

“Truth”

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It wasn't a word that I had heard outside my home. And growing up, it was always part of a sentence that my mom would say. “Is that the EMES?” she would ask. Or.... “Tell me the EMES.”.....Or....sometimes she would punctuate a conversation - blurting out a questioning: “EMES?”.....As those whose background includes a *'bisseleh'* or ‘a bit’ of Yiddish might tell you, the word “EMES” means “Truth.” And when my mom....or my Bobi – from whom she unquestionably learned it.....asked for the EMES.....it was clear that they weren't fooling around. They wanted facts.

I have been thinking a lot about Emes.....or Emet, in Hebrew....for several months now as the political discourse in our country has kept coming back to matters of Truth ---- Of what we are supposed to believe and of who is to be believed. Fact checkers in this election cycle have been working beyond-overtimeand then they themselves face the intense scrutiny of other candidates' fact checkers. Post-debate spin room savants work diligently to tell viewers what they just witnessed – even though, the viewers just saw it for themselves. And, importantly, pollsters report that overall, there is a heightened atmosphere of distrust in our country.

In the Jewish world-view --- not unlike in secular thought --- the pursuit of the truth.....the whole truth....and nothing but the truth --- is at the heart of a functioning society. Honesty and trustworthiness are foundational ideals upon which we build our most important relationships – in a marriage, within families, between and amongst friends, in business, in healthy political discourse, in our communities. Without trust....without faith in the words and deeds of others, all of these would breakdown. No surprise then that the Talmud teaches that, just as all rulers have their own official seal, so too does Gd....and that seal is “Truth”.....As well, when Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the great Sage of the first century sought to teach the primary principles upon which the world rests – unlike the more well-known formulation of Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chasadim – Rabbi Shimon taught, instead, that they are Emet, Din, and Shalom: Truth..... Justice.....and Peace.

However, in recent years....and during the past several months especially....social commentators – including academics, opinion writers, journalists, and even comedians – have noted that there seems to be a battle being waged on truth itself.

And, what has been particularly disturbing in recent years – and has undoubtedly reached a crescendo during this election cycle – has not only been the questions raised regarding the trustworthiness of a particular candidate – but the rampant recasting altogether of what is true. The idea that climate change – for example – is a fallacy – while certainly is a belief, it is not a

credible belief. And the implications of our national leadership choosing to ignore this truth – as inconvenient as it may be - would be catastrophic. Objective facts and statistics are being summarily disregarded in order to fit personal or politically motivated goals. In our country and internationally - there is a dangerous rise in anti-intellectualism – the outright dismissal of educated opinions. As well, there is an increased willingness amongst some people to dismiss out-of-hand those who bring-to-the-table particular experience or expertise in certain fields. As Timothy Egan, columnist for the New York Times, noted recently, we are experiencing an “epidemic of ignorance.”

In 2005, political pundit and comedian, Stephen Colbert, more famously provided a label for this phenomenon. He called it: “Truthiness” – the willingness of a person to proclaim something to be true, simply because he or she feels it to be so – regardless of objective facts. During an interview in which Colbert spoke about his societal critique, he said: “It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It’s certainty.”

Acknowledging the breadth of the trend, writer Frank Rich has opined that – quote: “We live in the age of Truthiness.” As well, both Merriam -Webster Dictionary and the American Dialect Society even went so far as to make “Truthiness” it’s Word of the Year in 2006.

One essential Emes that the vast majority of religious traditions embrace – including, of course, Judaism – is the truth that teaches that all people are deserving of the utmost dignity and respect. It is a principle that is foundational. The Torah, for example, speaks in the language of “*B’tzelem Elohim*” – of each human being as having been created in Gd’s image – of each soul possessing a spark of the divine. It is through this lens that we are called upon to see our neighbors, family members, friends, and selves. But even more importantly, this understanding of what is true about others is supposed to inform how we act towards them.

It was this shared understanding of the essential Gdliness of all peoples that inspired the recent gathering of Needham Clergy on our bima – for the dedication of new Temple home. On that Friday evening, over a dozen clergy and faith community leaders – representing the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation, the Baha’i community, the Muslim Community, as well as the broader Jewish community – joined together in friendship and in faith to bless our building and, in doing so, to offer heartfelt blessing upon our congregation, as well. Since that night of celebration, I have spoken with hundreds of people....and just about everyone with whom I have spoken referred to how spiritually uplifting that particular moment was. For our visiting clergy, as well, it was a powerful evening. ‘So often,’ one of them shared, ‘we are brought together as clergy for reasons that are tragic. ‘How good it was,’ she said ‘for us to come together to rejoice.’ I couldn’t help but smile at hearing a colleague and friend quote Psalm 133 - “*Hinei Mah Tov u’Mah Na’im shevet achim gam*

yachad.”

In Judaism, the acknowledgement that our shared humanity is an essential Truth is the faith spark that leads us to kindle flames of compassion, justice, and peace for all. It was this Truth that led our people to stand at the forefront of the civil rights movement and to remain there in the fight for racial equality. It propelled our people’s activity in the promotion of women’s rights...and for those in the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender community. This Truth has informed the essential work of “Inclusion” taking place across the Jewish community and beyond --- a movement to ensure that congregations, schools, businesses, community organizations, and civic institutions are accessible to people of all physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities. And this Truth has sparked our people’s local, national, and international commitment to political activism that succeeds in improving the lives of countless people.

How difficult, then, it has been, to bear witness during this election season to the distortion of – and at certain times and in certain places, the very eclipse of the highest of moral truths.

Over the past several months – especially – we have seen a more-than-troubling rise in expressions of intolerance and prejudice across our country....We have seen the mainstreaming of populist, racist, xenophobic, and, yes...Anti-Semitic rhetoric. We have witnessed the elevation and even the celebration of the worst stereotypes. Indeed, as the ADL has reported, in 2015 so many Jewish reporters have been harassed on-line through social media the ADL has launched a new “Task Force on Online Harassment and Journalism.”

In one particularly poignant political cartoon from this past July, a man, woman, and their children are pictured sitting at the beach, trying to enjoy the view of the ocean and sky in front of them. Above them, however, drawn into the swirling in the clouds of the cartoon, are images of the election. In the cartoon’s caption the woman says to her husband: “I am finding it harder than usual to relax this vacation.”

We should be disturbed by the swirling winds of distrust and hatred. And we should not be dissuaded from speaking out against their troubling tropes simply because we think that it might be a passing phenomenon...or because it seems to be happening in another part of the country or state....or because we, in our own lifetimes, have never personally experienced societally sanctioned intolerance. One need only open a history book to find ample examples of populations who willingly gave themselves over to the basest of sentiments. In the words of Mark Twain.... ‘History may not repeat itself....But it does rhyme.’ Are we listening? What are we to do?

Among the most compelling stories of Jewish mysticism is that of the Golem of Prague. Over the centuries, there have been numerous versions of this particular legend. However, one of the earliest is set in 16th Century Prague – during a time of intense Anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish

violence. Confronted by the suffering in the Jewish community, the great Rabbi Judah Lowe ben Bezalel – also known as the Maharal of Prague – sets about to create a heroic monster. Day and night he works to fashion an enormous clay figure of a man that – through mystical powers – would be brought to life in order to protect the Jews of Prague. (A medieval Frankenstein, of sorts.) According to the story, the Maharal creates the Golem’s body using regular earth. But what brings the creature to life.....what give it its power....is that the Maharal – while uttering a series of mystical incantations – writes a single word onto the golem’s forehead: Emet.....Truth.

And with the appearance of that word, the immediately Golem comes to life and attains a single-minded commitment to preserving life. In this version of the story, the Golem rises up.....rights the wrongs being done to the Jewish people and defeats their enemies so soundly that a decree is issued by the emperor that the Jews are to be left alone. With order restored and the Golem’s mission accomplished, the Maharal, then approaches his creation, reaches up to his forehead, and erases the first Hebrew letter of the word: Emet - the letter Aleph - leaving only the last two letters, Mem – Tav: “Meit”.....which means “death.” And with that, as the story concludes, life leaves the creature.

The legend is a classic ‘hero tale’ – a story inspired by a time of uncertainty and whose protagonist is not only endowed with extraordinary powers but also possess a single minded focus upon a mission: to liberate people from oppression.

For those who are fans of the Marvel or DC superhero comic book and movie series – the legend of the Golem unquestionably qualifies as a great precursor.

Still....what is perhaps most fascinating about the Golem is not only the fact that he sets out to restore: Truth, Justice and Peace – that ethical equilibrium, you will recall, first envisioned by Shimon ben Gamaliel, but that it is the power of Truth itself that enables him to do so.

This idea is not limited to legend. Throughout the literature of the Bible, adding Truth to something means adding strength and moral grounded-ness. In dozens of Hebrew passages, for example, just affixing the word Emet to a particular word brings strength and certitude to the meaning of that word.

For example, in Hebrew - while the word: “Derech” means “a way” – a “Derech EMET” is a “reliable way.” While the word “Sachar” means “a reward,” a “S’char Emet” – in Hebrew is a “sure reward.” And while “Shalom,” as we know – is peace, in the context of the Biblical text, the phrase: “Shalom v’Emet” is “peace and stability.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the Torah, this formulation is understood as applying to people as well.

In the earliest days of Moses's career as a leader, the Torah describes how he would spend long hours each day meeting with people to help them with their difficulties. The problem, however, was that there were many, many Israelites.....and only one Moses. And so, day after day long lines would form and the people would spend hours standing in the hot sun awaiting time with Moses.

One day, Moses's beloved father-in-law, Jethro – an aged and experienced leader himself – a Midianite priest, in fact - called Moses aside to offer him some fatherly counsel. “Look at what you are doing to this people?” he said. “And look at what you are doing to yourself.” To which Moses replied “But the people come to me with their questions. What shall I do?” Jethro responded, “You cannot take on this burden by yourself. You must bring forth people who are able to help.” Amongst the community are many who are: “Anshei Emet” – people who are honorable, reliable and of substance – people who can be trusted to help guide this community forward.” And so, the text tells us, Moses then set about to gather these people and, in doing so, successfully led them forth towards the Promised Land.

Now, more than this merely being an excellent story about the importance of delegating responsibility, our rabbis teach that this text reminds us of the merit of those amongst us who are “Anshei Emet” - of those who bring honor and truth to the world through their words and deeds. And, in doing so, it emphasizes the need for each of us to strive to become such a person ourselves.

It is a theme at the heart of Judaism: The life-wisdom text known as Pirkei Avot asks: “Which is the right path for a person to choose?” Answering its own question, it teaches: “That which is honorable in itself and earns honor from others.” The Book of Proverbs urges that one should “attain Truth and keep it close.....getting for oneself wisdom, discipline, and understanding.” Indeed, we are taught that so important is living with honesty and integrity that the Talmud tells us that very first question a person will be asked when his or her soul reaches heaven will be: “*Nasata v'Natata b'emunah?*” – “While you were alive, did you deal with others in good faith.”

This Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar calls out for Emes....for Truth. In a world and at a time when we are challenged by shifting attitudes, understandings, and approaches.....these Holy Days ask each of us:

What are we doing to contribute truth to the world?

What are we doing – at home, in our workplace, in our discourse with others - to root out falsehood?

What are we doing to honor honesty?

What are we doing to elevate integrity?

According to Torah, when Gd created the world, Gd did so by making it imperfect and incomplete....leaving it up to humanity to continue the process of creation – to ultimately determine the kind of world this would be. To help us, though, we are told that Gd gave us precious tools to aid us in our work: the wisdom of the generations that came before us – the values at the heart of our tradition – the life-lens through which we are called upon to see each other and our world - the rhythm of Jewish time which brings us together so that we might realign our moral compass – and communities of sacred purpose, such as this. All of these, our Sages teach, help us to recognize the Emes....to reaffirm that which is genuinely true and right and good. And then, with this in mind....we are then called upon to set about the task of bringing that Truth....that Blessing to others.

On this Rosh Hashanah morning, we offer this prayer.

May these High Holy Days inspire us in our efforts.

And may our local communities and our nation as a whole - in the year ahead - find their way to deepening their understanding....and working more faithfully to ensure justice... and peace for all.....Amen.