

Rabbi Jeremy Master

Yom Kippur Evening 5779-September 18, 2018

Truth

One of the most memorable moments in theater and movie history is the courtroom scene in A Few Good Men where the prosecutor Lt. Caffee is trying to goad Colonel Jessup into admitting that he had ordered an illegal punishment for a soldier under his command. The highlight of this dialogue has Caffee yell out, “I want the truth!” and Jessup responds, “You can’t handle the truth.” What I find compelling about this scene is you have two people talking about two different types of truth. Lt. Caffee represents the law which relies upon objective truth; he wants the clear facts, did Jessup break the law or not. Colonel Jessup believes that he has a subjective truth that makes his actions acceptable. Jessup’s truth is the country needs people who will enforce harsh discipline in order to save lives. Maybe the harshness of Colonel Jessup’s approach is right and the law hurts military discipline and puts people at risk, but his subjective truth that we can’t handle violates the law and so he has to go to jail.

Truth is one of the most important values in Judaism. In the 13 Attributes of God that we will recite during the Torah service tomorrow, truth is one of the attributes that God brought forth onto the earth and through which we come to know God. Reflecting the centrality of truth, the ancient Rabbis explain that “the

Holy One's seal is truth." Truth is so important that it is one of the three values that uphold the world as we are told, "The world endures because of three things: justice, truth, and peace." Not only is truth a core concept in our theology and our understanding of the world, it is also a central spiritual trait within our own personal spiritual lives. On Yom Kippur, we are supposed to reflect upon our actions with the goal of personal spiritual growth. Contemplating times when we have not been truthful or have denied another person's truth is an important aspect of today's self-reflection. The challenge with discussing the concept of truth is that at first glance it would seem that truth is something that is straightforward- either something is true or it is not- but as Judaism recognizes that there are many ways to understand truth.

In the Torah, there is significant emphasis placed upon seeking the objective truth in issues where evidence can be provided. There are numerous provisions requiring courts to seek out the objective truth in order to prevent wrongful convictions. The Torah tells us several times that a person should not be put to death only on the testimony of one person, but there must be at least two witnesses. The Torah recognizes that one person might give false or inaccurate testimony. Only when at least two people corroborate evidence can there be a sense that we are being given objective truth. Commentators further state that as many witnesses as are available must be heard so that the truth may be clear.

In the Torah, we are also told that we must have completely honest weights and measures if we are to long endure on the land that God is giving us. The weight of a measure can be proven through empirical evidence and serves as a symbol of the importance of honest dealings within society; either a weight is what it is supposed to be or it is not. Our ideal in Judaism is that where it is possible to prove the truth empirically, it is our responsibility to uphold that truth and deny falsehood. As the Torah says, if people distort the objective truth, they are doing something dishonest and everyone who deals dishonestly is abhorrent to God.

While the Torah provides laws that can be supported through objective means such as a proper scientific measuring of weights, there are laws which allow for different interpretations. In the Torah, we are told that we must build a Sukkah, but we are not told how high a Sukkah is required to be. Two of the main schools of Jewish law in ancient times, the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, argued for over three years on this issue of the Sukkah. Each side provided numerous valuable arguments with each side asserting, “the law is according to our views.” Then a divine voice went forth and said, “The utterances of both schools are the words of the living God, but the law is according to the school of Hillel.” Since both spoke the words of the living God, why was the law fixed according to the school of Hillel? Because they were kindly and humble and they taught both opinions. This Talmudic story teaches us that there are issues in which both sides

of an argument can be speaking the truth. The Torah does not tell us precisely how high a Sukkah should be so each school provided support for their own subjective opinion. Ultimately the law has to follow one particular opinion, but that does not diminish the fact that each side is speaking their own equally valid subjective truth.

We are facing numerous serious challenges to the concept of truth in our contemporary world. There are those who are presented with empirically supported facts and refuse to accept the objective truth saying that factual evidence does not matter, the only thing that matters is their opinion. Just as we would punish those who distort the measure of a weight, those who today reject the empirical truth must be rebuffed in their attempts to distort objective facts. There are also many people who think that their opinion, their completely valid subjective truth, is the exclusive objective truth. As a result, they denigrate the other side's equally legitimate subjective truth as being falsehood. Instead as the lesson of the school of Hillel illustrates, we should act kindly and listen to both sides of every argument. When there is no empirical evidence to prove either side has the objective truth then we should affirm that both sides speak the words of the living God and we should work to find a viable solution that affirms the righteousness of the opinions of each side. Our compassion to our fellow person must play an integral role in our approach to speaking the truth.

As you can see Judaism recognizes that truth is a highly nuanced subject. Truth is delicate. Truth can easily be stretched and torn. Look at how many causes will readily sacrifice truth to some other goal. Why then do we allow the truth to be stretched to the point where falsehood can show up in the trappings of truth? At the core of these challenges to the truth is the weakness of human ego. When you peel back the behavior of falsehood you will likely find the human emotion of fear. We fear disappointing someone else or we have fear of shame or loss or any number of possibilities. Twisting the truth in a self-serving or harmful way has negative consequences for the whole world. When people deny empirical truth, they turn people to a path of falsehood. When people refuse to accept the validity of another person's truth they show a lack of compassion for others.

Yom Kippur is the most solemn day of the year is because engaging in self-growth is one of the most challenging spiritual acts of all. The reason we have the commandments is to serve as an aid to help craft our souls so that we can strive for holiness. Today is the opportunity to look within ourselves and discover times when we have not been truthful. There are spiritual consequences to distorting the truth. Believing in falsehood or believing that your opinion is the only truth undermines the soul. When we refuse to understand the nature of truth, then we cannot be honest with ourselves. This behavior ultimately undermines all of our

other spiritual traits at the deepest internal level. If we cannot be honest with ourselves then we cannot work on our souls in the way we need to.

Since truth can be subjective, how do we go about dealing with this spiritual challenge? Rabbi Yisrael Salanter explains that there is an inner process that a master of truth goes through in executing the judgment of truth. He told a story about giving a lecture at his yeshiva. Not long after he had begun, he was interrupted with a question. After a few seconds of silence, the Rabbi declared, “I am mistaken” and stopped his lecture. Later on he talked with his students about what he had thought in the moment before he stepped down. He thought of five acceptable answers to refute the question, but he knew none of them were ultimately true. If he had answered, nobody else would have seen through him, but he would have known that he was saying something false.

If faced with the same situation, how many of us would give an answer even if we knew it is wrong? Nobody wants to stand up in front of a crowd and admit that they were mistaken. We fear a diminishing of our ego so we engage in falsehood for the sake of making ourselves feel better. We don't just deceive others we want to deceive ourselves because we fear the diminishing of our ego.

The whole conflict within the movie [A Few Good Men](#) centers around Colonel Jessup's ego and the fact that Colonel Jessup believes that his actions are

superior to the law. By the end of the movie, the Marines who were on trial realized that orders from superiors are not the ultimate truth. They knew that their compassion for their fellow soldier should have been the truth. As Rabbi Salanter illustrates, the mastery of truth must come from within our own souls. Truth is an exercise and a practice. We must begin by being honest with ourselves and seek to keep far from falsehood. We must also carefully balance compassion for our fellow person with our personal subjective truth. Our spiritual goal should be to live our lives with personal integrity guided by a discerning heart for the sake of our souls as well as the souls of others.