

There is nothing new under the sun, says Kohelet, the Book of Ecclesiastes. There is nothing new under the sun. And as strange, challenging, and often terrifying as the present moment seems, it is even true today.

This pandemic resonates with past crises, like the influenza outbreak of 1918. The frequent rejection of science echoes the plight of the great 19th century physician Ignaz Semmelweis, who proved the importance of washing one's hands, and who was driven mad by the outrage at so simple and important a discovery.

This is a frightening moment. But I cannot help but wonder if at times our own actions, or at least the actions of some, make things worse than they are.

The place: The Garden of Eden. The time: Genesis, Chapter 3.

The snake was shrewder than any beast of the field which God had made. He said to Eve, "Did God truly say you may not eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden?" Eve responded, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but not the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, If you take of it or put your hands on it, you will die.

The snake said, no, you're not going to die. You see, God knows that the day you eat that fruit, your eyes will open, and you yourselves will be like gods, knowing the difference between good and evil.

Now Eve could see that the tree was beautiful, and its fruit sure looked delicious, so she ate a piece, gave some to Adam, and their eyes were opened.

The new knowledge truly opens their eyes. They see that they are naked. They cover themselves. God knows something is amiss. Angered by Adam and Eve's disobedience, he ejects them from the Garden of Eden. As for the snake, God dooms him to "going flat upon the earth; dust will be your food all the days of your life."

So many questions this strange narrative leaves us with. Why did the snake tempt Eve in the first place? Why did God mete out so cruel a punishment to Adam and Eve?

Simply by being God, God, the reasons for not wanting them to eat from that tree were beyond valid. Yet Eve disobeyed.

Why did she disobey? She didn't respect God? The lush fruit was that tempting? Was the snake that convincing? The Midrash wondered about it as well, and offers an explanation

"The snake thought, If I go and speak to Adam, I know that he will not listen to me because it is difficult to tempt a man. So I shall go and speak to Eve. She will listen to me since women are light-headed and easily led astray."

Not a great explanation, but one we can understand when we recall those words were written two thousand years ago.

Perhaps, the key to understanding this story is to look at it in reverse. Instead of focusing on why Eve acted the way she did, let's assume that this is what God wanted. Like the Stage Manager in a Thornton Wilder play, this is what God set up. She did what God intended for her to do. The question then becomes, why? What was the point God was trying to make? What did God want Eve to teach us?

In a 1909 article in the American Historical Review, Yale historian Allen Johnson published an article on the Missouri Compromise. The article coins a phrase we know. "Conspiracy theory."

We cannot be certain that Johnson invented the phrase. We can be certain he did not invent the concept. Conspiracy theories are nothing new under the sun.

Take Jenny McCarthy. Playboy model, television personality, anti-vaxxer conspiracy theorist. Remember when she explained her activism to Oprah? No need for med school. No need to pay attention to PhDs in microbiology. How does she know she is right? She studied at the "University of Google." (That's an exact quote.)

The mysterious Q, who lives online and claims to be a high ranking official in the current administration. His QAnon followers believe COVID is a plot created by the Chinese and/or the Democratic party to enslave America. They

believe masks cause COVID. They believe the photographs of crowded hospital ICUs were faked. They believe Dr. Fauci is a double agent.

QAnon followers believe a lot of things that often contradict one another. But that doesn't matter. Belief in the conspiracy is all that matters.

Jo Rae Perkins is a major party candidate for the Senate in Oregon. Marjorie Taylor Greene is a major party congressional candidate in Georgia. They are two of the several candidates running in November who are followers of Q. It's tempting to laugh.

Why did Eve do what the snake said? Why knows? We don't have enough information. But we do know that she should have known better. If God who had created her, God who had created Adam, God who had created the world they inhabited, if God told her not to eat from the tree, she should not have eaten from the treat. Because she had the most unassailable source of information possible.

We understand having that kind of information. Smoking causes cancer. Is there anybody left who does not believe that? Seat belts save lives. Is there anybody left who does not believe that? Of course not. The studies have been done, the point proven, over and over and over again.

But historians tell us conspiracy theories once abounded on those two subjects...financed by tobacco companies and car companies.

There will always be some who find the truth...inconvenient. Like the snake, they will try to tempt us.

Some moments are ripe for temptation. At my daughter's piano recital, no matter how she really plays, the Mozart I hear will be sublime. If I really like the new car I am considering, I may convince myself that the lousy deal the salesman is offering is a great deal.

If I have been inside for a long time, at close quarters with, even people I love, and someone uses phrases like "herd immunity" and "liberate Michigan," it's tempting to open the door and join the voices demanding a return to normalcy right now.

We are living a difficult moment. At Temple B'nai Abraham, we know this. Today I wear the tallit I was given by you upon my retirement, a tallit chosen by our president, Bruce Greene, of blessed memory, my friend of many years.

We best respect his memory, and the memory of all who have been lost, and the pain their loved ones have suffered, when we respond to today's challenge by keeping ever in front of this: truth.

We cannot yield to the seduction of the snake's lies. Even, especially, amid the challenges, we must remain steadfast and firm and focused on what is true.

Pretty much every infectious disease doctor in the world tells us COVID is real and dangerous.

Pretty much no reputable medical authority recommends hydroxychloroquine because its effectiveness and its safety are not proven.

The countries and the states and the cities where people wear masks more and social distance more have the best records against COVID.

One of my closest friends has seen the movie *A Few Good Men* 100 times. Maybe more. It's an obsession. If you've seen the movie, you'll understand when I tell you his favorite scene is Jack Nicholson, on the witness stand, screaming at Tom Cruise, "you can't handle the truth!"

There's some truth to that. The truth can be hard to handle. It can be hurtful. Or disappointing. Or as today, the truth can be dispiriting.

This is not ending soon. That is not good news. But we can handle the truth. The more honest, the more truthful we are, with ourselves and with others, the better we are at confronting reality. The better we are as individuals and as a society at doing what we need to do.

A midrash notes that the Hebrew word for lie, *Sheker*, is spelled *shin, koof, reish*, three adjacent letters. Lies are close, hidden, doing their best to suck us into their false, dishonest, reality.

But the Hebrew word for truth, Emet - *alef, mem tov* - consists of the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet. Truth reaches out, truth encompasses everything, truth is utterly open and real.

These are challenging times. Perhaps the light at the end of the tunnel is still dim. But if we reach out to others, if we act in the genuine best interests of all of us, if we stand for truth, it may be not be as quickly as we would like, but that light will begin to shine brighter.