

What It Means to Be Anshe Emet, People of Truth: Anshe Emet at 150

Rabbi Michael S. Siegel | High Holy Days 2023

Rosh Hashanah Day I | Sanctuary

The word *Emet* is chanted 4 times.

Emet means truth.

On Rosh Hashanah of 1873, 20 Jews gathered in the living room of Louis Sax on the North Side of Chicago. Those joined together to welcome the New Year had come to this country from places like Bohemia, Hungary, and Russia. It is almost certain that the service was conducted in Hebrew and German. The new congregation quickly chose a name, Anshe Emet, people of truth, which comes from a passage in the book of Exodus. In it, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, describes the type of people that Moses should include in his leadership as the children of Israel began their journey to the land promised by God:

אֲנָשֵׁי-חַיִל People who are able

יִרְאַי אֱלֹהִים People who stand in awe of God

אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת *People of Truth*

Now we mark a century and a half since that service took place, and the questions that comes to mind are:

- What message were the founders attempting to impart with their choice of Anshe Emet?
- Why the focus on Emet, truth?
- What relevance does the name have today?

Anshe Emet is an unusual name for a synagogue. There are only a handful of congregations with this name in the United States. Jonathan Sarna, the great American Jewish historian, shared with me that the use of Emet in a name usually points to a reaction of some sort, a desire on the congregation's part to distinguish itself from something else. Looking around Chicago in the 1870s, the other synagogues in this area were both Reform: North Chicago Hebrew which is now Temple Sholom, and Emanuel. Sarna suggests that the founders of our congregation may have wanted to distinguish themselves from the more liberal congregations and proclaim that those who worshipped in this place were *Anshe Emet*, were bearers of the truth of our tradition.

This morning, I will suggest another possible reason. Perhaps the founders of this community wanted to make a statement about Emet, truth itself, in the context of American life.

Those gathered in Louis Sax's apartment were immigrants from other lands who came to America because of the promise, the truth, proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.

No other country had ever made such a truth claim based upon the foundational principles of the book of Genesis, that:

- all of us come from a single source,
- all of us are created in the image of God,
- and as a result, all of us should be included as full citizens.

It is no accident that those words appear on the ceiling of this sanctuary, tied to their Biblical underpinnings. *Naaseh Adam Kizalmaynu*, the words from the book of Genesis: *Let us make man in our image*. Below, the words of the Declaration: *All Men are Created Equal*. Those words proclaim that Jews in America are not an inconvenient afterthought to revolutions given freedom begrudgingly, or barely tolerated as citizens as they were in their Europe. No, those praying in that room had experienced an America committed to that truth of equality. Here, they were citizens with actual rights. At the same time, those gathered to pray in that first service were also well aware that not all people in America were deemed equal or endowed with liberty. Those sitting in that living room had witnessed the Civil War and had seen this country nearly destroy itself because of each side's bedrock belief in what they considered Emet: those who considered the opening line of the Declaration of Independence as an expanding truth and those who did not. The Civil War was not fought over land, but an idea, a truth.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored
He have loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on*

This congregation was founded only 8 years after that bloody conflict was fought to preserve the union and the truths of The Declaration of Independence. 620,000 soldiers died in that war. To put this in some context, that number is approximately equal to the total of American fatalities in all wars from the Revolutionary to the Korean combined.

In the wake of that terrible war, is it not conceivable that the founders of this community sought to make a statement about Emet? A statement not about the religious observance of the other congregations in the area, but one about the approach to Emet from the Jewish tradition.

Those people in Louis Sax's living room would have known that according to our tradition, one must approach the truth with humility, as it is the purview of God, whose very name is truth. As the book of Psalms proclaims, "In Your hand I entrust my spirit, El Emet, O God of Truth." (Psalm 31:6) For a person to claim that he or she possesses the truth would be an affront to God. The founders would have also known that the Jewish approach to truth is expansive, like the word Emet itself, which is formed from the first letter, *alef*, the middle letter, *mem*, and the final letter, *tav*, of the Hebrew alphabet. Emet spans the entire alphabet. According to the Jewish tradition, truth is expansive, not narrow; it is fluid, not frozen; and as a result, it belongs to no individual, group, or cause. The only way to discover the truth is sitting, struggling together, allowing diverse opinions to be heard. I believe that the founders of Anshe Emet were making a statement regarding the centrality of truth in their day, in the wake of a bloody war.

If we were able to bring Mr. Sax and the other 19 parishioners who made up that first Anshe Emet service to our Rosh Hashanah service today, there are many things that they would not recognize:

- Women leading the service.
- The melodies and the changes to the liturgy.
- The language in which the service was being conducted.

But they would recognize the crisis of truth in this country today. The vitriol, the anger, the unwillingness to listen to one another, and the violence that such division generates. A century and a half since the founding of this congregation, they would have an even deeper appreciation for the importance of being Anshe Emet: People of Truth! And so should we.

A recent Pew Study found that nearly two-thirds (64%) of American adults say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when listening to elected officials. 48% say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when using social media. We have a crisis of truth in this country. The broad understanding of Emet is contracting daily based upon our cable news network, those we interact with on social media, our news feeds, our tribes. Truth is under attack, and with the advent of AI it is hard to predict where things are going.

In 2005, Stephen Colbert invented a word, "truthiness", which now appears in the Webster's dictionary with the following definition: *Truthiness: Is claimed for something based upon a feeling or desire for it to be true, rather than on facts or evidence.* In other words, we assert that something is true because we want it to be, because it fits into a larger narrative that we have chosen. That is truthiness and not truth.

18 years later, in 2023, the joke has lost its bite.

- Truthiness is no joke when it can be used to prevent others from reading literature in certain states.
- Truthiness is no joke when it's used to deny the results of a fair election.
- Truthiness is no joke when it stokes the type of fear that leads to violent actions.
- Truthiness is no joke when we have to curate conversations around a dinner party or a holiday meal for fear that things will get out of hand because everyone is so sure of their version of the truth that they cannot hear anyone else.

In the last 60s, Phillip Reif warned of the slippery slope that we are on in his book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. For most of human history, he wrote, people read the Bible, studied Greek Philosophy, read great literature in search of truth, morality, and goodness. Truth was what you sought to discover outside of yourself. Reif argued that in the wake of the teachings of Sigmund Freud and the psychological revolution, we began to focus our attention inward. As a result, after Freud, it was possible to believe that truth grows out of the soil within us, or as is commonly heard today, *my truth*, as if each person is the sole arbiter of what is Emet.

The danger of this approach is apparent to anyone who observes the American scene where those with whom we disagree are no longer members of another party or movement; they are a threat

to us and our way of life, our mortal enemies. The danger of this approach is apparent on a number of college campuses where rather than debating issues, students feel justified in disrupting a speaker, hounding a professor, petitioning that classic works of Western thought be banned, because some find those views, or those of their authors offensive and personally threatening. I am reminded of the words of Louis Brandeis offered nearly 100 years ago: *the remedy to bad speech is more speech, not enforced silence*. The High Holy Day period serves as a powerful reminder that the way forward is always a choice, as individuals, as a community, as a city, as a nation, and as a congregation.

We have spoken so far mostly of Emet. But let's not forget the word Anshe.

Anshe Emet: People of Truth. In selecting this name, the founders of this congregation embraced the Jewish belief that the possibility of truth exists outside of any one of us, and can only be discovered when people have the courage to engage with each other and our texts in a joint quest for Emet. This approach is based upon the idea that my understanding of truth is enhanced by your understanding of truth.

- Where listening is as important as speaking.
- Where our sacred documents and our founding documents have a place at the table.
- It begins with a humility based upon the notion that that no one possesses the whole truth.
- It begins with respect, by engaging with open hearts and minds in difficult conversations.

Rabbi Israel Salanter taught that one cannot impact the wider society unless we are willing to create that change in ourselves and our communities. So let us make our congregation a place where we can engage in hard, thoughtful, and fruitful discussions. Let the work begin here in this community as we come together to fulfill our name, Anshe Emet: People of Truth.

Here, we will continue talk about the political issues dividing this country. To help us in that endeavor we will be holding a community conversation between Rabbi David Saperstein and Tevi Troy. The two are nationally recognized Jewish thought leaders whose politics and social views could not be more different. They represent the best of Jewish liberal and conservative thinking in this country. They are coming to model how Jews can have thoughtful political conversations and debate the issues of our day, from a presidential election to the issues pulling the fabric of our country apart.

Here, we are going to continue to engage as a community and talk about what is happening in Israel, and our relationship with the Jewish State. We will continue to bring a range of thought leaders to our community beginning with the break on Yom Kippur afternoon when we will play a recently recorded conversation that I had with one of the most respected commentators on the subject, Rabbi Daniel Gordis. We will continue to partner with an organization called Resetting the Table which has now trained more than 50 members of our community in their methodology of how to engage each other on Israel. We have already taken people from the full spectrum of our congregation, from those who support the right wing of Israel to those who do not identify as Zionists, and taught them a strategy that allows them to listen to one another without judgment or reproach. These conversations have been remarkable.

Here, we will continue our efforts to bridge the Black-Jewish Divide by having honest, open conversations. Our Bright Star/Anshe Emet book club will continue to gather and discuss challenging books about the Black and Jewish experience. We will be instituting an exciting new effort to bring the youth of our congregations together to engage in dialogue and travel together to better appreciate each other's history and narrative.

Here at Anshe Emet, we will continue to be a center for Jewish life and offer a multiplicity of religious expressions, that will allow for all voices in the Jewish community to be heard and offer a truly expansive expression of the different truths of the Jewish tradition.

In our 150th year, let us strive to be People of Truth:

- Let us engage with and listen to those with whom we disagree.
- Let us challenge each other respectfully and grow together in the quest for truth.
- Let us remember that truth, Emet, lies outside of us, and is the purview of the Holy One, and no one person or group.

I conclude with a prayer that was in the Mahzor of those that gathered in Louis Sax's apartment just as it is in ours, a prayer about God and Truth. *Emet Atah Hu Rishon, ve'Atah Aharon*: Truth, you are beginning and the end. *U'mebaaledecha ayn lanu melech goel u'moshia*: Without you, without an understanding of truth that is beyond ours, there is no nobility, no redemption, no salvation.

As we begin this new year, I invite you to join in song, repeating the word Emet, and to consider how all of us have a role to play in fulfilling the vital meaning of our name: Anshe Emet. Serving as a beacon to others as to what it means to be People of Truth.

TRUTH, YOU ARE FIRST, YOU ARE LAST, AND WITHOUT YOU, THERE IS NO
NOBILITY, NO REDEMPTION, NO SALVATION
-MORNING LITURGY

Emet (x4)	אֵמֶת, אֵמֶת, אֵמֶת, אֵמֶת
Emet ata hu rishon	אֵמֶת אַתָּה הוּא רִישׁוֹן
Ata hu acharon	אַתָּה הוּא אַחֲרׇן
U'mi'bal'adecha	וּמִבְּלֵעֲדֶיךָ
Ein lanu melech	אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ
Ein lanu go'el	אֵין לָנוּ גּוֹאֵל
U'moshia	וּמוֹשִׁיעַ