

The Danger of a Post-Truth America

I want to begin with a Midrash, a Rabbinic teaching, about our Torah reading this morning which, while composed well over a thousand years ago, could have easily been written today:

“When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day of creation. When he came to the verse regarding the creation of people he was shocked by the words: ‘and God said: let us make man in our likeness and in our image.’ Moses could not understand God using the word “US” when God was the only creator. Moses feared that this would encourage those who believed in more than one God to point to the text and say that God was working with other Divine Beings. Moses said, Sovereign of the Universe! Why do you give an excuse to heretics?” (Genesis/Bereshit Rabbah, 8:8)

Many solutions were given to this question, with the most astounding being that quoted by the Midrashic sages:

“When the time came for the Holy Blessed One to make the first human being, the ministering angels made themselves into competing counsels. Some of them said, ‘Don’t create humans,’ and the others said, ‘Create them.’ The angel of kindness said, ‘Create them, for they will do acts of loving kindness.’ Then the angel of truth said, ‘Do not create them, for they will be full of lies.’ The angel of righteousness said, ‘Create them, for they will establish justice.’ The angel of peace said, ‘Do not create them, for they will be in constant strife!’ God had no good response to the angel of truth. What did the Holy Blessed one do, but grab up truth and hurl it to the earth? Whereupon the ministering angels said before the Holy Blessed One, ‘Ruler of all worlds, what have You done? Why have You so chastised the chief of your court? Let truth arise again from the earth’” (Bereshit Rabbah, 8:8). But God left truth on the ground.

This wonderful Midrash answers Moses’ question by suggesting that while God created humankind alone, the Torah’s use of the phrase, “let us create” is a reference to God’s consultation with the angels as to whether God should create humans or not. Our sages bring this Midrash as an example of the complexity of the human being: on the one hand, people can be righteous and kind, but on the other, human beings can be full of lies and strife. Humanity has succeeded in reaching to the most amazing peaks of morality and goodness but has also gone down to the lowest pits of horrific behavior.

How did God deal with this dilemma? He threw truth down to the earth, thus challenging humankind to deal with it. God placed that power in our hands. If we fail to use that power to support truth, then it will continue to lie on the ground.

The Rabbis of the Midrash offer a bold solution to Moses’s question, but I am beginning to wonder if God’s faith in humankind was misplaced.

The writers of this Midrash were not naïve about the complexity of truth or the human proclivity to lie. The Rabbis understood that truth was complicated. They were quick to point out that the word EMET begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, followed by the middle of the alphabet and concluding with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The lesson: truth can be expansive. But make no mistake, the Rabbis also believed that there were limits to the definition of truth and they were quick to call out a lie. There is a wonderful Yiddish Proverb: A half truth is a whole lie. In other words, a half truth, or a misleading truth, is nothing more than a creative lie. It is not hard to see the relevance of this Midrash.

There is no question that we have a truth problem in our country. In fact, some are defining our time as the post-truth generation. Did you know that in 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary announced post-truth as its “word of the year”? It is an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

Post-truth is based upon the notion that each of us has the right to define our own truths. To say whatever we happen to believe, whatever makes sense, whatever works for us in the moment, and call it “my truth” is as far from Judaism as any idea that I can imagine, and it is dangerous. When we no longer believe that there is a set of truths that all of us are duty-bound to subscribe to in this country; when we are unwilling to say that there are ideas or theories that are so repugnant that they are outside of the public arena; we have entered dangerous territory. When societies embrace relativism over accepted truth, or what has been called “alternative facts”, they do so at their own risk.

George Orwell, writing in 1942 about the Spanish Civil War, wrote about the success of Fascist propaganda: “This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history.... So for all practical purposes the lie will have become the truth.” Power seeks to impose its own interpretation of events—of the world—on people’s minds, a specter that haunts Orwell’s novel *1984*.

If Orwell was nervous in 1942, if he wrote about those fears in his book *1984*, then I wonder how he would feel about America in 2021. Somehow, I don’t think that he would have been surprised at the ransacking of the Capital on January 6th. But the post-truths of Representative Majorie Green, whose beliefs are nothing more than vile, self-serving lies, would, I believe, stun George Orwell. Not that he would have trouble believing that someone would have the audacity to speak such filthy lies, but what he wouldn’t expect is that people who could stop her, people who could banish her from office, have chosen to appease her, and contribute to her cause.

The fact that she is still serving as a member of the House of Representatives; the fact that some of her fellow congresspeople gave her a standing ovation in a meeting where she should have been censured; the fact that the leadership of her party was unwilling to take action because it was not in their self-interest; should horrify and scare all of us, Jews notwithstanding.

After all, Jews are at the center of Green's thinking as they are in Quonon. This notion of Jews shooting lasers to start forest fires supported by the Rothchilds is much more than a sick joke; it is a reworking of some of the worst anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish money putting innocent people in danger for their own greedy avarice. Any Jew with a cursory knowledge of our history would know just how dangerous this type of rhetoric can be.

I feel compelled to remind this congregation that when Representative Ilhan Omar accused Israel of hypnotizing the world or AIPAC of controlling Congress with "Benjamins", a slang word for money, I decried her lies and her use of anti-Semitic tropes as well.

Truth is sitting before us, and rather than lending it a hand, it is being pushed to the ground.

How do we find our way out of this quagmire? While I do not possess the exact answer, I can suggest an approach that is found in our Torah reading this morning.

The giving of the Ten Commandments was a watershed in world history. Unlike Christianity and Islam, whose revelations were directed at one person, the Torah was given to an entire people. On that day at Sinai, the Jewish people were exposed to the notion that there are moral truths that are absolute, above us, and it is our responsibility uphold them. The giving of the Ten Commandments created a public square where there were ethical boundaries. Murder and theft were declared universally wrong. One of those laws is not taking God's name in vain; another is that it is forbidden to give false testimony. The lesson is that not only do our actions matter, but our words matter; the truth matters; and lying is an abuse of the human gift of speech, and an affront to God.

Please note that the Torah does not record Moses taking a poll of the people as to which commandments were popular and which were not before he brought them down the mountain! That is because they came from a higher power and were accepted as such - not by individuals, but by a nation. The people accepted these laws with the timeless words: *Naaseh Venishmah*. We will do! We will listen!

While over the course of the history of our people we may have struggled with keeping the Ten Commandments, we never denied that we were responsible to keep them. We have never had a post-commandment moment!

Our country created its own Sinai in 1776. Listen to the Preamble of the Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

In 1776, we the people entered into this covenant that we call the Constitution.

We are long overdue for a “We the people” moment in our day, to stand at the American Sinai again. To regain our footing as a country; to acknowledge our joint commitment to the principles of this country and to state clearly what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.

But we will never get there if we continue to embrace this individualistic post-truth ideology. Unless we are willing to do as the Israelites did so long ago, to act as a people to accept a higher law, a higher truth, and with it the responsibility to act with vigor against those who claim that lies are truth.

The question that was raised in an ancient Midrash is still with us today. Will we be worthy of God’s faith? Will we yet raise truth from the ground? The answer, in this Orwellian moment, is in our hands and on our tongues.

Shabbat Shalom!