

Truth of Humanity

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In August of 1988, two college juniors founded a comedic newspaper. They called their creation *The Onion*. 30 years later, the paper is a national juggernaut, surfacing satirical critiques of nearly everyone and everything.

From challenging our obsession with scientific research and statistics:

[World Death Rate Holding Steady at 100 Percent](#)

[Study Reveals: Babies Are Stupid](#)

To hilarious and scathing jabs at our society:

[Area Liberal No Longer Recognizes Fanciful, Wildly Inaccurate Mental Picture of Country He Lives In](#)

In its 3 decades of existence, one of the most-read headlines regarding *The Onion* actually came from its readership this past year, declaring, “The Onion on the Verge of Bankruptcy As Reality Eclipses Satirical Absurdity”.

Shakespeare asked the question, “Is not the truth the truth?”¹

What was once a rhetorical query is now debatable.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year was “post-truth.”² Plenty has been written about “truthiness” and “alternative facts” and “fake news.” In an era in which most of us have come to assume all politicians are liars, any news source is biased, and statistics are tools of manipulation, the image of this season as we stand before the Judge of Truth holds new weight. The results are apparent in the fractures and factions of our nation. Since its inception in 1972, the General Social Survey indicates American trust of fellow Americans is at a historic low.³ Confidence in institutions, in scientists, in religion has never been lower. And according to Pew Research, the political partisan polarization is wider than it has been since 1879, the earliest year for which there is data.⁴

For many of us, we feel all of this in the most personal of ways. We have lost friendships and even familial connections, we have boycotted news sources and websites. When we see neo-Nazis gathering in the public eye and babies ripped from the arms of parents at our border, it is difficult

¹ Henry IV, Part 1, Act 2, Scene 4; the joke here is that Falstaff has been lying his head off, and Prince Hal is in the process of exposing him as a liar.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/05/31/watch-americans-trust-in-each-other-erode-over-the-last-three-decades/?utm_term=.9a201642093a

⁴ <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>

muster feelings other than rage and disgust. Some of us have felt marginalized and silenced, others emboldened and heard. Whatever landscape of truth once invited us to find shared ground of humanity is diminished. And for many of us we look across the country, across party lines, across the pew, we find only allies or enemies. A bifurcated battle of belief.

More than ever, I believe Judaism is a gift for this moment in time, and our tradition's teachings on truth may be the most important lessons of our age.⁵

Our early sages faced a Jewish world upended by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. With Jewish community destabilized and dispersed, they had to craft a new sense of truth that could cohere a fragmented Judaism. And this was their imagination of Truth:

 Rabbi Simon said: When the time came for the Holy One of Blessing to create the first human being, the ministering angels broke into sects and factions, one opposed creating the human and one in support...Compassion said, "Create, for they will do many acts of lovingkindness." Justice said, "Create, for they will do great acts of justice." Peace said, "Do not create, for they are quarrelsome." And Truth agreed, saying, "Do not create, for they all are liars." What did the Holy One of Blessing do? God took Truth and cast him down from the heavens. And then created humanity.⁶

Of these divine embodiments, Compassion, Justice, and Peace all remain in the heavens. But, as we read in Deuteronomy, Truth is not in heaven⁷. Of the divine attributes, Truth is the one God casts down, diminishing its stature and distancing it from the source. Truth wanders the terrestrial plane, fractured and forever limited.

Hillel and Shammai, two of the greatest of Talmudic rabbis, disagreed about almost everything. Their intellectual and political battles pepper the pages as our early sages search for truth. And they came down on the other side of the aisle on every issue. How to light Chanukah candles, what are the conditions for divorce, whether lying is ever holy. God ends up saying, "*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*"—both of these rabbis' words are the words of the living God.⁸ Mutually-exclusive, yet co-existing truths.

And yet, the Talmud is not post-truth. We follow Hillel on every issue. So we would assume that Hillel always had the better arguments. That his was the perspective of justice. That his was the better truth. But that's not the reason why. The Talmud explicitly says that Hillel didn't prevail because he had the better arguments: Hillel always had his students first study the arguments and ideas of Shammai before ever turning to Hillel's. Hillel wanted his students to learn the truths of

⁵ For more on this idea, see Douglas Rushkoff interview on [Judaism Unbound Episode 52](#). Feb. 10, 2017.

⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 8:5; I have omitted the biblical reference texts and flipped the order of Peace and Truth for the sake of narrative flow.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:12

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Erubin 13b

Shammai, because it would keep them humble. He wanted his students to be a certain kind of people, not win a certain kind of argument. And for this reason, we follow his teachings.⁹

Even beyond this, the sages relay that the children of Hillel and Shammai married one another. Both Hillel and Shammai placed humanity and unity on an even higher pedestal than truth, mirroring the divine image of the midrash.¹⁰

Dr. Leon Festinger summarized decades of research in social psychology with his book *When Prophecy Fails*.

A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point. . . Suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before.¹¹

We have a “bias to believe.”¹²

For many, we see this manifested by our religious readership of the newspaper we believe most accurate, watch the news station we believe best captures reality, and curate our social media for comfort. For those of us who have dropped subscriptions or unfollowed Facebook friends, we know how easy it is today to create a cushiony cave of information that is comfortable to our own understandings. As many of us cling to our Kindles and halls of learning for guidance, it is worth noting that greater intelligence and education even correlates with *more* bias, not less.¹³

And as Scientific American reported last year, when we encounter a perspective on truth, it will likely only reinforce whatever understanding we already held.¹⁴ All of this research challenges so many of the ways we connect to the world of ideas. From articles to reports and even to this sermon. In these minutes of my words, some are likely nodding, consciously or unconsciously finding affirmation of ideas already held; others may already be finding reasons to reject these words on the grounds of faulty thinking, incomplete information, or my rabbinic ignorance.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 14a; what is even more noteworthy, is that Hillel and Shammai’s legal disputes regarding the nature of divorce and marriage would make marriages between the two schools problematic. The text elucidates how they navigated this, ultimately “teaching that they showed love and friendship” despite the dispute.

¹¹ Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schacter; *When Prophecy Fails* (University of Minnesota Press: 1957), p. 21.

¹² Kahneman, Daniel; *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, NY, 2011), p. 80.

¹³ Perkins, D. N., Farady, M., & Bushey, B. (1991). Everyday reasoning and the roots of intelligence. In J. F. Voss, D. N. Perkins, & J. W. Segal (Eds.), *Informal reasoning and education* (pp. 83-105). Hillsdale, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.; <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/nature-origins-misperceptions.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-convince-someone-when-facts-fail/>

One of the most powerful ways to counter our confirmation bias is to look to the wisdom found in crowds, as accuracy of knowledge tends to be highest in a larger pool of people. The trouble is that the wisdom of crowds fails when the crowd is homogenous.¹⁵ That is, it is our diversity in belief and perspective that can offer the clearest lens into data and ideas. And yet, more than ever, we are separating into ideological tribalism. In an era of greater access to information than ever in history, we have more and more information strengthening our own beliefs and dividing us into like-minded bubbles. And sadly, such homogeneity dulls our wisdom.¹⁶

My aunt, uncle, and cousins live in the settlement of Alon Shvut, deep in the heart of Israel's West Bank. With a population of 3,000 and growing, the settlement's beauty and tranquility mask a deep fear that ripples in the hearts of its citizens. Violence and murder have plagued Alon Shvut, and its proximity to Palestinian villages makes it a crucible-like microcosm of a larger conflict.

But I want to tell the story of two people.

One of my family's next door neighbors is a rabbi named Hanan Schlesinger. A religious Zionist, one who proudly served in the IDF and devoted his life to the land and people of Israel, found himself surrounded by like-minded Israelis in the tight-knit community of Alon Shvut. In 2013, he was invited, along with a dozen other members of the settlement, to be a part of an experimental dialogue with Palestinian neighbors. It would require walking 15 minutes out of Alon Shvut into a nearby village. Though Palestinians make up 90% of that region of the West Bank, Rabbi Schlesinger recalls never having met one of them. He described the reaction from fellow Israelis and his own anxiety. "What are you doing risking your life talking to them? They're bloodthirsty killers! What could be the possible benefit of it?"

Schlesinger writes that the next two hours were the most impactful moments of his life. 30 Israelis and Palestinians stood in a circle in dialogue, the only rules being no interrupting, persuading, or defending. He listened to stories. And shared his own. He was astounded to learn from one Palestinian neighbor of the fear his children feel regularly, that bearded settlers with rifles are their boogeyman.

The Israeli settlers spoke of the murders of Jews near Alon Shvut, and the constant fear their own children face daily surrounded by those who wish them dead. About the experience of living with neighbors who want to push them into the sea. As the night progressed, the numbers thinned, and soon only Schlesinger stood with Ali Abu Awwad, a man who had been a militant during the first Intifada.

¹⁵ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Doubleday; 2004), p. 38.

¹⁶ https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/better_decisions_through_diversity

“I wanted to complement my old lens with a new one,” Schlesinger says.

Even though we may see [the] other as aggressive and dangerous and blood-thirsty, those paradigms keep us safe because they teach us that we’re living in a world that we understand. When one starts to realize that those paradigms that you have been taught your whole life are not the only truth, then life absolutely becomes much, much more dangerous—not in a physical sense but in a spiritual and psychological sense...it’s a...mind-expanding and soul-expanding experience because you realize that...you’re in a process of expanding your truth.¹⁷

Geographic neighbors, and zealous enemies. And they stood together bearing witness to one another. Over the course of months, Awwad and Schlesinger formed a close friendship, and engaged in a longer, deeper dialogue, one that pushed them to imagine a different path forward. Together they established Roots—a Palestinian-Israeli Initiative for Understanding, and together speak around the globe. And it all started by hearing biography rather than ideology. In perceiving the person behind the politics, hearing the human behind the horror.

But even as partners and friends, this is not a story of Pollyanna. Schlesinger remains a settler, Awwad still vehemently opposes Israeli occupation. The two debate and argue in every conversation. And they see the daunting long road before them. But now there is something that unites them. “It starts by realizing the other is not my enemy,” says Awwad, “but rather, our respective fears are the enemy. With conversation, we can see the human before us. I’m not always optimistic...But I’m a believer in what I’m doing.” Even so, slowly change is happening. Their friends and families now gather regularly. More and more people from Alon Shvut and its neighboring villages are joining in dialogue. And their words and example ripple in communities around the world.¹⁸

About fifty years ago, in an essay called “The Vocation of the Cantor,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asked the question “What does a person expect to attain when entering a synagogue? In the pursuit of learning one goes to a library...for pure music to the concert hall. What then is the purpose of going to the synagogue?”¹⁹ Heschel’s response is that in a synagogue we should cultivate a sense of humanity. It is here that we elevate being a *mentsch* as our most prestigious aspiration. Here, our stories matter, where each person is needed, every person is necessary. In our diversity of perspective, we become wiser. In our humility of belief, we may transcend our own bias. And in relationship with those with whom we disagree, we live out the heart of our tradition’s take on truth:

¹⁷ <http://www.jewishledger.com/2016/01/learning-to-hear-the-other-west-bank-rabbi-brings-his-message-of-passionate-pluralism-to-west-hartford/>

¹⁸ https://www.wvgazette.com/life/friends-finding-peace-at-roots-of-israeli-palestinian-conflict/article_bc2e29d5-77af-5387-a0e6-532cad758833.html

¹⁹ <http://www.hebrewcollege.edu/sites/default/files/Heschel%20-%20The%20Vocation%20of%20the%20Cantor.pdf>

it must always serve the higher divine values of compassion, righteousness, and peace. We need this synagogue, perhaps more than ever, and need this to be a bastion of diversity and transcendent humanity.

So what evolves belief and brings us together? According to a team of scientists from Princeton, sharing our stories may be one of the most impactful ways to create space for shared perspective and emotion.²⁰ In holding relationship, even with deep tension and disagreement, we come to see the humanity in difference. In hearing the biography, not the ideology, we may find deeper shared values that otherwise remain hidden.

For many of us, when we see a political position not our own, our desire is to vanquish the opposition in elections and private debate. And in the short run, we may indeed be able to shape a larger landscape towards our sense of justice. And then what? Our country's division will remain. The bifurcation of belief will persist. What vision could rebuild some shared ground of our country and community?

It would take ten years after being liberated from Buchenwald before Elie Wiesel would attempt to speak into a world that had fallen apart. As a witness to the most extreme atrocities, he became a scribe and a storyteller; in words, bringing his truth to a world of chaos. After publishing *Night*, he began a lifetime as an activist, he changed the way we think about humanity and the way we understand our responsibility to each other.

Later in life he would remark,

I know and I speak from experience, that even in the midst of darkness, it is possible to create light and share warmth with one another; that even on the edge of the abyss, it is possible to dream exalted dreams of compassion;...that even in exile, friendship becomes an anchor.”²¹

To remain human in the face of absurd inhumanity is the real message of Judaism.

I believe in language, although it has been distorted, corrupted, and poisoned...I still cling to words, for it is we who decide whether they become spears or balm, carriers of bigotry or vehicles of understanding, whether they are used to curse or to heal, whether they are here to cause shame or to give comfort...I belong to a generation that has learned that whatever the question, despair is not an answer; whatever the experience, indifference is not an option.”²²

Our sages taught, in a place where there is no human, be human.²³ In the face of inhumanity, bring humanity. That is where it begins. Such a value transcends even truth. In the small, even quiet acts in which we force ourselves to face another. In hearing the biography, not the ideology. If Wiesel can reach for the spark of humanity even in the face of absolute atrocity, all the more reason why we

²⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/you-illuminated/201106/why-sharing-stories-brings-people-together>

²¹ Elie Wiesel, [Days of Remembrance remarks](#), April 23, 2009

²² Elie Wiesel, [Days of Remembrance remarks](#), April 23, 2009

²³ Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 63a

must be the torchbearers of it no matter how polarized the perspectives. And like him, like the path of our tradition for thousands of years, our path forward may be found in hearing story. The stories of people and their struggles. The stories that remind us of shared values. The stories that remind us to be human. To be humane. This is our charge.

There are truths others hold that I do not, and likely will never, understand. We hear flippant and frequent urges to “understand the truth of another.” Not everything is truth, nor can all truths be grasped. But ours is a tradition that holds a grander, higher ideal before us. Humanity. I may never understand the truth of the grandfather who doesn’t speak to me; we may recall the injustices a colleague or friend placed upon us long ago. We may argue and debate who is at fault in fractures of our personal lives and our political landscape. But there is something higher than truth. Have I seen the humanity in the person beside me tonight? Have I created space for biography in a storm of ideology? Do I duck people of difference? Have I challenged myself to sit with a person of different ideology and political persuasion, and paused long enough to simply listen for their humanity?

This year we at Rodeph Shalom are attempting to expand the ways we can both embrace our diversity and elevate our humanity. For some, we feel pride at the actions and positions of our congregation. But for others, we may feel silenced or marginalized. I have sat with members of our community horrified we are not more vocal about some issues, and sat with others equally horrified by the platforms we hold dear. Believing we are wiser with diversity does not negate our responsibility to hold conviction as a congregation. But it also necessitates we create a space of belonging for those who disagree, and invite such perspectives to be heard and witnessed.

For those interested in creating space to delve into the complexities and possibilities of Israel, we invite you to join us for a training with *Resetting the Table*, an organization dedicated to encouraging difficult conversations through active listening. At a time when Israel is one of the most polarizing topics amongst American Jews, we see Jewish institutions struggling for space for learning and dialogue; join us in this new experiment and help us raise our discourse.

As Minyan enters its second year, we already see that these small affinity groups of 10 congregants create a sacred space in which connection becomes our purpose. Last year we had 200 CRS members involved in these groups, and for many, it was the first environment in which diversity of discourse could be surfaced where relationship was not threatened.

Deepening our wisdom demands elevating our humanity. It is difficult, even painful, to sit with ideologies that may negate our own identity and most precious values. But, in Wiesel’s words, our only path forward is with the human before us. For those of you hearing these words, and feel a sense of resonance, please let me know, and join me in dreaming new ways to create space so this may be house of prayer for all people. And for those of you who found these words fell short or offended, I would greatly appreciate the chance to sit with you, hear your story, and learn from you.

We stand in the midst of the rubble of truth. Like the rabbinic imagination, it has been cast down from the heavens in ruin. But our tradition reminds us that there are values even more important

that remain our heavenly aspirations. In his final written words to the world, Senator John McCain proclaimed this very idea:

We are citizens of the world's greatest republic, a nation of ideals, not blood and soil. ...We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. ...

We are three-hundred-and-twenty-five million opinionated, vociferous individuals. ...But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do.²⁴

We are at our wisest when we sit in relationship with difference.

May the example of our sages ring loudly today. As we debate that which divides us, may we reach for that which unites us.

May we dare to listen, and in the process, reach towards the heavenly virtue of compassion.

As we stand before the Judge of Truth this Yom Kippur, may we reach towards the highest of values—our humanity.

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/27/us/politics/john-mccain-farewell-statement.html>