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“Rescuing Truth”

We can probably all agree that it was inevitable. It was just a matter of when. The year 5778, now ended, proved to be the year.

Many of us first suspected it might be coming way back in the year 5734, when we were told, “I am not a crook” by a man whose crookedness was already commonly acknowledged, even by his supporters.

In 5747, we were assured our country did not trade arms for hostages – and were promptly told four months later that we did.

5758 brought a true landmark moment on the road to this year – that was when we were counseled from our nation’s highest office about what the definition of the word “is” is.

5762 was, as you may recall, the year of “known knowns” and “known unknowns” – and various other formulations of fiction.

And of course, the repeated promise that “if you like your health care plan, you can keep it” was awarded nonpartisan Politifact’s “Lie of the Year” in 5774.

So we really had no cause to be all that shocked when, from the same White House that had once produced all those fantasies, the invention of “alternative facts” was rolled out in 5777.

That shocked us – but it shouldn’t have. After all, just one year later, that phrase now sounds almost quaint, having been told just three weeks ago by the President’s television lawyer that “truth isn’t truth.”

Some hurried to point out that the President’s television lawyer is, shall we say, prone to hyperbole – so only a political partisan looking for trouble would think he literally meant what he said. The problem is that just one week earlier, in a much less publicized remark, he asserted that “facts are (nowadays) in the eye of the

beholder.” And if that weren’t enough, back in May, he told the Washington Post that Robert Mueller’s team “may have a different version of the truth than we do.”

So, no, there was nothing unexpected about “truth isn’t truth.” It had been coming for weeks, months, years, decades even. The year 5778 is when it arrived – when truth was finally publicly rejected in the United States of America.

Not much of a “happy new year” thought, I know. But Rosh Hashanah, of course, isn’t really supposed to be “happy new year.” It is known instead as *Yom Ha’din* – the Day of Judgment... of ourselves and our place in our world. And so, for those who are already thinking to yourselves, “This political stuff is not what I come to synagogue for” – I want you to know what we are taught in the oldest collection of rabbinic morality there is, *Pirke Avot*, the Sayings of Our Masters: “*Al shlosha d’varim ha’olam kayam: al ha’emet v’al ha’din v’al ha’shalom*” – “Just three things sustain the existence of the world: truth, justice and peace.” That is the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, one of the greatest Jewish sages of all time... the leader of our people as they prepared to revolt against Rome, which led to his death and to the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem.

I promise that if anyone ever comes to announce the eradication of justice or of peace, I will give a sermon to defend those virtues just as vigorously. But before Shimon ben Gamliel even got to justice and peace, he taught that the world’s existence cannot be sustained without truth. So if you’re a rabbi, and you’ve studied this text from the very beginning of your seminary training, and the people in power announce that “truth isn’t truth,” and you remain silent – you are a desecrator of the rabbinic tradition... one who dishonors the legacy of Shimon ben Gamliel from nearly 2000 years ago.

So tonight, we will not be silent. We will not allow truth to be sequestered from us as “politics,” and therefore somehow off limits, somehow unworthy of fighting for in this holy space on this holy night. 5779 is here, and truth itself is under an all-out assault in the country we love and which has loved us. And let me be clear... this is not just the work of President Trump or Rudy Giuliani. We are not just victims in the demise of truth. We are a part of its demise – sometimes unwittingly, sometimes not. Left, center or right... old or young... we have been coopted into the destruction of truth. We are accomplices. This season of the Jewish year is for *teshuvah*, for turning back.

Now, if you’re thinking I’m the one who is prone to hyperbole, consider this: Six years before publishing his landmark work, *1984*, George Orwell wrote the following about what he saw us about to become: “What is peculiar to our own age,” he wrote, “is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. In the past, people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but,” wrote Orwell, “in each case they believed that ‘facts’ existed and were more or less discoverable.” Orwell looked into our future and foresaw the end of the belief in facts... he foresaw the end of truth, left in our hands, all the way back in 1943. So what have we done to make Orwell’s dark prophecy come true?

Seven weeks ago, a new book attempting to answer that question became an instant bestseller. *The Death of Truth*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic Michiko Kakutani, walks us through the steps we've taken as a society and as individuals that have created the conditions for "truth isn't truth." You see, our leaders didn't invent those conditions. They're simply exploiting them. So what are they?

Kakutani argues that the first of those conditions began on the political left, where "the gospel of post-modernism" was preached by academics claiming there are no universal truths, just "smaller personal truths – perceptions shaped by the cultural and social forces of one's day." The goal of postmodernism was and is, of course, noble. Biases had to be blown up. Male-oriented, Western prejudices had to be laid bare. But the relativism that came with asserting that there is no actual truth, just narratives or perspectives that we claim to be *our* truths, came with a mighty cost. It permitted almost any claim upon truth to be brought forward as a valid narrative. This is what enabled, for instance, climate change deniers to demand an equal platform for their theories alongside the findings of science. It's what empowered creationists to call for intelligent design to be taught alongside evolution in schools. It's what allowed Holocaust deniers their day in the court of public opinion. A pressure to present "both sides" of an issue, even when only one side is grounded in reality, began to infect education and journalism. The result was a weakening of our capacity simply to reject falsehoods refuted by facts. We were too busy questioning how the "positioning" of the truth-teller colored their truth.

If you still doubt the very dangerous underbelly to liberal relativism, consider these words from Mike Cernovich, one of the alt-right's most notorious conspiracy theorists – in a 2016 interview with the *New Yorker*, he said this: "Look, I read postmodern theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative." When bald-faced liars like Cernovich are grounding their lies in postmodern theory, there can be no doubt the theory has been hijacked.

So postmodernism was the first ingredient in doing away with truth. But it needed a lot of help to get the job done. That help, explains Kakutani, began to arrive in the 1970s, the "Me Decade," when the "sacred self" took center stage. Suddenly, it was "in" to seek self-gratification, without much concern about whether doing so warred with our communitarian spirit. Whatever served me was inherently good. Subjectivity became more prized than objectivity, which meant making reality fit with my own views, instead of forcing myself to coexist with facts I may not prefer.

Soon, and not coincidentally, television news stopped being treated as a public service and became a corporate commodity. And very quickly, executives discovered that you make a lot more money showing people "news" they already agree with than by presenting objective, balanced journalism, with all of its ideological messiness. This is how we willingly surrendered Walter Cronkite, "The Most Trusted Man in America," in favor of delivering massive ratings to Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow, each of whom speaks their unadulterated truth to whomever chooses to watch.

This is also how we hatched the curiously named phenomenon known as reality TV – which we all know is a completely fabricated and staged “reality,” not that that makes us any less intoxicated by it. Reality TV was perfect for a society that had long ago elevated subjectivity over objectivity. It didn’t matter whether what we were seeing was actually true, as the producers pretended. It only mattered whether I liked looking at it – and treating it like it was true.

All of this was foreseen by the renowned American historian, Daniel Boorstin, in his 1962 book, *The Image*. In it, Boorstin saw where we were heading as a society in the personage of famous circus huckster, P.T. Barnum, whose “great discovery was not how easy it was to deceive the public but rather how much the public enjoyed being deceived,” as long as it was being entertained. Boorstin observed that we seemed less interested in whether something was a fact than in whether it was “convenient that it should be believed.” In such a society, he argued, “the socially rewarded art” was “that of making things seem true.” (Kakutani, pp. 81-82)

All of that was foreboding enough... and then came the internet. Much has already been documented about the ways you and I, not just our ideological rivals, are constantly being manipulated for profit by social media and online news. But I don’t want to take the chance that anyone here either hasn’t followed it or just decided they were smart enough to beat it – because let there be no doubt: you are not smarter than the people manipulating you for profit, nor am I.

Ironically enough, the book that best chronicled what we’re up against came out just two months before the 2016 election. Entitled *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Harvard-educated data scientist Cathy O’Neil was among the early describers of the algorithm – that mathematical weapon being deployed to addict us to clicking and buying and believing whatever profiteers want us to believe. Put simply, their goal is to separate us as rigidly as possible from those not like us – literally to tear the fabric of our society apart – because that’s how they get us to keep returning to their sites and increasing their revenues. And they do this in a Wild West of American business, with essentially no regulatory controls whatsoever. They are experts on human psychology. Their tool is confirmation bias – the clinical term for that non-discerning hunger you have for news and stories that confirm how right you’ve been all along about whatever you already believe. Keep showing a person how right they are, and they will come back for more and more... *you* will come back for more and more. It’s like crack for information-seekers.

O’Neil explains what would happen if she turned to Facebook, as many of us do, to circulate a petition. Which of her friends would see her petition? “I have no idea,” she writes. “As soon as I hit send, that petition belongs to Facebook, and the social network’s algorithm makes a judgment about how best to use it. It calculates the odds that it will appeal to each of my friends. Some of them, it knows, often sign petitions, and perhaps share them with their own networks. Others tend to scroll right past. At the same time, a number of my friends pay more attention to me and tend to click the articles I post. The Facebook algorithm takes all of this into account as it decides who will see my petition. For many of my friends, it will be buried so low on their news feed that they’ll never see it.”

This is how a publicly traded corporation masquerades as a “modern town square” for more than two billion people, determining on its own what those people will see and learn and trust. Two years ago, O’Neil reported that two-thirds of American adults have a Facebook profile – and that American Facebookers spend an average of thirty-nine minutes a day on the site, just four minutes less than they spend on actual human, face-to-face social interactions. In 2017, two-thirds of Americans reported that they get at least some of their news through social media.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “Well, thankfully, I don’t use Facebook much... or even at all.” Well, then, I hope you also don’t use any other online social media, or Google, or Apple, or Microsoft, or Amazon, or YouTube, or any online news sites. I use all of those, and so do most of you – and all of them are collecting massive mounds of information about humankind, with practically no regulatory intervention, and using it to get you to do and think whatever makes them richer.

This is how so many smart people assumed Donald Trump was being taken for a circus clown while he was busy being elected President of the United States. It’s also how, according to a Washington Post study last year, 47% of Republicans believe that Trump won the popular vote (he didn’t)... 68% of Republicans believe that millions of illegal immigrants voted in 2016, (they didn’t)... and more than half of Republicans said they would support postponing the 2020 election until such illegal voting problems can be fixed, even though postponing elections is the stuff of totalitarian regimes. And if you think our enemies don’t love how weak we are before the crack cocaine of online manipulation, think again. Whatever you may believe about the Trump campaign’s involvement, the Russians know full well that the best way to bring you and me and our country down – the best way to get us tearing each other apart instead of them – is to get us to go online. That’s why, as just one example among many, they used an impostor Facebook account called “Heart of Texas” to organize a protest called “Stop the Islamization of Texas” during the 2016 election cycle – *and* another impostor Facebook account called “United Muslims of America” to organize a counter-protest at the same time and place. (Kakutani, p. 51)

The Russians are literally conducting an orchestra of us screaming at each other. They had never succeeded in attacking America – until now. No less of an authority than Russian former world chess champion and desperate defender of democracy, Garry Kasparov, put it succinctly in a December 2016 tweet: “The point of modern propaganda isn’t only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.”

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the world cannot continue to exist without truth. What do we do?

Perhaps the answer can be found in three little Hebrew letters... *ayin, resh, vet*. Hebrew is a wonderfully expressive language, because from a single three-letter root comes a series of words which comment upon each other and provide a rich sense of message.

From *ayin, resh, vet* comes *eirev* – a woven-together jumble... and *eiruv*, a boundary that converts the private spaces of many into a shared space for all... and *eiravon*, a pledge to be honored... and *areivut*, the experience of being responsible for something or someone.

With just three letters, our tradition whispers to us on this *Yom Ha'din*, this day of our judgment: We are *supposed* to be a jumble, a mess of humanity, bound inside a border that forces us to weave ourselves into something together, so that we might live out our pledge to be responsible for one another. A three-letter Jewish definition of citizenship – one more gravely needed right now than I can ever remember in my life.

We can all remember a time when some or even all of that felt true, or at least truer, of us as Americans. A time when we felt united, even across our many differences, by what we all agreed was truth – by some common values, by a shared history, by a sense of shared destiny. A time when we felt proudest of the hard compromises we all made to advance the collective good and to renew a precious feeling of being appended to one another. We all miss that. And we blame the other side for destroying it. But on this day of supreme honesty, perhaps we can see the ways in which we ourselves are contributing to its destruction, as we seek ever-safer seclusion within our separate truth silos – and get suckered by the exploitation of our own human hardwiring into excising everyone else... all those who are just wrong, even sometimes family members or longtime friends... from our lives.

I know this is hard to hear and even harder to do. I am finding it even a little hard to say. But I've lost track of the number of you, young and old, who have described, often through tears, how frightened you are. How the rising tide of meanness all around you... and sometimes even in you... is terrifying. How we seem incapable of agreeing on anything anymore, even just the simple truth. And if there's no foundation of truth anymore, what on Earth will be left for us to turn to?

Are you afraid? I am. I'm afraid of the world Shimon ben Gamliel said couldn't survive – the world without truth. So, in the name of surviving – and of being unafraid – here are three small tips that might enable us to start turning back.

First, perhaps we can punch back at least a little against the degree of ownership that our electronic devices have over us. One of America's wisest cultural critics, Neil Postman, once said that it's stupid to be against technology – it's like being against food. But just as it's not stupid to ask what to eat, how much to eat, or when to eat it, we could afford to ask those same kinds of questions about the technologies we tend to treat wholly as advancements, no matter what they actually do to our lives. Social scientists like MIT's Sherry Turkle are researching the effects of screens on our brains, and the #1 finding is that our capacity for empathy is plummeting. Empathy is what makes us human. It's what enables us to do more than just understand what another person is saying. It's what enables us to feel what another person is feeling.

Don't believe me? Just think about this. You're walking down the street, and a person in front of you is so distracted by his conversation that he smashes face first into a street sign. You'd breathlessly rush right over to offer aid. When you see that same thing on YouTube, usually accompanied by funny music, you laugh until your sides split. In both cases you saw the same thing. Only the live experience enabled you to feel the other person's pain. This is why replacing live human interactions with screen interactions stunts our growth as humans. Have a difficult conversation with someone in person, and you can feel the awkward silences, you can see and feel the other person blush, you can sense the shifts in voice or posture. Have that same conversation on a screen, and you encounter a disembodied head with none of the human messiness that prompts us to feel into that other person. You want to know why research shows that those spending more than two-and-a-half hours per day "connecting" on Facebook feel lonely? You want to know why anxiety, depression and suicide are all up 30% or more since 2010? You want to know why those who possess a different truth than you often feel subhuman to you, deserving of being vanquished? It's at least partly because all of our screens are slowly making *us* less human. Show a little discipline, and dine on your technology a little less and a little more carefully, and you'll become a little more of the person you're praying to be on this Rosh Hashanah.

Which leads to the second tip... break out of the curated algorithmic box the billionaire tech giants are trapping you in, and experience a little of what people in the other silo are experiencing. It's the only way back to some sort of jointly held truth. It might be hard for you liberals to turn on Fox News or you conservatives to visit CNN.com, but you've got to do it – and not just to marvel at what the idiots believe, but to try to feel something of *why* so many people believe something so different than you do. What is the human yearning underneath that belief? Such a pursuit will quickly debunk the absurd caricatures of all liberals wanting no border security and all conservatives being white nationalists. The great majority, who reside in between, are motivated by differing taxonomies of similar values. Learn what another person worries about most or values most, and you might find a way toward a path that honors something sacred in both of your taxonomies. This, of course, is not just good advice for public discourse – it's good advice for your marriage, your parenting, your office and your school. But in the sphere of public policy, humanizing instead of demonizing the other has led to a whole lot of communal progress at less toxic times in our nation's history. Huge majorities in this country want sensible gun reforms, want a path to citizenship for DREAMERS, want to save the planet from overheating. Might we try to find a new spirit for accessing and unleashing that collective will?

And last but certainly not least, I want to urge you never to give up – never to succumb to the hopelessness and cynicism that is being cultivated in you by the relentless assault on truth. I know how hard it is not just to throw your hands up and quit in disgust. On my worst days, I feel overwhelmed and defeated by all of this – by the fecklessness on Capitol Hill... the mountains of money that drive our elected officials to contort themselves into truth-defying stances... the hypocrisy... the phony thoughts and prayers. And we have a President unlike any conservative or liberal we've ever seen – a leader whose political survival depends upon our submission to the erasure of truth. He has declared journalists the enemy of the people. He has told us what we are seeing is not happening. He needs us to accept that truth isn't truth.

I have no illusions that working to regain some common truth with those less like you will magically fix all of this. But I know what happens if we give up and give in. History has already shown us, repeatedly. And it's like Garry Kasparov said – when we get inundated, when we abandon all faith in the institutions and vehicles that once granted us the gift of communal cohesion, truth gets annihilated. And Shimon ben Gamliel, 2000 years ago, already told us what happens to a world without truth.

It won't be easy. After all, while we're working to regrow our humanity and afford it to others, we still have to live in this tribal world we've created for ourselves. We still have to vote and mobilize for the things we believe in – after all, Shimon ben Gamliel didn't say the existence of the world would be sustained by truth alone... it also is sustained by justice and peace, so we don't stand idly by while injustice or violence is being perpetrated. We still have to take stands for things that will divide us from those who aren't our ideological peers. We just don't have to be lured into hating them while doing it.

It is 5779. We are here because we want desperately to believe that something – perhaps this sacred tradition of ours – can lead us back to the spirit of unity we miss. We long for that uniting truth. Fortunately for us, it resides right at the heart of this enterprise we call Judaism. *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. Hear... Adonai is our God... Adonai is that Unity... Adonai is One.

Those are the words we speak. Let them be the truth we live.

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