

Lovingkindness and Truth Will Meet

In 1974, when I was in 7th grade, my teacher took our class to a Congressional hearing on Capitol Hill. We sat in a small room on wooden benches, listening to the testimony of a very elderly man, one of the very few survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. The hearings were about a proposal to pay reparations to survivors and descendants of the hundreds of men, women and children who had been slaughtered by the U.S. Cavalry on the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The man we were listening to, who had been a child of 4 or 5 when the massacre occurred, recounted his memories of that terrible day. I remember being both horrified and heartbroken at what I was hearing.

I decided to do my final 7th grade project on the events at Wounded Knee. My father worked for the Department of the Interior, and he was able to get me documents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I read Lakota accounts of the events, the testimony of witnesses, and the government account of what had happened. Not surprisingly, the Native American and government versions of events were markedly different. It was pretty clear to me who was telling the truth. At the age of 12, I was learning a very important lesson: that history depends on who is doing the telling. I also learned that sometimes our government lies. It took until 1990 for Congress to formally pass a resolution expressing “deep regret” for the massacre; and reparations have never been paid.

I have been thinking about my 7th grade education in light of our current age of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” Out-and-out lying by people in power is of course nothing new, and is not confined to the U.S. government. But the sheerchutzpah of the resistance to the scientific reality of human effects on climate change, to an honest appraisal of American history, to the actual deaths and damages suffered by American citizens right now, still sometimes takes me by surprise.

But there is also a flip-side to this denial of reality that is heartening: the truth-telling we are hearing from previously ignored or suppressed voices. Whether it’s a growing awareness in white America of the unprovoked violence faced on a regular basis by African-Americans, or the wave of revelations of sexual harassment and assault made public by the #MeToo movement, there is a new kind of truth breaking into our collective awareness. We are hearing truths about Black lives, women’s lives, queer lives, immigrant lives, that have been hidden in the shadows for far too long.

The value of *Emet*, Truth, is a very high one in Jewish tradition. There is a famous rabbinic adage that “God’s seal is Truth” (Talmud, Shabbat 55a) – a seal being the personal stamp that an ancient ruler would put on their official documents to indicate their identity. God’s seal, God’s name, in effect, is Truth. So this could be a very brief talk: truth is one of Judaism’s highest values, we need to accept the truths affirmed by scientific research, we need honesty at all levels of our society, and we should celebrate the rising up of previously unheard truths that we all need to hear.

But – it would seem that our tradition also suggests that when it comes to *Emet*, to Truth, it’s not always quite as straightforward as that.

I recently came across a wonderfully intriguing teaching from the Kotzker Rebbe, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a famed Hasidic rabbi who lived and taught in Poland in the first half of the 19th century. The Kotzker was famous for his insistence on truth—on avoiding hypocrisy and lies. His teaching is related to the Biblical story of the 12 spies sent by Moses to scout out the promised land. When the spies got back from their reconnaissance mission, ten of them told the Israelites that while the land was indeed full of good things, it was also dangerous, inhabited by giants who saw them as mere grasshoppers. The people promptly freaked out, refused to go into the land, and were punished with having to wander 40 more years in the desert.

Many commentators have wrestled with what exactly the spies did wrong to merit such a harsh punishment. And this is what the Kotzker Rebbe said: “What was the sin of the spies? They spoke the truth.” That is, it’s no sin to tell the truth! But, he goes on: “However, ‘truth’ does not just mean speaking what you see. That would simply be ‘not lying’. ‘Truth’ means that if one understands what it is that God wants, then one must exhaust oneself to find a genuinely truthful way of expressing God’s word.”ⁱ

According to the Kotzker, there are two levels of truth. The first one – the level I was speaking about earlier – is simply “not lying.” The spies did not lie; they reported what they saw. Their problem was deeper: the way that they framed what they saw actively discouraged the Israelites from fulfilling their mission. The spies sowed panic instead of hope. They caused the Israelites to lose confidence in their own abilities and in their sense of God’s presence in their midst. The spies failed to grasp the deeper truth of what they had been sent to do, and this failure led to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

Unlike the spies, many of our leaders today need to do a better job of simply “not lying.” This most basic level of adhering to facts is important. But facts are not always the same as truth. On many issues, there are “facts” that can be lobbed by both sides of a dispute to prove or disprove an opinion. And there are spiritual and emotional realms of human experience where mere “facts” may not describe our reality well at all.

The Kotzker Rebbe described this deeper level of truth as a process of discovering God’s will, God’s desire. For me, this means the ongoing effort to discern what exactly is asked of me in this moment. If I am attempting to live my life in alignment with what I understand to be the Godly flow of the universe—what the Kotzker calls “God’s desire”—it is not always so easy to know what I am supposed to do. This is where the higher level of *Emet*, of Truth, comes in.

I’d like to offer a few ways to think about this higher, or deeper, level of Truth.

Rabbi David Jaffe shares a beautiful teaching about the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*.ⁱⁱ It is composed of three letters: Aleph-Mem-Tav. Aleph is the very first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Mem is right in the middle, and Tav is the last letter of the aleph-bet. This implies, David says, that just as the written word “*emet*” spans the entire alphabet, so too *Emet*, Truth, is expansive. To get to *Emet*, we need to cultivate this kind of expansiveness, to incorporate multiple perspectives and views.

The expansive nature of *Emet* leads me to believe that one enemy of truth is certainty. This is somewhat paradoxical, because the usual definition of a fact is that it is what it is, and can't be something else. And this is perhaps true for the "not lying" level of truth: I am here, and not over there; the tablecloth is blue and not red. I can be fairly certain of those small truths.

But when we look into the more expansive nature of *emet*, certainty becomes an obstacle. The deeper truth of things is that uncertainty is built into the very structure of our universe. Things that seem clear and true in one historical time period are replaced by new understandings as time goes on. Our ethical sensibilities develop, we make new discoveries about how our minds and hearts work, how physical reality operates—all of this should make us very wary of anyone who claims to know the real "truth."

An embrace of uncertainty does not mean that all truth is relative. There is right and wrong; there are actions and attitudes that are either wholesome or unwholesome. Rather, embracing uncertainty suggests a stance of humility or modesty when it comes to claiming access to the truth. It invites a curiosity to challenge and explore, to always investigate claims of truth. By definition, what I can know is always partial; even the machinations of my own brain are largely hidden from view.

But we humans tend to like certainty, we are reluctant to let go of familiar truths. This reluctance at least partially explains the great resistance that arises when, as a society, we begin to hear the truths of those whose voices have been suppressed. Until relatively recently, most white Americans were living within a mutually agreed upon narrative of what constitutes reality. The emergence of other experiences—the evidence of a different reality lived by brown and Black people—means that this white version of truth has been radically undermined. This is terrifying to many people.

In a similar way, many men have functioned for a long time within their own version of truth regarding the treatment of women. The recent explosion of women's voices narrating a very different version of that truth threatens not just individual careers, but an entire world view. These kinds of social ruptures are evidence of the growth of *Emet*, the expansion of our collective understanding of a more inclusive and complex Truth. Ultimately, this is a powerful and necessary process, for all of our benefit.

This brings me back to the words of the Kotzker Rebbe: "'Truth' means that if one understands what it is that God wants, then one must exhaust oneself to find a genuinely truthful way of expressing God's word." If we understand "God's word" as the imperative to build a more just and loving world, then how do we go about "finding a genuinely truthful way" of taking up that challenge? Given our many perspectives and experiences – in this room, in our congregation, not to even mention the wider Jewish community or American society—what might such an endeavor look like?

Last night I spoke about the coupling of *emet*, truth, and *chesed*, lovingkindness, as an essential component of the work of Teshuvah. Over the course of Yom Kippur we chant, multiple times, this verse from the book of Exodus: *Adonai Adonai el rachum v'chanun erekh apayim v'rav chesed v'emet*. These words are what Moses hears when he asks to have

a direct experience of God's presence. "Adonai, Adonai, God of compassion, mercy and patience, filled with lovingkindness and truth." Last night, I spoke about lovingkindness and truth, *chesed v'emet*, as different and distinct qualities, in tension with each other.

But it is also possible to see the pairing of "*chesed*" and "*emet*" as a unified concept, each modifying and enriching the other. We can translate *chesed v'emet* as "truth that is loving" or "lovingkindness that is true." It's a fairly common phrase, appearing 24 times in the Hebrew Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps this pairing is an important clue to the greater, more expansive understanding of *Emet*.

So what exactly is "*chesed*? The English word "lovingkindness" was actually invented to translate *chesed*, back in 1535. But there isn't any one word in English that adequately conveys its meaning. *Chesed* is a kind of love that is experienced primarily in the context of covenantal obligations—of God to us, of human beings to one another. *Chesed* is not an emotion, but a way of nurturing the relationships that bind a community together. So when we bring *chesed* together with *emet*, it implies that we are talking about a kind of truth that builds relationship, a truth that connects rather than divides.

One way to understand "*chesed v'emet*" is a definition of truth offered by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg. He teaches that a statement is true if it meets two criteria: #1: it must be verifiable – it fits the definition of "not lying" – and #2: it must honor the *tzelem Elohim*, the essentially Godliness of the other—that is, of the person we are speaking to or the person we are speaking about. According to this definition, I speak the truth—even a difficult one—if I am able to say it in a way that does not degrade those to whom I am speaking or about who I am speaking.

As a guide for community conversations on difficult topics, this seems like a powerful yardstick. Even if I profoundly disagree with you, can I voice my truth in such a way that does not imply that you are either evil or an idiot? If I am speaking about people in the public arena who need critique, can I condemn their actions without dismissing them as human beings? This is one way we can unite *chesed* with *emet*: speaking truth in a way that is powerful and yet not destructive, in a way that hopefully builds connections and does not undermine them.

I also wonder if *chesed v'emet* offers a framework for moving out of the "us vs. them" mindset that is so easy to fall into in these political times. I have been thinking about this particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the vast canyon that has opened up in the American Jewish community between those who consider themselves "pro-Israel" and those who identify as "pro-Palestinian." Even the fact that the issue is now framed in this way, with a binary that seems more suited to a football game, is disturbing to me. I want a new approach, a new framing, one that does not ask me to declare my allegiance to this group over that. Because this is not a football game; there can be no "winning" by one group vanquishing the other. To choose a side is, ultimately, to choose endless conflict and endless suffering.

My own relationship to Israel-Palestine these days is grounded in my connections to those groups and individuals, Jews and Palestinians, who have chosen to fully embrace both *chesed* and *emet*. They embrace truth, because in their work for justice and peace, they are committed to hearing the truth of the other, and to looking honestly at themselves and their own communities. For the Jewish Israelis, including some who live in settlements on the West Bank, this means that they are able to acknowledge the realities of the occupation, and to stand in solidarity with their Palestinian neighbors. For the Palestinians, it means that they are able to seek their own liberation while also connecting with Jewish Israelis and learning their stories, their truth. These are all people who have lost loved ones at the hands of the other, who have taken up arms to kill, and yet who have decided for their own sake, and for the sake of the other, to follow a path of *chesed v'emet*.

For both the Jews and the Palestinians doing this work, their commitments to one another are profoundly counter-cultural within their own communities. They refuse to be imprisoned by fear or anger. In their commitment to relationship-building, they are undermining dominant narratives that diminish everyone. They are doing the deeply transformative work that, to my mind, is the only path to a lasting solution.

These groups—[Combatants for Peace](#); [Roots](#); [Bereaved Parents Circle](#); [Women Wage Peace](#), and others—inspire me to bring this kind of *chesed* and *emet* into the American Jewish community. Can those of us who are critical of Israel acknowledge and understand the collective narrative that gave rise to the Zionist movement, to hear with open hearts the stories of Jewish Israelis, without demonizing an entire society?

For those of us who feel deeply connected to Israel, is it possible to see clearly the terrible injustices that occurred in the founding of the state; is it possible to acknowledge the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people, without making excuses or turning away? Is there a truth-telling we can collectively aspire to that does not ignore the realities of power or the complexities of pain, that does not fall prey to certainties that limit our understanding and our compassion? I think this is possible, if we can commit to the openness of heart and mind that comes from embracing *chesed v'emet*.

And what might it mean to bring that expansiveness of heart and mind to our American society? Can we foster a loving truth-telling that is desperately needed, to move us beyond the fear-mongering and hate that infects everything from government policy to our public discourse?

Such an aspiration sounds a bit daunting. The author and activist adrienne marie brown, whom I quoted in my talk on Rosh Hashanah, has an important teaching for us here. She writes about fractals, the phenomenon in nature whereby patterns found in the smallest life-forms are reproduced on the largest level, from tiny snails to entire galaxies. In bringing this insight to our human lives, brown writes, “What we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale.” She continues: “When we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal...We must create patterns that cycle upwards. We are microsystems...Our friendships and relationships are systems. Our communities are systems. Let us practice upwards.”^{iv}

Let us practice upwards. Let us practice, in our personal lives, *chesed v'emet*. Let us commit to being honest with ourselves and others, but in a compassionate, loving way. Let us practice *chesed v'emet* here at Dorshei Tzedek, as we take on difficult issues like economic and class diversity in our community, or our views on Israel-Palestine. Let us practice *chesed v'emet* in all venues in our lives, whether at work, at school, on social media. Let us remember always that those to whom we speak and about whom we speak are, like us, created in God's image. Let us embrace uncertainty and be open to new truths that, even if difficult, are necessary to hear.

May we together begin the journey of finding a genuinely truthful way of expressing God's word, of bringing a bit more love and justice to our fractured world.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer
Yom Kippur 5779

NOTES:

ⁱ *Amud Ha'emet*, translated by Gavin Michal, <http://shortkatzkvort.blogspot.com/2016/05/52-kotzker-truth.html>)

ⁱⁱ See Rabbi Jaffe's wonderful webinar on "Truth" at [this link](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ With great thanks to my colleague Rabbi Avi Winokur for sharing his Rosh Hashanah sermon with me, "Truth, Post-Truth & Jewish Tradition," where he explores the pairing of *chesed v'emet* and points out the number of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible.

^{iv} adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy* (2016), pp. 52-60.