

Kol Nidrei 5781

The Seal Of The Holy One

I had my Kol Nidrei sermon for this year written and ready to go a couple of weeks back. But it's not the one I'm going to give. Because on Erev Rosh Hashanah, as I was driving back home, I heard a director of a documentary being interviewed on the radio. And as I listened I knew I would watch that documentary and I knew I would be throwing out my sermon and writing a new one. So here is the new sermon: and it starts with the documentary, which you can currently find on Netflix. It's called *The Social Dilemma*.

The Social Dilemma opens by introducing a series of people who have worked for the internet platforms we use every day - Google, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook. They include the co-inventor of the Facebook "Like" button. They come across as talented and frank and personable - but also very, very worried. They explain that the technology we use every day is "persuasive" - that is, that our daily interactions with these platforms have had unintended consequences.

Every time we use one of these platforms, we are disclosing aspects of ourselves - our likes, our dislikes, our favorite color, our favorite movies, our politics. That then enables the creators of the platform to direct us towards both advertising and information. The advertising is for what it's always for; to encourage us to buy more things. The information is curated by algorithms - artificial intelligence - around what we will like, or appreciate, or agree with, which will make us click more, which will create more opportunities for advertisers to sell us more things.

The unintended consequence here comes from the curating of the information. As the algorithms get to know us better, more and more of what conflicts with our world view gets knocked out. The problem is that artificial intelligence doesn't have the capacity to recognize truth. Those algorithms are just busy feeding us what they "think" we will like - playing to our beliefs, our worldviews, our preconceptions.

It isn't a conspiracy. The makers of these technologies are clear that all of this is just the flip side of the many positive benefits of such platforms - the sharing, the eroding of physical distance, the creation of all kinds of virtual, worldwide communities. Nobody ever anticipated that the result would be to place the human race under an assault by disinformation. Nobody planned that we would be at risk of losing control over who we are and what we really believe.

The Jewish tradition doesn't feel quite the same way about truth that the algorithms do. For all that we believe that everything can change, including ourselves, for all that this is a season in which we turn towards the possibility of change - *shinui, shanah* - there are some aspects of reality that aren't ours to interfere with. *The seal of the Holy Blessed One is truth*, declares Reish Lakish in the Talmud¹.

What is so unique about truth? In a Midrash on the Creation story² the claim is made that the Hebrew word *emet* is exceptionally stable - the Hebrew letters *aleph* and *taf* each rest firmly on two feet, the base of the middle *mem* sitting firmly on the line between them. By contrast, the word for falsehood, *sheker* has only one leg, so it wobbles. The letters that make up the word *emet* are as far apart in the Hebrew alphabet as they can be - the first, the middle and the last - while the letters that make up *sheker* are all close together - which proves, says the teacher, that truth is hard to get, but falsehood is always close.

So truth has the quality of being grounded and rooted, somehow safe. But there is more. When Rambam, Maimonides, talks about the nature of the Holy One to open his master work the *Mishneh Torah*, he describes God's quality of - well, God-ness, God-essence - as being *emet*, as if to say that something about truth and something about the Absolute are in essence the same.³

We carry that idea - that truth is a transcendent value - into our liturgy and into our lives. After saying the *shema*, the closest thing we have to a creed, a declaration of our allegiance to the One who is beyond everything, we say *Adonai eloheihem emet*. On hearing of a death, of that absolute reality that we

¹ BT *Shabbat* 55a

² *Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 3 (cited on p. 10 of the weekday *Sim Shalom*)

³ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1

cannot affect or change, we say *Barukh Dayan Emet* - blessed be the One who judges in truth.

And we even have a day on the calendar that is dedicated to truth. And that day is today.

For a whole night and a whole day, we are going to do our best to strip away everything that isn't true about ourselves. We are going to confront and set aside our stale promises, our pretensions, our excuses, our false aspirations. We will dress in our shrouds, rehearse our deaths, deliberately put ourselves into a place of radical hindsight so that we can see things in their real, their *true*, perspective. With nothing delicious or luxurious to distract us, with nothing of the everyday to intrude, we will work together to strip ourselves back to what is real and nourishing and wholesome. We will remind ourselves that deep questioning is worth so much more than quick, facile answers, or any answers at all. We will look for the truth in ourselves and in each other; and in doing so, perhaps we will remind ourselves of what truth feels like.

We must do this not only for our own personal growth. We must do it because we need to be able to remember what searching for truth feels like when we turn once again to our everyday lives.

The participants in the documentary I mentioned at the start of this sermon, *The Social Dilemma*, invite us to imagine a dystopian world where nobody believes anything that is actually true. A world where everyone is entitled to their own version of "the facts." If everyone is entitled to their own set of facts, then there's no need to interact and no point at which we can agree. There is no community. There is no country. And false information - because it's less complex - spreads faster and is stickier. And when it comes to critical information - for example, information about COVID - then it really can be a matter of life and death.

As Tristan Harris, one of the speakers, bluntly puts it:

If we can't agree on what's true - we're toast.

We are perilously close to living in such a world. We might be living in it already.

But Yom Kippur offers us the opportunity to step away from the persuasive, the assumed, the subjective. It gives us the chance to rediscover our truth muscles, even to flex them. Like the letters of the word *emet*, we can place our feet on firm ground once again.

Let me close with a final image. It's a legend from the sixteenth century. At a time of great persecution in Prague, the head of the community, Rabbi Yehudah Loewe ben Betzalel, created a hero to save them all - a being made out of clay, a *golem*. The *golem* was animated by carving on its forehead the word *emet*. And when the *golem* had completed its task, Rabbi Yehudah Loewe erased the *aleph* from the start of the word, leaving the Hebrew word *met* - dead. And the *golem* lost its humanity and went back to being clay.

Emet or *met*. Truth or death. The absolute or the algorithm. Which is it going to be, this year?

Humanity created these technologies and only humanity can repair them. But in the meantime, each of us can dedicate ourselves to ensuring that the *aleph* stays in place on the forehead of the *golem* - by remembering that truth is the seal of the Holy One, and as such, we must strive for it.

Gmar hatimah tovah.