for the world which enables the world to be sustained, held and balanced, albeit precariously, on three legs. What is not possible, however, to embrace only two of the three. All three, justice, truth and peace are required for the if the balance is to be maintained.

And, both sides must agree that peace is desirable, that we would prefer a world sustained by peace between enemies than a world in which one side is right by virtue of being the victor standing atop their vanquished mortal enemy.

A famous passage in the Talmud records a bitter dispute between the great houses of study, House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. They argued bitterly, each trying to prove that that they were correct and that their opponent was wrong. Finally, exasperated and weary, Hillel and Shammai turn God and ask God to answer the question: who is right and who is wrong. And a Voice from heaven is heard saying: *Elu v'elu divrei Elohim chayyim* / both are correct, these words and those words are both the reflections of the Living God.

How can both be right? Well, there are times when there is a right and wrong. But sometimes, both are correct...correct for you even if they are not correct for everyone.

It doesn't sound like that should be so difficult. But that simple formula for the sustainability of the world, of that promise of peace was written two thousand years ago. That simple aphorism has been part of our tradition for thousands of years. Yet, the fulfillment of that goal, has eluded us and we it. I see no better moment than this moment to go back to Rabban Shimon, it is time that we move toward understanding the other and the stories they tell.

What holds up the world according to the Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel? How does our world, not just Israel but our world, not disappear in space or fall to the ground and crash? There is a delicate balance which exists in the Universe which has been perceived and succinctly expressed by Rabban Shimon. For the world to stand, he teaches, there must be both justice and truth. Justice and truth must come together for the sake and cause of peace. Peace is the place where justice and truth can exist, endure and survive. Peace is attainable only as a result of *din* and *emet* / justice and truth.

World peace is as far from us today as it was for ancient Greece. Although ancient Greeks found comfort in the belief that Atlas would not let the world slip from his hands, our tradition give us no such promise or image. Instead, we look for, pray for and work for peace as an outgrowth of eternal values. And so, without the prospect of world peace at this moment, we would be well-advised to start small, with baby steps, steps leading to our own, individual, inner peace. While waiting for a world at peace, our mandate on Yom Kippur, is to begin with ourselves, with our own justice, our own truth and our own inner peace.

Yom Kippur, as you know, means the Day of Atonement. I like to think of atonement as: “at one-ment”. Atonement implies not only acknowledging our faults but admitting mistakes, apologizing for doing that which has harm to others and has diminished us in the process. We cannot begin this new year with a clean slate unless we have apologized to those individuals we have wronged, admitted our errors and asked for forgiveness. When we do that, we approach an inner sense of being “whole” and “complete”. In Hebrew, whole and complete translates as *shalom*.

In the new year may we see the beginnings of a world of justice, a world of truth and a world of peace.

May we use our energy and efforts to work for peace.

And may our quest for peace lead to a safer and better world,

For us, for our children and for theirs.

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל ועל כל יושבי טבל ואמרו אמן

May God, who made peace in the heavens, help us to find peace within ourselves, peace with those with whom we have struggled and peace throughout the world. And let us all say, “Amen”