

On Truth, *Emet*

I am fascinated with the word “*emet*” in Hebrew. It means Truth. The Hebrew letters used to write this word is *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*. *Aleph* is the first letter of the *aleph bet*, *tav* the last letter, and *mem*, in the middle. It is as though in our search for truth, the Hebrew is saying that truth is wide in scope, it takes is from A to Z (or *aleph* to *tav*) to discover, and to illustrate truth we must traverse from the beginning through the middle, all the way to the end.

Truth is something we have to work for. (Some things aren’t necessarily meant to be “true” as in factual or historical but contain truths.) When we dig deeper into a topic, we often find that what we thought was true has much more depth and multiple perspectives.

The past few weeks have been disturbing, distressing, and deadly. Yes, I am speaking of the Gaza fighting, but I am now also concerned about the reaction to it in America and around the world, especially as it has resulted in an increase in antisemitism, even in Los Angeles.

I have spent countless hours reading articles on the 11 days of fighting, as well as its aftermath. The more I read, the more I understand, and the more I recognize multiple perspectives. In this decades long situation we all know that if the issues were simple, this would have been resolved long before now.

Without apologies, I am also not going to propose a “side” to take.

What I do want to do is acknowledge how difficult this is, especially for those living through this in Israel, in Gaza, the West Bank, and unfortunately, even for those of us who may now be experiencing antisemitism and a level of uncertainty and fear and we never expected in our lifetimes and here in America. I have engaged in conversations with a number of people just this week about their fear engendered by the news and postings they have viewed in social media.

In his book *Morality*, published last year, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, wrote on the issues colleges and universities have faced in the area of free speech, in which he states, “No-platforming, safe spaces, and similar behaviors, isolated at first, have grown rapidly since around 2013, the point at which Generation Z (those born in

or after 1995) first started attending college. The irony is immense. In some respects, obviously, tolerance has won many important battles, in relation to respect for gender and sexual orientation in particular. Yet after several decades of nonjudgmentalism, moral relativism, and expressive individualism, we now have in their place judgmentalism and moral absolutism, based on something as primordial as group identity. The new intolerance is ugly and regressive.” (pg 174, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*)

Rabbi Sacks also speaks of the work of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, saying especially of students, but I see this now across much of what is being reported in social media and expressed by actions reported in the news: “...they *catastrophize*, believing that terrible events are about to happen. They *label*, seeing individuals in stereotyped form. They engage in *dichotomous thinking*: you are either on my side or the other side. There is no nuance, no complexity, just with me or against me. They *overgeneralize*, seeing a universal law, instead of an isolated occurrence.” (pg 176, *Morality*)

When we think this way, catastrophizing, labeling, thinking dichotomously – us and them, my side or the other side, and overgeneralizations, we are subject to manipulation by what we see in the news, in social media, on the internet. From this kind of thinking, we are highly manipulatable by social media, the internet, and the news. It is too easy to take what we hear, see, and read, for granted.

We must filter this through the basic question: *Is this true?*

Seeking the truth is an “all-in” process. It is not a one-minute search and you have everything, especially when an issue has complexity.

Let’s begin with some basics, five “don’ts”: First, don’t mind-read, don’t think you know what others are thinking. Second, don’t catastrophize. Third, don’t label, everyone is different, don’t “other” people. Fourth, don’t dichotomize, life isn’t always either/or and neither are people. Fifth, don’t overgeneralize, as this may be the exception, not the rule.

I wish to add a couple thoughts.

First, we have many values in Jewish living, including *shalom bayit*, peace in the home, *ahavat habriot*, love of all God’s creations, *emet*, truth, and *shalom*, peace.

But it is not possible to uphold every value at the same time. It is complex, challenging and humbling to be a human being.

There is a midrash that goes like this:

Rabbi Shimon said: In the hour when God was about to create Adam, the angels were divided into different groups.... Love said, "Let him be created, and he will do loving deeds." But Truth said, "Let him not be created because he will be all lies." Righteousness said, "Let him be created because he will do righteous deeds." Peace said, "Let him not be created because he will be all quarrelsome and discord."

What did God do? He seized hold of Truth and cast it to the earth.

Among these, they are saying, the least essential is Truth. Righteousness, Peace, and Love are most important, and are central to our faith. But truth remains. The midrash continues by saying that truth will sprout up from the ground.

In our search for truth, the Hebrew word *emet* is a visual reminder that truth is wide in scope, it takes us from A to Z (or *aleph* to *tav*) to discover, and to discover truth we must traverse from *aleph*, the beginning through *mem*, the middle, all the way to the end, *tav*. In our 128-letter sound-bites many of us have lost what it means to do the work of searching for the truth, and we can see that choosing sides has become more important than Righteousness, Peace, and Love, or even Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.

When we stop arguing over what *we believe to be* the truth, and act with righteousness, peace, and love, we can then recognize *b'tzelem Elohim*, the Divine image, in one another and in ourselves.

From a place of *b'tzelem Elohim*, perhaps we may then be ready to seek the truth, to seek *emet*. Most of all, may we remember that we are here as God's partners, to bring wholeness and healing to the world. That is our task.

Shabbat shalom,

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