

PARSHAT NOAH  
OCTOBER 13, 2018  
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I was mesmerized, as was most of America, by the testimony of Judge, now Justice, Brett Kavanaugh and Dr. Christine Blasey Ford at the Senate Judiciary committee meeting two weeks ago. I listened very carefully to both testimonies. Dr. Ford described an event over thirty years ago in which she claimed that Judge Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her. Kavanaugh, on the other hand, denied the entire episode. It was a political theater in addition to watching history unfold before our very eyes. When the testimonies concluded, followed by the subsequent FBI investigation, we were left with one major decision. Who was telling the truth? Who was being truthful? Did the events described by Dr. Ford really happen in the way she claimed? Or, was Judge Kavanaugh correct and his denial truthful? It had to be one or the other. There was no way that both of them could be telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

In a book entitled *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* written in 2008, the author Farhad Manjoo describes what he sees as truth in our society. He writes: “In the last few years, pollsters and political researchers have begun to document a fundamental shift in the way Americans are thinking about the news. No longer are we merely holding opinions different from one another; we are also holding different facts.” He continues: “Political scientists have characterized our epoch as one of heightened polarization; the creeping partisanship has begun to destroy our very perceptions about what is ‘real’ and what isn’t. Indeed, you can go so far as to say we’re now fighting over competing versions of reality. It is more convenient than ever before for some of us to live in a world built out of our own facts.” Recall that this book was written in 2008. I believe the situation has become even more complex in subsequent years. What we saw at the Senate Judiciary committee and the later Senate vote was that those on one side of the aisle immediately believed Dr. Blasey Ford and those on the other side of the aisle immediately believed Judge Kavanaugh. It all depended on a few swing votes. Each side of the aisle understood the truth as they wanted to hear it. Each side of the aisle had their own perceptions of the facts as they understood them.

On October 17, 2005, on the premiere of his late night show, the comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term *truthiness*. Colbert believed, and I believe still does, that America can be split into two camps with philosophies that can never reconcile - those who “think with their head” and those who “know with their heart.” Since that time the word *truthiness* has even been added to the dictionary where it is defined as “the quality of seeming or being felt to be true even if not necessarily true.” It actually has its own Wikipedia page which states that: “Truthiness is the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. Truthiness can range from ignorant assertion of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda intended to

sway opinions.” It was named “word of the year” for 2005 by the American Dialect Society and for 2006 by Merriam-Webster.

In many ways, both Manjoo and Colbert are correct. We don’t see truth for what it actually is, we instead interpret the facts as we want to see them. We read the newspapers that support us, watch the television shows that substantiate our views, and only associate with those who are of the same opinion as we. Truth, itself, has become very flexible in the information age in which we live.

In a Midrash in Genesis Rabbah concerning the creation of man the Rabbis warn us that this was to be the case. Rabbi Simon said: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying ‘let him be created’, while others urging, ‘let him not be created.’” According to the Midrash, love and truth fought one another with love suggesting that he should be created because he will dispense acts of love; truth stated that he should not be created because he is compounded of falsehood. Righteousness contended that he should be created because he will perform righteous deeds and peace suggested that he should not be created because he is full of strife. The Midrash continues: “What did the Lord do? He took truth and cast it to the ground. Said the ministering angels, before the Holy One, blessed be He ‘Sovereign of the Universe, why you despise Your seal? Let truth arise from the earth,” said the Lord.

The Midrash suggests that the Rabbis understood that the angels believed that human beings might not be able to handle the truth and thus perhaps man should never have been created. The Midrash reminds us: “The seal of G-d is truth.” In other words, G-d bears the ultimate truth, we do not. We are gullible and make mistakes. Very often, we try to cover them up by stretching the truth, denying the truth, overriding the truth, or simply exaggerating the truth.

There are times, according to Jewish tradition, when expanding on the truth is permissible. These situations relate to preventing future harm, making sure that you don’t cause unnecessary hurt to another, or creating peace among individuals. Other than that, Jewish tradition expects that one will always tell the truth and live by that truth.

In our Torah reading of this morning we are introduced to Noah. In the first verse we are told: “This is the line of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with G-d.” Rashi, the Biblical commentator, brings a disagreement among the Rabbis as to the true character of Noah. He states: “Some rabbis regard these words as praise; even in his own time he was righteous; how much more so had he lived in a truly righteous generation. Others hold it to be a disparagement: only by comparison with his own sinful generation was he righteous.” In other words, Noah was a righteous person for his time according to one view. Compared to people in his generation who

were filled with lawlessness, thievery and terrible actions, he was righteous. However, if he had lived in Abraham's generation he would never have held a candle to the first monotheist. The other view held that if he could be righteous in a society of evil doers, how much more so would he have been righteous if there had been positive role models around him.

Which one is it? Was Noah totally righteous and blameless? Or, was Noah simply good enough in the generation in which he lived? He simply could not have been both. Either he was a person who was to be emulated at all times and in all situations, or he was in comparison to all others in his generation, seemingly righteous, but not someone who would be seen as a paragon of virtue for all time. I can just imagine in our day and age FOX news taking one side and MSNBC taking the other side. One would suggest that there could be no one like Noah, and the other suggesting that Noah, himself, was not so great. They would each see the facts in their own way and come to their own conclusions. *Truthiness* would win the day once more.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in his book *The Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume 1* cites the Pele Yoetz, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century compilation of Jewish teachings which cites a midrashic tale of a very evil man who decided to reform. He undertook to fulfill one commandment, not to lie under any circumstances. Through this commandment alone, he received full repentance and character transformation. Whenever he was tempted to commit an improper act he reasoned: "If I am questioned to ask to whether I did this, what will I say? If I speak the truth I will be disgraced. If I lie, I will have violated the one rule I agreed to accept." The Pele Yoetz wrote: "Thus, by keeping this one rule, the man became a true penitent." When we lie or stretch the truth it merely leads us to other misdeeds. When we get away with one falsehood it sets the pattern for other occasions as well. When we see we can state half-truths and get away with it, then we will do so again and again. According to Jewish tradition, "the seal of G-d is truth" meaning that where truth is found, there is evidence of G-d's presence.

Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal, served as the Chief Rabbi in Prague. He is remembered for his ability to successfully defend the Jews of Prague against anti-Semitism and unjust government attacks. According to the legend, using the clay from the shores of the nearby river, Rabbi Loew formed a human figure known as the Golem of Prague. To give him life, he engraved three Hebrew letters on his forehead – An Aleph, a Mem, and a Tav. These letters spell the word *Emet*, truth. The Golem who was a giant in physical stature was created for the sole purpose of defending the Jews of Prague. By defending them he would reveal, protect, and promote the truth about the unfounded anti-Semitic charges leveled against the Jews of Prague.

The Golem lived in Rabbi Loew's synagogue. Whenever he was needed to defend the Jews of Prague, Rabbi Loew summoned him. When he was no longer needed he was "deactivated," by simply removing the Aleph, the first letter of the word *Emet* from the

Golem's forehead. Without the Aleph, *Emet* is transformed into the word *Met*, dead. When there is no truth, we are at least spiritually dead.

We live in a society, I am afraid to say, where there is more *truthiness* than truth. The facts are distorted for our own purposes and each side describes the other opinion as “fake news.” I wonder what that teaches our children and the next generation? How do we explain what they hear or read? How do we explain negative political ads that are coming across the airwaves hour-by-hour? Can we not hope that those in leadership live up to the high standards that we expect of them? It is not an easy world, and in the age of social media with instant information it is becoming more difficult. Truth becomes a victim over and over again.

As Manjoo concludes in his book: “Truthiness means you choose. You're not just deciding a reality; you are also deciding to trust that reality – which means deciding to mistrust the others. Whenever you choose, you're making a decision to form a particularized trust. This is the essence of the new medium.”

I pray that we choose wisely on the side of truth. I suggest that we live by the high standards of our tradition and take seriously the concept that “The seal of G-d is truth.” Let us remember, the words of Rabbi Abraham Twerski: “Speaking or acting falsely in G-d's name renders us guilty of ‘forging His seal’, since we make it appear that G-d approves of something which He detests.” Only by telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, except for the times when Jewish tradition allows us to be flexible with it, can we begin to raise a next generation that will learn to trust its leaders and build a better society.