I am not nervous AT ALL.

The Yom Kippur fast thing is soooo easy.

I have like NOTHING to atone for anyways.

And this speech, it is going to be brief and HILARIOUS.

#Alternativefacts

We have all had some good jokes about truth lately. Our world now seems full of fake news, unfiltered truth, personal honesty, brutal honesty, personal truth, and of course, the alternatives facts. Free society and relationships depends on trust, and trust depends on truth.

Lack of truth erodes trust and ruins relationships - writ large in our country all the way down to personal relationships. But what I fear really fear is that it affects our *sense of self*.

Today I am going to talk about ~~#AlternativeTruth~~. #Truth. I’m talking about it because I think our society has a wavering relationship to it. And among the many issues that raises, particularly today on Yom Kippur, this wavering truth promotes a denial of truth in our own life. And Yom Kippur is about facing the truth of our lives.

This will not be a diatribe against an administration or a plea to convince you of a particular truth. I want to explore the role truth plays in how we interact with our society, each other, and how we see ourselves.

# Political Realm

In terms of how it effects society, there is of course the political realm. In early August **Thomas Friedman** wrote an article in the NYTimes (so it must be true) listing some truths that the democrats must connect with and take in a constructive direction:

1. We cannot take in every immigrant
2. The Muslim world has a problem with pluralism and terrorism is linked to that.
3. Americans want a president focused on growing the economic pie, not redistributing it
4. Political correctness on college campuses has run amok

His point, which was music to my ears, was that Democrats are missing basic truths that resonate with others. Disagree all you want on the solution, but the truth is being missed. **No one has a monopoly on truth**. Democrats can cry foul about how the administration will handle these truths, but they cannot ignore these truths. Many of the current conversations, and certainly the political rhetoric, are laid out in a manner to hit the gut and get a vote. People trust their gut to tell them what is true. But until these truths are accepted, solutions will be few and far in between. The real differences lay in our values. (More on that in a moment)

The other aspect of truth that Freidman’s article highlighted is that **truth has multiple sides** Let’s look at the issue of immigration as an example.

One set of truths that resonate with some people include:

* People are struggling economically and are unhappy seeing immigrants and non-citizens with benefits, resources and protections supplied by the US government, i.e. their tax dollars.
* Some American’s are paying out of state college tuition when non-citizens pay in-state tuition.
* The criminal justice system is using resources to deal with people who are in the country illegally.

Here is another set of truths:

* The United States was founded by immigrants and was built and grew through open borders.
* With one notable exception of native Americans, we are ALL immigrants or descendants of immigrants.
* The US has benefited greatly and in various times has flourished specifically from immigrants.
* I would add: Judaism is founded on the narrative of being a stranger in Egypt. We are reminded repeatedly and commanded to welcome the stranger, which includes immigrants.

These are two sets of truth, but politics has gone “post truth”. The reality is that multiple truths exist. These are not real truths and “alt-truths.” These are the many truths that build reality, which is not a simple singular truth.

Too much energy is spent framing issues beyond the truth warping them into gut wrenching values statements. This post truth, instead of multiple truth, approach has created a schism of denial which has been exploited.

This post truth approach pits values against truths – so let’s go there...

# Social/Cultural: Values

Thirty years ago, Alan Bloom wrote “The Closing of the American Mind” (which I never actually read) and now 30 year’s later Jon Levenson just published a review of Bloom’s book in the Jewish Review of Books. Bloom asserts and Levenson reiterates how truth turned from a rigorous academic exercise into a cultural relativism of narratives. In a search for truth, absolutism is the danger. God forbid, an incorrectly held truth is asserted, because that would be wrong. Absolutely wrong. However, the fear has become less and less about error and more about intolerance.

Bloom argued, and Levenson sees 30 years later: without a search for truth that transcends society as the guiding force, universities will become - have become! - a conglomerate of departments that compete for importance and relative particularistic preferences. One could argue this has extended to both the fringes of our political left and right. Truth became a perspective, influenced by culture, which informs our identity. And identity is ultimately about our values. To translate practically, that means topics and important issues are not introduced or examined with a focus for truth, but through the lens of narrative and values which have no way to be discovered by reason.

Levenson asserts that in 30 years, Bloom’s assessment seemed to hold and has moved from academia to society. The result is that, intellectual honesty trumps truth. In religious terms, this means culture replaces God. Think about that from the political, social or personal perspective. **Intellectual honesty trumps truth; culture replaces God.**

Larger truths become hostage to personal truth, or more accurately perspective, because personal identity is simply not negotiable. A pursuit of truth, in a sea of intellectual honesty and cultural context, will drown. Identity politics, while indispensable in many ways for enacting social change, takes “truth” and makes it “mine. [[1]](#footnote-1)”

While I previously explained that multiple truths on an issue can exists, this was not meant to imply “mine” and “theirs”. Because if its “mine”, it is not “yours.” Here is where I want to discuss the role of “They” in truth.

The Talmud is a massive compendium searching for truth. Volumes of arguments where *opposing views are preserved and multiple truths are found*. Brilliant arguments sometimes end with a draw when a single truth cannot be found. Some of the most famous oppositions and disagreements, and there are many, are between Hillel and Shammai**.**  In Mishnah Yevamot we learn: Even though Hillel allowed what Shammai forbade, and vice versa, followers of Hillel married followers of Shammai and vice versa. The two may have disagreed, but they also figured out how to lives their lives together.

This is not the case today. Single people today are more likely to marry someone who shares their political affiliation than their religion. In other words, a single liberal Jew has a better chance of marrying a non-Jewish liberal, than a conservative Jew (that’s little c). The other side of truth has become “they”. Our culture is plagued with “they.”

They are wrong

They are evil or stupid or elitist or racist

Their motivation is certainly only selfish.

Their concerns are not important.

I have caught myself thinking some of these. But a famous piece of advice learned recently teaches: do not question other people’s motivation. Question their judgement, which usually is an expression of their view of truth. When “they” creeps in (and someone else’s “they” is you), it is safe to assume that truth is no longer being discussed.

# Personal

So here is where we return from the larger picture back the personal. As I said earlier, these political and societal issues of multiple truths, monopolies on truth, personal truths, *and also the “theys,”* affect our personal relationship to truth and our sense of self. I want to share with you an experience I had that really forced this issue for me and is instructive about accepting truth in our lives.

As part of a rabbinic fellowships, I attended a conference which had a focus on pluralism. We were asked to choose topics we felt strongly about and argue the other side. The group was resistant to the point of one participant saying, “I’m not going to provide the other side with their ammunition.”

Our group did it exceedingly, disturbingly well. Some group member were in tears afterwards. “If I didn’t know any better,” someone said to me, “I would think you believed what you said.”

The exercise challenged me, and I had done it twenty years prior on the same topic. But this time I found weaknesses in my opinions. What was more troubling to me was that I heard another truth.

Part of this approach stems from the idea of a devil’s advocate. The devil’s advocate has a Christian origin, although the idea of measuring good and bad deeds to tip the scale sounds quite familiar today…. The idea is that to test a statement or theology, arguments needed to be made on at least two sides. So one was against. Today, some groups plan for or assign someone to argue the other side in order to enact this approach.

The conference experience being the devil’s advocate was instructive for how we can pre-empt PTSD: Post Truth Stress Disorder:

* S**ee the other side**. Don’t just consider it. Explore it. *Look for truth*. Look for multiple truths. Even better…
* **Invite the voice of dissent -** Research shows better decisions are made, more innovative solutions are developed, and a clearer understanding of problems are found when people with differing opinions work together. If you truly want change, inclusion, improvement - find the voice of dissent, hear that voice, Encourage that voice.

In Adam Grant’s book “Originals”, he discusses this idea of the idea of the devil’s advocate in response to groupthink and quotes the CEO of a highly successful investment firm that promotes dissention in order to find the best solutions to problems. The CEO says “The greatest tragedy of mankind comes from the inability of people to have thoughtful disagreement to found out what’s true.” (Grant, 195) Grant also quotes management scholar Karl Weick, whose advice I will pass along:

* “**Argue like your right, listen like you are wrong**.” (Grant, 201 Weick)

One more way we can personally stay focused on truth is to…

* **Ask questions** - Whether it is political, social, or personal, consider these questions:

Do you need this to be true? Have you considered if this truth holds in a different context? Could a different perspective point to a higher truth? Is it possible that the difficulty of accepting this truth is that it reveals a conflict of values? Is the truth is still unfolding?

# Personal - self

It is Yom Kippur and I have one more question. I started by suggesting that society’s wavering relationship to truth challenges our ability to accept truth in our own lives. That it erodes trust and ruins relationship and I fear it effects our sense of self. I want to return to the focus on self. It is Yom Kippur and today is the day we have to face the ultimate test of truth with one more question: **who are you?**

The political and social context of wavering truth must not diminish our personal ability to connect with truth, especially the truth of who we are. The answer is not a personal narrative or a list of values. The answer is reflected in your character and written by your actions. What is the truth of who you are?

You may want to be a good partner, parent, spouse, professional, leader, community member, and friend. In truth – you have probably done a lot of it well. A lot. But truthfully, where were the mistakes? What is that side of you that you have yet to understand, that needs to learn, that needs to be addressed? **What is the truth you need to face about yourself?**

* You cannot ignore that various parts of you have different needs. The truth is that *all of your truths* have to be addressed.
* You cannot label the mistakes you have made “they.” The truth is, “they” are *the truth* and “they” are all you.

*This is one truth you can choose. The truth of who you will be.*

*Let the truth guide you back to yourself.*

*This is the truth that Yom Kippur, that God, asks of us.*

There are no alternative facts or fakes news here, although you might encounter brutal honesty. This truth cannot be manipulated on social media. It will not be fact checked. It will not be diminished into relative values. Your relationship with truth starts with a dialog with yourself. Starting with you, see all your sides, ask questions, and hold to the truth.

This is not going to solve all the problems in the world. Truth is changing around us, but we cannot lose our sense of self. We have to start somewhere. I am starting with myself. Start with yourself.

*This is one truth you can choose. The truth of who you will be.*

*Let the truth guide you back to yourself.*

*This is the truth that Yom Kippur, that God, asks of us.*

Shana tova and gmar chatima tova

1. Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks (RJS) looks at the decline of truth in the face of personal narrative and cites the teachings of moral theory and Emotivism to point out another danger. When we lose objective morality, moral judgements are expressions of personal feeling. Truth disappears and feelings win. This leads to there being no point in being honest. There is no truth to be had. The most persuasive lie wins. (Alasdair MacIntyre’s moral theory. Google Sacks and Post Truth.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)