

Sermon for Yom Kippur  
September 29-30, 2017 - 10 Tishri, 5778  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
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In the Midrash, Rabbi Shimon said: When the Holy One was about to create humanity, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups. Some of them said, "Create humanity!" while others urged, "Don't create humanity."

Love said, "Let him be created, because he will perform acts of love"; Truth said, "Let him not be created, because he is full of lies"; Righteousness said, "Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds"; Peace said, "Let him not be created, because he is full of strife."

What did Holy One do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground.<sup>1</sup>

Centuries later, the great Hasidic sage Menachem Mendl of Kotzk - the Kotzker Rebbe - reflected on this teaching. "Why did God only throw Truth down and not Peace as well, when Peace had also argued that humanity should not be created?" So he answered: "The source of strife is that each person fights for his own truth. But if one pushes Truth aside, there is no longer a cause to quarrel, there are no disputes, and no one to denounce Peace."

Truth is a complicated thing. Maybe the Kotzker Rebbe is right. Battles over truth seem to fuel the conflicts that roil the globe. When we look at the great human conflicts in history, they often were not simply contests for land and treasure, but also conflicts of ideas and competing truths. Fascism vs. democracy. Communism versus capitalism. Shiite versus Sunni, Catholic versus Protestant, orthodox versus Reform. Right versus left.

More and more we see people retreating to their corners, refusing to work to compromise or even talk to people with whom they disagree. We refuse to accept that the other side might actually have something to teach us. We become so fixated on our vision of the truth, that not only do we refuse to accept that there is another truth, we demonize those who hold that different truth. People who take positions opposite to the truth we know are either "useful idiots" or belong in a "basket of deplorables."

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<sup>1</sup> Bereishit Rabba 8:5

The Psalms teach us that "Truth springs up from the earth (Psalm 85:12)." And sometimes it seems like truths grow like weeds. So perhaps the best things we can do is stop worrying so much about truth. Maybe if we just stop spending so much time thinking and arguing about who was right and who was wrong, our world would be a much more peaceful place.

At the same time, imagine what would happen if we no longer were willing to fight for what we believe in? With the dawning of the enlightenment in the 1700's a new truth sprang forth from earth that changed the world: the idea that all people are created equal. This truth which rose up from the core of our texts and tradition is what gave birth to this nation. The authors of this nation enshrined that truth in our founding documents, and posited the idea that Government should no longer be determined by the whims of a monarch, but instead government should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

They were willing to stake their lives on those ideas. Patrick Henry famously said: "Give me liberty or give me death!" So convinced they were of the rightness of their ideas, they were willing to risk everything to advance their truths.

Similarly, after nearly two thousand years of living in exile from the land of Israel, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Theodor Herzl and the early Zionists realized that the Jewish people, like all peoples, had a right to live in peace, safety, and security in our own homeland. Herzl worked himself into exhaustion fighting for this idea, a truth that had never been extinguished from the Jewish soul. The proclamation: "Next year in Jerusalem" would no longer be a fantasy, but a reality. "If you will it," Herzl said, "then it is no dream."

The struggle to realize that truth came to fruition just 70 years ago in the UN Partition plan which created the State of Israel, and is a truth thousands of our people have given their lives to secure.

But as committed as many are in fighting for the truth, the fact is that we, as human beings, have fundamental limitations on our ability to understand what is true. Gandhi once said: "What may appear as Truth to one person, will often appear as untruth to another person."

We ought to fear anyone who claims with any certainty that they possess a monopoly on the truth. At the same time, to abandon a pursuit of the truth, or to shirk our responsibility to fight for what we know to be good and right can be a dangerous and grievous sin.

So what do we do? I think the answer lies in a profound teaching from our tradition. There is a midrash which teaches that when God created humanity, God fashioned just one human creature, androgynous - male and female together. This first human being was created with two faces and no back. But to create us as individuals, God sawed us in two - male and female, and suddenly each had a back.

The face is where we encounter and interact with the world. When we are little, our parents teach us - "look at me when I'm talking with you." When we want to disengage, we turn our faces away and turn our back to the world.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning humanity was supposed to be able to look out at the world from all directions. We had to learn to see in two directions at once, to see the world in 360 degrees, to embrace the full complexity and diversity of life. We had to appreciate that there was more than one way of looking at a problem, more than one way of seeing the world.

As individuals and we have come to love our backs. We like to believe that there is only one right answer, only one right way, only one truth. And sometimes there is. But our lives are filled with contradictions. What's the right thing to do - take on additional responsibility at work or to spend more time at home with our children? What's the right thing to do - stretch for a once in a lifetime opportunity to travel and experience the world or to be more conservative and save for a rainy day? What's the right thing to do - try one more experimental treatment or let nature take its course?

Our world is filled with contradictions too. There is a passionate debate going on in our country about the challenge of immigration. How open should our society be to immigrants or to refugees? What should we do about individuals and families whose residence in America may not have been secured through the legal process?

For example, let's suppose Hector comes from Honduras, where the menacing violence of the drug cartels make it impossible for his son to go to school without being forced to join a drug gang. So he takes his son on summer break to visit cousins in America. During his visit, he tells his family the horrors of everyday life in his home country. So they encourage him to stay with them. His cousin helps Hector get a job with his friend's landscaping company, and his son starts going to

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<sup>2</sup> My deepest thanks to Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem for sharing this insight in her webinar "On The Threshold of a New Year".

school in the fall. They thrive. Hector and his cousin eventually start their own landscaping company which employs 20 people, he buys a house, his son becomes a straight-A student and applies to college. They realize the America dream.

So the truth of the matter is this. The rule of law is intrinsic to the essence of Judaism and is fundamental to a moral society. In the midrash, the rabbis teach: "The whole Torah is dependent on the rule of law - that is why the Holy One gave a set of laws that follow the 10 commandments."<sup>3</sup> Judaism is about creating a moral and just society that is dependent on the rule of law. In rendering judgment, the Torah teaches us not to show favor to the rich or the poor, but to adhere simply to the facts of the case and the law. Hector, like millions of immigrants who did not follow the legal process, broke the law, and so he must be prepared to accept the consequences of his decision to break the law.

And the truth of the matter is this. The admonition to love the stranger is intrinsic to the essence of Judaism and is fundamental to a moral society. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses commands us to: "Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts, and don't be so stiffnecked. For Adonai your God ... upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)." The command to care for the stranger recurs no less than 36 times in the Torah, more than any other commandment, and demands that we protect the stranger not simply from physical violence, but economic oppression and emotional harm. As Jews who have wandered the globe for two thousand years, always the people who were "not from here" we know what it is to need safe haven and to have doors slammed in our face, to suffer expulsion, deportation, and xenophobic hatred. We also know that our people has benefited from the American dream perhaps more than any immigrant community in our nation's history - how can we not be moved with compassion by those who follow in our footsteps?

The truth of the matter is this: there is more than one truth. It is right and fair and honest to say that the moral core of our tradition teaches two truths - that the rule of law must be venerated as a primary moral value, AND that our responsibility to protect the vulnerable and welcome the stranger is also a primary moral value. When we cultivate the

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<sup>3</sup> Nachmanides commentary to Exodus 21:1 in *The Commentators Bible: Exodus* edited by Michael Carasik. Philadelphia: JPS, 2005 p. 168.

ability to hold two truths in tension, we can use the energy that tension generates to find a creative and moral solution.

Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement - is a day that demands Teshuva which means engaging a process of repentance and return. But a return to what? To whom? Perhaps what we need to return to on this Yom Kippur is the core essence of who we were at the beginning of our human journey. Perhaps we need to return to a time when we had no back, when we had two faces and could see more than one truth at a time.

Maybe instead of seeing only one truth, and turning our back on the other, perhaps we can open our hearts a little wider to see if we can find room for more than one truth - the truth we know and the truths others know. Making room for more than one truth does not mean abandoning the truth you know. But if we can hold more than one truth at a time, we may find that we learn a great deal from simply listening to both.

Parker Palmer, in his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy* teaches that in a world of competing truths, we need two things: *chutzpah* and *humility*. "By *chutzpah* I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By *humility* I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial and may not be true at all - so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to 'the other' as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction."<sup>4</sup>

The fact is that none of us possesses the entire truth. In the course of our lifetimes, with education and experience, we can learn to appreciate just a fraction. We must begin to realize that the way to heal our broken society is not to destroy those whose truth is different from our own, but to expand our hearts to hold the tension of multiple truths. Ultimately, it is when we are willing to hold two different truths together, even contradictory truths, that is when we get closer to understanding the larger truth that only the Holy One possesses.

The Talmud teaches us that in ancient times there was a dispute between the two great academies of Hillel and Shammai that threatened to split the Jewish people itself. One asserted, the law is in keeping with our view, and the other contended, the law is in keeping with our view. Then the rabbis suggest something amazing: A voice from the Holy One called out

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<sup>4</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 43.

from the heavens saying: "Elu V'Elu Divrei Elohim Chayim - these words and those words are the words of the living God."<sup>5</sup>

We will begin to heal our fractured world when we can begin to see in the truth others hold an echo of the Holy One's commanding voice. Learning to see the world through two sets of eyes will teach us to see the world as God sees it. Elu V'Elu Divrei Elohim Chayim - these words and those words are the words of the living God. Just as the psalms teach us that "Truth springs up from the earth (Psalm 85:12), so may we endeavor in our lives to cultivate in our world a garden where different truths may take root and grow and thrive. In this New Year, may we gather from that garden a beautiful bouquet, a larger truth whose fragrance and sprit will inspire us to be more at one with God, and more at one with each other.

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<sup>5</sup> Talmud Babli - Eruvin 13b