

Post Truth
Kol Nidre 5778- 2017
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I received a call recently. “Rabbi, I need your advice. I am standing outside my father’s hospital room, the doctor just told me that my father has end-stage, terminal cancer. He may have only a few weeks or months to live. Rabbi, do you think we should tell him? Do you think he deserves to know the truth? Or do you think he would be better off if we protected him from this terrible truth and enabled him to live out his final weeks with a sense of hope.”

What do you think I said?

These are very difficult questions – we want to be truthful; we want to be loving – and it does not seem like we can be both? And there is no one right answer for all occasions. Life is complex and different situations sometimes demand different answers – but, as a rabbi, I have a bias in these matters – a bias towards the truth. I also believe that Judaism has a strong bias towards the truth.

This does not mean that I believe we should all tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth all the time. The Rabbi’s say that even God was permitted a white lie. Remember when God tells Sarah that she will be a mother at her very advanced age. Remember how Sarah reacts? She laughs, and says – “Shall I have a son seeing that I am old and my husband is old as well?” And remember when God reports this to Abraham? God deliberately misquotes Sarah – saying, “Your wife does not believe this is possible because she is old.” Did you notice what God left out? God deliberately chose not to tell Abraham that his wife had called him an old man. Call it being tactful. Call it being kind – the rabbis understood it as both – but they also understood that God was not being completely truthful – and they were ok with that.

No - honesty is not *always* the best policy –but it usually is.
Truth is very important in Judaism.

Truth is God’s real name – did you know that?

You know those little stickers we put on when we are at a meeting or an event and people don’t know each other. The ones that say, “Hello, my name is....” And then we fill them in, and we have to choose whether we want to be formal or informal – do I put Alan or Rabbi Lucas, or Rabbi Alan? Well if God was attending one of these events and God was given one of these stickers – how would God choose to refer to God’s self? According to Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, the bible records some 70 names for God and Rabbinic Literature adds another 90! That’s a lot of names to choose from! And no one has even attempted to tally the names used by Jewish mysticism. Some mystics see the entire Torah as one long holy name of God.

So, what would God write – if God had to choose one name by which we would know Him or Her? According to the rabbis of the Talmud (Shabbat 55a, Yoma 69b) God's signature is truth – *EMET*. According to this when God wants to sign God's name God writes – *alef, mem, tav* – *emet*, truth. (If you turn to the yellow sheets that were at your seats – you will notice I have printed it at the top of the page.)

Emet is an interesting word. If you look at the second source, on the bottom of the front side you will notice that *Emet* is comprised of three letters and the first letter is *alef* the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the last letter of *emet* is *tav* the last letter of the alphabet and the middle letter of *emet* is *mem* from the middle of the alphabet. As if the word itself were trying to teach us that not only is God truth – but truth is the beginning, the middle and the end of what God wants us to understand as God's essence. Others have suggested this is the Jewish version of “the whole truth and nothing but the truth...” – as it teaches that it is not enough to begin with truth, but one must also maintain the truth throughout and end with the truth as well – the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

What does it mean when the rabbis say, “God's signature is truth?” Our signatures are our most intimate and personal renditions of our names. A name can be printed a million ways in all kinds of sizes and fonts – but our signature is uniquely our own – it is a sign of our personal stamp and approval. On all those legal documents they don't print our name --- they want our signature.

The rabbis have another insight to share about *emet*. (*Look at the other side of these sheets*) (Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis 3) *Alef-Mem-Tav* the three letters of *emet*, each one of them stands on two legs, each letter touches the line with two ‘feet’- they are all on firm ground and solid in nature. The letters of *sheker* – to lie, *shin-kof-reysh*, each stand on one foot only – you can see that they each have only one foot on the line. So, say the rabbis, truthful actions and words stand firm, while those based on falsehood and lies wobble on shaky ground.

And the last source on the back side of the page – you will notice three Hebrew words – *Bara Elohim La'asot* – these words may be familiar as they are not only from Genesis chapter 2 v.3 – and the three words with which the creation of the universe is concluded, but they are included in the Friday night Kiddush that we chant every Shabbat. The verse tells us that “God rested *asher bara Elohim la'asot* – from all that God had created – and the last letters of these three words spells... *emet* – truth. Just as an artist does not sign his painting until it is completed and worthy of his or her signature – so to, God adds God's name when the universe is complete – and signs it with God's chosen signature -- *-Emet*. So, what is the point of all of these word plays? Each in its own way remind us of how important truth is in Judaism – always was, always will be. So, you can imagine my sadness to learn that we now live in an age in which truth is passé.

Three books came out recently, and all three had the same title: Post Truth by Matthew D'Ancona, the second was Post Truth by James Ball, the third: Post Truth by Evan Davis.

Every year, the Oxford English Dictionary chooses a word of the year. A word that most captures the zeitgeist of that year; a word that featured prominently in the thinking of people during the year; a word that came to dominate conversation. This past year --- after much discussion, debate, and research, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year was: *post-truth* (even though it is technically two words). They described it as an adjective and they defined it as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

I started tonight by admitting that Judaism could conceive of a situation in which something might be even more important than truth. But it appears that we now live in a world where practically everything is more important than the truth.

I asked my High School students how important they thought it was to vote for a politician who was truthful. Their sad consensus was that politics inherently involves not telling the truth. Lying, cheating and misrepresentation are in the very DNA of every political system. When I asked them if they were upset by the possibility that Russia may have created fake Facebook accounts and postings in an attempt to influence the outcome of our presidential election – these young people shrugged and said, “Everyone does it. Most of what you read on Facebook is not true.” Our children seem to occupy a world in which honesty and being real is no longer even an expectation. Doesn’t that make you sad?

The New Yorker published an article recently titled: “Why Facebook Makes Us Unhappy.” A lot of the time when people go on line, they do so because they are bored or unhappy. When we are engaged and busy – we do not bother checking Facebook. And once on Facebook, all these unhappy or bored people are confronted by their friends all bragging about the wonderful meals they are having, the great trips they are taking and the marvelous day they are enjoying – and the result seems to be that it makes us feel worse. “Why is every else having such a good life while mine _____ - --well, does not seem to be as good? The answer is – because they are lying – or at least exaggerating – or at the very least – being selective in the moments they choose to share publicly. When we are having a lousy meal – we tend not to post it to Facebook, when we are having a bad day, we tend not to announce it to the world.

My mother-in-law clearly does not know from Facebook. Ask her how she is feeling, or how her day is going – and if she is not feeling well, or her day is not going well, she will tell you. “Mom,” I sometimes say, “When people ask how you are, just say fine.” “Why?” she protests – “Why should I say fine – if I am not fine?” Score one for the truth.

But, our Post-Truth world has gone way beyond the selective use of truth. On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the fact that we tend to listen to news programs that tell us the truths we want to hear, that already conform to our pre-conceived notion of what is true. But there is a big difference between choosing amongst various facts, and just making them up. It is one thing to be selective – to only post on Facebook when you are having

a great meal and not post all the terrible one's you have. Or only post the beautiful vacation days and not post when you are stuck inside on a rainy day. That is very different from saying the lousy meal is great and the boring day is exciting. One is – forgivable; the other is just plain lying.

Remember Pizzagate? Proponents of the Pizzagate theory falsely claimed that e-mails hacked from John Podesta's account contained coded messages referring to human trafficking and connecting a number of restaurants in the United States and members of the Democratic Party with an alleged child-sex ring. Unfortunately, I could multiply these examples of outright lying endlessly. There was a politician from Alabama who won this past week and aspires to one of the highest offices in our country – who still unabashedly states that he is not sure that Barak Obama was born in this country.

What was that famous Daniel Patrick Moynihan quote: "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, they are not entitled to their own facts." But, it seems that in our post-truth world, we are entitled to our own facts. In our post-truth world, we are no longer interested in truth – no today we are satisfied with truthiness.

First heard on The Colbert Report, a satirical mock news show that used to be on the Comedy Central television channel, **truthiness** refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, over concepts or facts known to be true. As Stephen Colbert's post-truth persona succinctly put it: "I don't trust books." Now, when Colbert said that he doesn't trust books, of course, he was joking. That was his shtick on the Colbert Report.

Have you been in my book-lined office? As someone who has spent a lifetime surrounded by books, in a love-affair with books – as someone who has spent my entire life searching for the truth – I am not laughing. Living in a post-truth world is far from funny, and for a Jew, it is downright frightening. Historically we Jews do not fare well in a world untethered to truth.

Up until now I have been using the word truth – and describing a post-truth world. But, in truth, *emet* does not mean truth. I think an even better translation might be: "real" – and being real is very different than being true.

Truth is an abstract concept. We essentially borrowed it from the Greeks. They were the ones who invented or discovered logical rules and postulates which allowed them to categorize statements as being "true" or "false". For the Greeks, and by extension for many of us, true corresponds to some kind of Ideal-Form and something which is False, does not.

At some point, *Emet* came to be understood in the light of this Greek understanding of truth. As we all got used to the Greek way of thinking, it was important to have a vocabulary to communicate it and well *emet* got the job. But, if we go back and study the Bible – and do so with fresh eyes – we can clearly see that *emet* had a different connotation for our ancestors than it does for us, post-Hellinization. For the Bible and for our ancient rabbis - *emet* was not abstract at all – it was amazingly concrete. If we had

time to study all the uses of *emet* in the Bible and Talmud we would discover that more than what was true, they were interested in what was real and what was fake, what was authentic and what was phony.

For the Bible, the problem with lying is not the violation of some abstract category, but the representation of something which is misleadingly non-real. Now you can understand why I like Colbert's truthiness concept – as it deals less with the abstract and more with the experience of what is real and what is fake. It is more... Jewish.

Some of you may remember a piece I wrote for our bulletin this summer about fake and real that I titled: "Lights, Camera, Action!" It is amazing how much fake goes into making something look real. As many of you may know – we permitted our shul to be used for the shooting of a movie that stars Adam Sandler and Chris Rock called "*The Week of...*" that will appear on Netflix sometime this year. It was a nice source of income for the shul and well why not...everyone loves a movie! Some of you even volunteered to be extras; they wanted a full sanctuary for the scene they were shooting.

The scene was a funeral scene. And here was the irony: While they were in here with their lights and cameras and action, I sat in my office preparing for a real funeral of a beloved and long-time member of our congregation.

My preparation required no electricians, handymen, lighting people or actors. A real funeral is a pretty simple affair. It consists of a real rabbi, real grief and loss, real mourners and a real sense of loss over someone who was here yesterday and now is no more. Those of you who volunteered to be mourners for the movie, were asked to pretend to be sad. But, the people who were with me, at the real funeral, didn't have to pretend at all. There was a real and genuine sense of loss and sadness – a good and decent man was no more.

It *is* amazing how much fake goes into making something look real – how much time, effort and money it took to create a movie scene, something that looked like a real funeral but wasn't.

I offered to play the rabbi in the movie's funeral scene – but they didn't seem to want a real rabbi. Apparently, since I am not an actor, they might have been concerned that I wouldn't come off looking real – as a rabbi, that is. It takes real talent to look like a real rabbi – in a movie.

It dawned on me as I wrote that article and as they shot the movie here at TBS, that movies had become the perfect metaphor for our time. We live at a time when we want authenticity but we don't quite know how to achieve it – so we fake it until we make it. What is that saying: "Sincerity is the key to success – once you learn how to fake that, you have it made..." Today we would say that truthiness is the key to success and once you know how to fake that, you have it made. Such is life in a post-truth world.

Watching them shoot the movie here in our sanctuary, I learned that in a movie, fake looks real, and real looks fake. There are dozens of recipes for blood when blood is needed on the big screen, none of them contain blood. Corn syrup – yes, food coloring – yes but real blood? No. I understand that most food commercials don't use real food because it won't look real – lettuce is coated in shellac to keep it looking fresh; mashed potatoes are often used in place of ice-cream because they don't melt; and that steam rising from hot food –it is usually cigarette smoke from a hidden cigarette. Yes, it takes a lot of fake to make something look real.

I'm still bummed over the fact that I wouldn't make a good rabbi in the movies.

Now, I like movies a lot. But I am worried about a culture that spends so much time and effort cultivating the art of the fake. You see, the thing is, we don't need more fake – we need more real, in a post-truth world, we need more *emet*.

The amount of money that was spent to make that movie was staggering. Fake is good business. There seem to be almost unlimited resources, talent, and access that go into the business of being fake – but real synagogues struggling to do real things for real people, can hardly make ends meet.

I know I am being hard on the fake industry. The truth is that sometimes fake can be a source of real beauty, real insight and real truth. Take Shakespeare and Dostoevsky; great literature and great art and yes, even great movies – can touch us, and move us and enable us to grow in real and significant ways.

Fake is ok if it does not lose sight of what is real. It is only when fake comes to believe it is real and take itself too seriously, that it loses its way.

There is fake and there is real – and our job is to know the difference.

There is fake news and there is real news – the challenge is knowing which is which. How many times have one of you forwarded me something you found on the Internet – either because you thought I should know about it, or to just share your horror that it exists. “How do you know this is true?” I ask. “Because I found it on the Internet!” “Because I found it on the Internet, because I heard it on the news, because a friend shared it with me. In a post-truth world, this is no longer an acceptable answer. I am afraid that we all must become critical consumers – more discerning than believing – more questioning than accepting – such is the challenge of living in a post-truth world.

Judaism is about *emet* – about being real.

Some of you are probably wondering how can a rabbi who believes in fairy tales spend so much time advocating for the truth. Every time we read the Torah, we finish by lifting it and declaring – “*V'Zot HaTorah...*This is the Torah that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai...” Come on rabbi –do you really believe that? When we approach the Torah, we take hold it and we make a blessing in which we declare before all assembled that we

believe in a God – *asher natan lanu torat emet* – we celebrate a God who has given us a *Torah of emet* - a Torah of truth. Really? Do I really believe that a Torah that speaks of seas splitting, the sun stopping in its daily course, of a universe created in six days some 5778 years ago – is a Torah of truth?

There is a prayer we recite every evening as part of our daily davening, we will say it a little later this evening, it can be found on page 209 in our *mahzorim* if you want to take a look at it. It comes right after the *Shma*. The last word of the *Shma* is...*Emet* and the first word of this prayer is ...*Emet*. As it is printed in our prayer-book – the two prayers share the word – *emet* – they share truth. The *Shma* ends by affirming that the God we believe in is a God of *Emet Adonai eloheychem emet* – that God is real. And then in the very next prayer – it links *emet* to faith – *emet v'emunah*. *Emunah* is the Hebrew for faith. When our own Conservative Movement wanted to publish a short tractate on the essential principles of what it means to be a Conservative Jew – they took its title from these two words: *emet v'emuna*.

In Judaism faith and truth are inseparable. Oscar Wilde said, “Skepticism is the beginning of faith.” Faith and truth need each other – depend on each other. For me, belief in God is a process, and doubt about the particulars of God is a part of that process. As Rabbi David Wolpe said, “Any serious relationship involves doubt -- whether with a spouse, a sibling, a colleague or a friend. But, if the primacy of the relationship is what matters, the messiness of the details is simply terrain to be navigated and negotiated along the way.”

Does your commitment to truth cause you to question your faith? Good – that is exactly how it should be. And your faith should inform your sense of truth as well. *Emet V'emunah* – the two need each other and are dependent on each other. I do not believe the world was literally created in 6 days but at the same time – I believe the Torah is, if not literally true, absolutely true.

If you had to choose one person from the entire Bible who you think had the most faith in God – who would you choose? Abraham? Moses? Chana? David? Those would all be good choices – they were all people of enormous faith – but they would not be my choice. The one whose faith was most tested in the entire Bible – was Job. Job was a man who had everything: a wife, children, wealth and honor. And then on a seeming whim, God takes it all away. Chapter after chapter Job endures the worst kinds of tragedy. But with all his doubts, his faith remains unshaken.

Job insists on the truth – when friends present to him the dogmas of his day: he must have done something wrong, he must have angered God in some way – Job rejects these out of hand – if Job knows anything at all – he knows he does not deserve what is happening to him.

But the one thing that is unshakable is Job's relationship with God. He questions the fairness of God's choices, he even challenges the notion of divine providence but never, not once does he question his faith in God, his sense that God is real.

Some here tonight may have had a Jobian year, or maybe some Jobian moments within the past year – I hope that Job himself can offer you some guidance. Difficult though it may have been Job maintains his relationship with God – and I hope you will as well. Job is not afraid to ask very real, very, very big questions of God. He is the man of both *emet v'emunah* – faith and truth. He maintains his dialogue with God amidst all the paradoxes and complexities of God's universe. And while he, like so many of us – never really comes to understand what happened to him – he is a relentless pursuer of God and the truth – we would do well to follow his example.

No, as a student of the Bible, I am not a believer in fairy tales, although I happen to like fairy tales very much thank you. No, I study our Bible and I embrace our sacred tradition because of my commitment to *emet.... V'emunah* – to the truth, and to faith. I invite you to join me in this journey.

If ever there was a time to get in touch with what is real – that time is now. As we begin our Yom Kippur experience, we join Jews the world over and gather in synagogues like ours, for hours upon hours, all in an attempt to get in touch with our real selves. Many of you who came to the sanctuary to participate in that Netflix movie shoot over the summer, were hired to be fakes. I hope you came here tonight to be real. Many of you were hired then, to come to sit in this sanctuary and pretend. I hope you came here tonight willing to drop all pretenses.

In this post-truth world, on this Yom Kippur Day, I am asking that we do what Jews have always done – rededicate ourselves to *emet* – to the truth, to being real.

We need to begin by being real with ourselves. I find it interesting that whenever someone stands to speak at an Alcoholics Anonymous Meeting they all seem to begin the same way: "Hello, my name is _____ I am an alcoholic." They must begin with nothing less than the truth – unless you can begin by looking honestly at yourself – all the rest will be built on deception and lies. Hello, my name is Alan, and I am I am what? The answer to that simple question should be what pre-occupies us for the next 24 hours. It is a question that demands honesty; it demands that we be real – even in a post-truth world.

I ask that we also be real with each other. In a world of artifice and false emotions, in a world of lies and falsehoods – let this place, this community, this fellowship be based on *emet*. On being real – on real relationships, real honesty, real love. It is appropriate, like God, to be polite when necessary – but it is also necessary, like God, to make sure that our signature is truth. That all our interactions be real, and honest and sincere.

And finally – we must demand truth of others. Maybe we do live in a post-truth world – but we are Jews, and our commitment is to *emet*. We must refuse to participate, contribute or tolerate lies wherever and whenever they are found. No, all politicians do not lie – and it is time to demand truth and honesty of anyone who would seek to represent us. We must demand this of our religious leaders as well, we must demand it

of our friends, of our newspapers, and any who would seek to engage us, inform us or lead us in any way. And we must teach it to our children so that they can grow in a world of *emet v'emunah*. Tonight, we proclaim, that in a post-truth world – we demand truth.

Our ancestors chose *emet, v'emunah*– I pray we will do so as well.