

Rosh Hashanah 5779 Emet-Truth  
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Curated photos. The best vacations. Happy, smiling children. Loving spouse. Job promotion. Accolades for being an excellent human being. Facebook or Fakebook. When we follow someone on Facebook, twitter, instagram or snapchat, we think we know almost everything about them. Where they vacationed. When their children return to school. What they ate for dinner yesterday.

But the truth lies somewhere in between the perfect posts. Occasionally we see or post heartfelt, revealing comments about our inner lives including the truth.

The truth is 5778 was a wonderful year personally. I received my honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. My second son graduated college and has a job. I traveled on a Civil Rights Journey with TBA members to the South and expanded my knowledge of the truth of the Civil Rights movement.

The truth is I was able to put my faith into action, speaking truth to power, and putting my body on the line, facing arrest while standing up for my values.

The truth is that 5778 was a very difficult year personally. Family members and close friends faced illness, accidents and tragic deaths.<sup>1</sup>

The truth is every year is a roller coaster of emotions. Sometimes we find ourselves on a kiddy ride with gentle twists and turns while other years we are thrown upside down and are turned inside out. We may be rocked by personal interactions, world events or circumstances beyond our control. But the truth is there is a lot being said about truth.

What is Truth? We hear a lot about truth, truthiness, and opinions being presented as truth. Today I'd like to offer Jewish perspectives on truth.

Emet, the Hebrew word for Truth is a Jewish value and a spiritual challenge for us today. We need to listen for Truth even when it is difficult.

Emet is spelled Alef-Mem-Tav which are the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet--alef-bet. The letters spelling Emet, or Truth, Alef, Mem, Tav, have more than one point touching at the bottom, providing a strong base. [*hold up poster אממת*] Emet can be viewed as encompassing all perspectives as the whole alef-bet is contained within it. Getting to truth when you can hold a multiple range of perspectives is strong.

Sheker, the word for falsehood, is spelled with the letters, shin, kuf, and resh. They are adjacent in the alef-bet, which can be seen as not offering a wide range of perspectives.

For Sheker, all three letters stand on only one leg and can easily tip over. [*hold up poster שקר*] There is a saying in Hebrew that falsehood has no legs.<sup>ii</sup>

Some of us are familiar with the Jewish legend of the golem, an artificially created being. The rabbis assembled clay into a body and chanted special prayers. Then the word Emet, the seal of God, would be inscribed on its head to bring the creature to life. The golem was created to protect the Jewish community, for example in Prague, from pogroms. But it would eventually turn violent itself and need to be destroyed. The letter alef would be removed from Emet, leaving the word Met, death.

What would it mean for us to walk around with Emet/Truth stamped on our foreheads?

Truth can bring something powerful to life but if we are not careful with how it is used, it can be highly destructive.

Truth and its role in the world was a topic of concern even at the time of creation.

In Midrash Rabba<sup>iii</sup>, there is a debate about creating humankind.

“Rabbi Shimon said: When God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, ‘Let him be created.’ Others said, ‘Let him not be created.’ That is why it is written Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace clashed. (Psalms 85:11)

*Hesed v’Emet NifgA-shu; Tzedek v’Shalom Na-shA-ku.*

[Loving kindness and truth meet; Justice and Shalom kiss]

Mercy said, ‘Let him be created for he will do merciful deeds.’

Truth said ‘Let him **not** be created for he will be full of falsehood.’

Righteousness said, ‘Let him be created for he will do righteous deeds.’

Peace said, ‘Let him **not** be created for he will never cease quarrelling.’”

Human beings did not yet exist and the angels, with Divine attributes, were divided in their opinion about God’s idea to create humanity. They were split into two camps, like opposing color war teams or...political parties. Mercy and righteousness were in favor of God creating humankind emphasizing the positive attributes to come---acts of loving kindness and merciful deeds. Truth and Peace were opposed to God’s creating humankind citing the negative qualities that would exist including lies and arguments.

“What did the Holy One, blessed be God, do? God took truth and threw it to the ground.

The angels said, ‘Sovereign of the Universe, why do you do thus to Your own seal of truth? Let truth arise from the ground.’

God knew humankind would be flawed but created us anyway. Truth was thrown to the ground. Our job is to uncover Truth, which exists here on earth, not up in heaven.

As we know on a personal and communal level, it can be hard to be truthful. Truth may be difficult to say. In a world of multiple truths, discerning what is true means opening your heart and mind. Unfortunately, there are lies everywhere. We may consider some lies minor or white lies such as not correcting someone about your child's age so they get the child discount. Or, maybe more egregious by not reporting your whole income to the IRS. Or, by denying scientific facts. Lying hurts our character. Lying is the opposite of engaging in teshuva--striving to be the best versions of ourselves.

But truth also doesn't mean we have to say everything on our minds. The famous rabbis Hillel and Shammai disagreed how to respond to a bride who may not be considered beautiful. Hillel said she should be praised while Shammai didn't think one should say something not true. Hillel's approach to this is to engage in kindness.<sup>iv</sup> The Midrash in which the angels debate about creating humankind emphasized the angels' belief in the importance of lovingkindness and justice.

The Talmud's story of the Oven of Aknai features a debate about the halakhic status of a new kind of oven. And new a couple of thousand years ago certainly did not include self-cleaning, timers or convection cooking.

The chief rabbi, Shimon ben Gamliel and his colleagues do not think the oven is kosher. Rabbi Eliezer, however, argues that the oven is pure even though his colleagues continue to reject what he says. In frustration, R. Eliezer resorts to miracles—He asks a carob tree to prove it and it leaps from the ground. The other rabbis state a carob tree does not prove law. Next he orders a stream to prove he is right and it starts flowing backwards. The other rabbis emphasize that stream can not prove law. Convinced he was right, R. Eliezer says if the halakha is according to my opinion, the walls of the beit midrash-study hall will prove it. The walls begin to fall but R. Joshua tells the walls not to interfere in a debate with scholars. They stop falling but don't return to their original places out of respect for R. Eliezer. Finally, R. Eliezer cries out if the halakha is according to my opinion, Heaven will prove it. A voice from Heaven is heard saying, Why are you differing with R. Eliezer, as the halakha is in accordance with his opinion in every place he expresses an opinion. Rabbi Joshua responds, “[The Torah] is not in heaven (Deut. 30:12).” God laughed and said my children have triumphed over me.”<sup>v</sup>

The debate among the rabbis is intense. R. Eliezer is adamant that he is correct and will go to any means to prove it. When we are convinced we are correct, are we willing to listen to any other ideas? R. Eliezer even risks all of their lives when the walls begin to fall down on them. According to Halakha, human intervention is crucial. It is up to us to interpret and apply the law and establish Truth. Torah was

given to human beings at Sinai with the instructions for those who follow it to turn to it as a source and guide.

In this post Temple, post-prophetic world, we set up systems to establish and name the truth. It is up to humans to uncover the truth---sometimes it is buried deep. But we also wrestle with what is the absolute Truth up in the heavens. R. Yisrael Salanter, founder of the modern Musar movement, Jewish ethics, said it is very difficult to get a handle on any objective truth because we are so subjective.

On the Civil Rights Journey we traveled to Atlanta, Montgomery, Selma and Birmingham. In Selma we met Jo Ann Bland who shared her story. Jo Ann marched on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday (3/7/65), Turn-Around Tuesday and as part of the Selma to Montgomery March later that month.

When Jo Ann was a very young child her mother was in the hospital and needed a blood transfusion. With segregation, her mother could only receive blood from a black person even though there was blood available at the hospital for white people. By the time the transfusion arrived, her mother had died because of racism. Painful truth.

The racial injustice then and now continues to plague our country.

Walking over the Edmund Pettus Bridge we linked our physical steps spiritually and emotionally to the ongoing work to honor truth and pursue justice.

Pursuing Emet is to hold onto truth as best you can and act it out in the world.<sup>vi</sup> For example, if you believe that the plight of immigrants and refugees or gun violence is a Jewish truth, then you need to advocate, go to rallies, or support causes that help reunite families, and end gun violence. Please be in touch with me. I want to hear what truth you want to act on in the world.

In February, I put my faith into action by engaging in civil disobedience for Dreamers. As a mother of four sons, my heart aches for the pain of families that were separated and for those in danger of separation. The truth of my experience can be viewed from the perspective of the landlord who pressed charges; the police officers who arrested me and my belief that my decision to act was a moral obligation.

Striving for Truth means embracing paradox. Emet can hold multiple perspectives, from alef to tav. In the Oven of Achnai story: R. Joshua establishes that humans name the Truth.

The story continues after God laughs---how the other rabbis handle R. Eliezer having a direct line to God. They excommunicate him which causes suffering to the world as 1/3 of his crops are burned in anger.<sup>vii</sup>

This is a painful story. Truth does not reside up in the heavens. God has given humans the ability to decipher it in each generation. Yet, the treatment of R. Eliezer is harsh. They weren't able to hold multiple truths. How do we handle Truth we don't want to hear? Instead of leading to destruction and blocking out information, can we be expansive enough to make space for multiple truths?

How do we show compassion for the other, as Hillel taught, while also working to prevent suffering for the world?

On the Civil Rights' Trip-In Montgomery, we visited the Rosa Parks Museum and became acquainted with a few of the names and stories of this part of American History. Later, when we entered the Equal Justice Initiative building, we felt like we were walking on sacred ground. EJI was founded by Bryan Stevenson and is dedicated to helping prisoners on death row, ending three strikes and you're out (life imprisonment without parole), and helping children in adult prisons. To quote Bryan Stevenson, "[The] Criminal justice system treats you better if you are rich and guilty vs. poor and innocent." This is a painful truth.

Our meeting was held in the soils room. There were hundreds of glass containers of different colors of soil. Each was collected from one of the 400 counties in our country where a lynching occurred. In the Spring, EJI opened a memorial for America's more than 4,000 lynching victims. The memorial has additional pillars for each of the counties to take one home and honor the truth of what happened. America, the land of the free and the brave, with liberty and justice for all. Our hearts were aching when we left EJI. But we were grateful to dig deep and learn some of the truth of our nation's history.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, we will read about Jonah ben Amitai--Jonah son of my Truth.<sup>viii</sup>

Jonah wanted to ignore the truth, the message God was telling him and ran away from it. Only after being swallowed by a big fish did he listen to God's command.

Dear God, on this Rosh Hashanah 5779,  
V'taher libeinu l'avdecha b'emet Purify our hearts to serve You in truth

Help us to live by your highest values to bring wholeness and healing to our world,  
From aleph to tav and mem in the middle  
Let us listen and learn to discern the truth  
Let us speak the truth  
Let us be honest with ourselves as we are truthful with others.  
Adonai Adonai el rachum v'chanun erech apaym v'rav chesed v'emet--  
God, compassionate God, slow to anger, help us to engage in lovingkindness and Truth

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<sup>i</sup> Thank you to Karen Koffler and Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu for reading drafts of this sermon and encouraging me to include personal examples.

<sup>ii</sup> Everyday Holiness, by Alan Morinis, p. 164

<sup>iii</sup> Midrash Rabba, Genesis 8:5

<sup>iv</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 17a

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v 'Truth as a Spiritual Practice', lecture by Rabbi David Jaffe through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Rabbi Jaffe's teaching provided a helpful framework to think about Truth and pointed out this passage from the Talmud. Babylonian Talmud Baba Metzia 59b

vi Reb Shlomo Wolbe, a Chassidic rebbe and Mussar teacher, as pointed out in Rabbi Jaffe's 'Truth as a Spiritual Practice.'

vii Thanks to Rabbi Elliott Tepperman for exploring this text with me.

viii Miriam Grossman's source sheet on Truth on Sefaria