

Seeking Truth for Justice and Peace

Or: Don't Mess With *Emet*

Rabbi David L. Reiner¹

Erev Yom Kippur/Kol Nidrei Evening Worship ~ Friday, September 29, 2017
Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties
Ridgefield, Connecticut

According to Jewish legend, Rabbi Judah Loew, in 16th century Prague created a Frankenstein-like creature from clay to defend his Jewish community from antisemitic attacks. To make his creation come alive, the rabbi would inscribe three Hebrew letters on its forehead: *Aleph, Mem, Tav*—*Emet*—meaning “Truth.” To de-activate the Golem, the rabbi would erase the *Aleph*, leaving the *Mem* and the *Tav*, spelling *Meit*, meaning death. According to one version of the legend, the Golem goes out of control and has to be permanently subdued. We can draw several lessons from this episode: straying even a little from truth can lead to death; bad things can happen -- even to great rabbis -- when we mess with *Emet*. Though he wanted to protect his community, Rabbi Loew’s alchemy almost resulted in catastrophe. To this day, in some circles, the word *golem* is used to describes someone who lacks *seichel*—intellect; a golem is someone who does not seek the truth.²

Truth is a pillar of Judaism and the key to an orderly, just, and peaceful society. It was written in *Pirkei Avot*, a second century collection of rabbinic wisdom, “On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace.”³ The early rabbis also taught that justice, truth, and peace “are really one, for when justice is done, truth prevails, and peace is established.”⁴ Without truth, there can be no justice or peace.

Our justice system and political processes are corrupted by lies, false testimony, and disinformation. Misinformation broadcasted leads to conflict and chaos. As with the Golem, without truth we die. Especially in this age of “fake news” and (what Stephen Colbert terms) “truthiness,” we must commit ourselves to be pursuers of truth that we may also preserve justice and peace. Minorities, including the Jewish people, are particularly vulnerable and unable to prosper when truth, justice,

¹ It is a blessing to work with a fantastic editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer. When we began discussing sermon topics, he suggested that I write a sermon this year about “Truth.” I must also thank my wonderful wife, Ashley Heller, for her input and tireless support.

² *A New Heyday (and Many Spinoffs) for a Centuries-Old Giant, the Golem*. Dan Bilefsky. May 10, 2009. Page A10, New York Edition. The New York Times. Also online as *Hard Times Give New Life to Prague’s Golem*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/11/world/europe/11golem.html>

³ Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel in *Pirkei Avot* 1:18

⁴ *Why the Ten Commandments Are Just What America Needs*. Aron Hirt-Manheimer. November 3, 2017. Reform Judaism Blog. <http://reformjudaism.org/blog/2016/11/03/why-ten-commandments-are-just-what-america-needs>; referencing Yerushalmi Talmud, Ta’anit 4:2—(Talmudic citation was not verified)

and peace are not assured, which is why our ancient sages ruled that a Jew is forbidden to dwell in a lawless community.⁵

Tomorrow afternoon, our Torah reading will define what it means to be a “Holy People.” In the midst of that explanation we are commanded by God: “...you shall not deceive; and you shall not lie to one another, nor swear falsely in My name...”⁶ These verses emphasize the importance of truth, forbidding us from lying and deception and using God’s name to make our lies seem true.

In the book of Exodus, we are commanded to “...not carry false rumors”⁷ and, a few verses later, “keep far from a false charge...”⁸ *Eitz Hayim*, the Conservative Torah commentary explains that while everywhere else the Torah commands us only how to act, in telling us to keep far from a false charge, “the Torah go[es] beyond [our actions] and command[s] us to distance ourselves from [a forbidden act]...The Sages go to great lengths to explore the ways in which falsehood can infiltrate our thinking.”⁹ It is not enough to only speak truth, we should remove ourselves from situations where lies are being told.

But can we really remove ourselves from such situations, when it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the difference between truthfulness and lies? And is it always wrong to say something that is untruthful, or are there exceptions?

Consider our patriarchs. Jacob -- aided by his mother, Rebekah -- dresses as his brother Esau to deceive their blind father.¹⁰ Many commentators rationalize or justify Jacob’s lie by pointing out that Esau had sold his birthright to Isaac and the firstborn blessing was rightfully for Isaac. On three separate occasions Abraham and Isaac lie and pretend that their wives were their sisters.¹¹ Many commentators rationalize the deception of Abraham and Isaac by pointing out that lying was necessary for self-preservation, plus Sarah was actually Abraham’s half-sister, so it was not a lie!

I am reminded of a Simpsons episode when Marge begins working as a real estate agent. A colleague talks with Marge about her “no-pressure approach” which has led to no success. Marge explains that she tells customers “the truth.” Lionel Hutz responds by explaining “there’s ‘the truth’ (dark sounding; shaking head ‘no’) and ‘the truth’ (upbeat and nodding head).” Marge comments that a house looks “awfully small.” Hutz responds, “I would say it’s ‘awfully cozy.” Marge: “That’s dilapidated!” Hutz: “Rustic!” Marge: “That house is on fire” Hutz: “Motivated seller.”¹²

The Talmud recounts a fascinating debate about what to say to a hideously disfigured bride on her wedding day! Beit Shammai says to speak truth to the bride and emphasize her good qualities (“You have the most beautiful third arm I have ever seen!”). Beit Hillel says to tell a bride that she is fair and attractive because Scripture proclaims that every bride is beautiful on her wedding day. Beit Shammai presses the issue: Is it okay to lie? Beit Hillel responds that it is not a lie, and,

⁵ Credit to my editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer, for this observation and phrasing. The Torah as a whole is guiding Israelites and their descendants to live in communities of law and order. I am confident that a more specific source can be found.

⁶ Leviticus 19:11-12

⁷ Exodus 23:1

⁸ Exodus 23:7

⁹ Drash comment on Exodus 23:7. Page 472.

¹⁰ Genesis 27

¹¹ Genesis 12, Genesis 20, Genesis 26

¹² *Reality Bites*. The Simpsons; Season Nine. Original air date: December 7, 1997.

furthermore, “you should be empathetic and treat everyone courteously, including a bride.”¹³ We should speak to a bride with words that will make her feel happy. Though lying to a bride may seem to contradict the teachings and emphasis on truth in our tradition, telling a bride that she is not beautiful would cause harm and disrupt shalom, which, like truth, is one of the other pillars on which our world stands.

We read in Torah, *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*: Justice, Justice shall you pursue, one of the most important verses of Torah speaking to our obligation to seek justice in the world. We are similarly instructed in *Pirkei Avot* to “*Ohev Shalom*—love peace and *rodef shalom*—pursue peace...”¹⁴ You may be able to hear the similarity between the words *Tirdof* and *Rodef*—they share the root reish, dalet, fey, which means “pursue.” You may also be familiar with the phrase “*Rodef Shalom*—pursuer of peace” as it is a popular synagogue franchise name with locations on the Upper West Side and in Falls Church, Virginia, where Rabbi Burstein, of blessed memory, began his rabbinical career. The commandments to pursue justice and peace in our tradition are clear. And today, on Yom Kippur we should recognize our responsibility as *Rodfei Emet*—pursuers of truth.

On this Yom Kippur, as we acknowledge our shortcomings and pray for God’s forgiveness, we confess. Our prayers include, literally, an *aleph bet* of possible sins, to remind us of anything wrong we may have possibly done. As is noted in our prayer books, “Many of the wrongful and harmful acts in the litanies of confession refer to unethical speech: gossip, slander, and rumor-mongering; lies, large and small; careless and hurtful remarks...”¹⁵ In reciting the confession we are encouraged to consider our wrongful acts, to reflect upon how we can be better people. Our mouths can be used to praise God, AND for acts of that are harmful to ourselves, our family, and our community.

We have all heard untruths and who among us has not been complicit in spreading of speculation and truthiness. We have been misled and who among us has not misled others.

Louis Newman, citing the 3rd Century sage, Resh Lakish, writes that the focus of *t’shuva* – repentance – “is not on changing the past, but on defining a new direction of the future...*t’shuva* is ultimately about changing ourselves, not only clearing our record of past deeds...”¹⁶

18th Century Italian ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, wrote: “...Man is not born wise and cannot know everything. But by studying the matters, he will be awakened to what he did not know, and he will contemplate on what he did not grasp previously, even matters not found in the books themselves. For when his mind is awakened to the matter, it goes and observes it from all perspectives, and draws forth new understandings from the wellspring of truth.”¹⁷ We can only change what we do not know.

As in the story of the Golem, bad things happen when we mess with *emet*—the truth. Without truth, we will be *meit*—dead. Let us commit to not being a Golem! In the year ahead, let us all draw from the wellspring of truth and commit to being *rodfei emet*—pursuers of truth, healthily skeptical consumers of news, people who study that we may be awakened to what we do not know.

Amen and Amen

¹³ BT Ketubot 16b-17a William Davidson Edition

¹⁴ *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 1:12

¹⁵ *Mishkan haNefesh*, Yom Kippur Edition. Page 91

¹⁶ *Mishkan haNefesh*, Yom Kippur Edition, page 85

¹⁷ *Messilat Yesharim* 12:6