

## Rosh Hashanah Morning 5769, Rabbi Karen Citrin “The Truth Be Told”

I can hardly believe as I look out at you today that this is my sixth High Holy Days with you here at PTBE. It has been a blessing to come to know so many of you over these years. And so, I have decided that it is time to tell you the truth.

There have been times when I have been bored during High Holiday services. Not when I am leading, of course. And certainly not when Rabbi Eisner is leading.

But, I can recall a time not so long ago when I sat on the other side of the *bimah*. When I was a kid, my sister and I always looked forward to the holidays in our small New England town – the leaves beginning to turn, the excitement of missing school, the delicious holiday dinner. My parents always chose the best seats in the sanctuary – toward the front of the social hall near the door. We could see everyone coming and going. And we were close enough to see all the action but far enough away so no one would notice us talking.

Each year we devised new ways to pass the time through services. There were the counting games – how many different colored *kipot* we could find, how many panes of glass in the stained glass windows that lined the walls of our synagogue, how many “*alefs*” we could find on a single page in the Hebrew prayers of the *machzor*. Whoever found the most was the winner.

And there were the betting games – how long the rabbi’s sermon would last, how many pages we would skip, and please, we would pray, let us do some skipping. And the big gamble - when would the service end.

I have since come to learn that my sister and I were not so original. Apparently, many people engage in such activities. None of you, of course.

Ok, let’s tell the truth. Maybe I’m not the only one who has drifted a bit during these services. Maybe we all have.

But when we drift, when we start looking at our watches, we miss the point. These days are supposed to help us make meaning of our lives, to help us gain new insights into the world around us. We are supposed to acknowledge the truth about ourselves. We are supposed to revisit our choices over the past year and ask ourselves: Of what am I the most proud? What do I regret? What is required of me in the year to come? Instead of counting yarmulkes or pages in the prayer book, we should be counting our failings and our accomplishments.

This morning I want us to begin to face the truth about ourselves and the world we live in. This is not an easy thing to do. As Mark Twain observed, “truth is stranger than fiction.” But, as we face a new year, our charge to seek truth is as vital as ever.

Our tradition has a lot to say about truth. The rabbis wondered about the existence of truth in the world. They wondered if an idea as pure as truth could co-exist with humanity. The rabbis told this *midrash* about the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation when God formed *Adam*, the first human: “When the Holy One was about to create Adam, the ministering angels began to argue, some of them saying, ‘Let him be created,’ while others cried, ‘Let him not be created.’ Love said, ‘Let him be created, because he will perform acts of love.’ Truth said, ‘Let him not be created, because he will be false.’ Righteousness said, ‘Let him be created, because he will do righteous acts.’ And Peace said, ‘Let him not be created, because he will never cease quarreling.’ What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? God took Truth and cast it to the ground.” (Genesis Rabbah 8:5)

This parable leaves you wondering, what happened to Truth? What does it mean that God cast Truth to the ground? To the Hasidic master, Reb Menachem Mendl of

Kotzk, it meant that God had buried the truth and that only God knew where to find it. Humankind, absorbed in falsehood and deceit, was left for all eternity to try to distance itself from pretense and to seek the truth beneath the soil. The Kotzker believed the only way to come close to knowing truth is to devote ourselves to living a life of truth.

If the Kotzker was right, then we can glean two messages from this *midrash*. The first lesson is that ultimate Truth is not within man's reach. Only God can grasp the full meaning of Truth. This means that no single person, no single religious faith has a monopoly on truth. Judaism's embrace of multiple truths is embodied in the talmudic debate. Following an argument between Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, proclaims, "*Eilu v' eilu divrei Elohim chayim*" – "This view and that view are both the words of the living God." (Talmud *Eruvin* 13b) As Reform Jews, we especially affirm this kind of pluralistic path to making meaning out of our tradition.

And, if ultimate Truth is only known to God, then the second lesson of the *midrash* is that individuals must search for different kinds of truth throughout life. As Jews, we come from a long line of truth seekers.

Abraham, whom we just read about in our Torah portion this morning, was one of the great seekers of truth. When God commanded Avram to leave his home and go to the land of Israel, this leap of faith became a quest for truth. When Abraham begged God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if only he could find enough righteous people in them, this pursuit of justice became a defense of truth. When God commanded our father Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, then this incredulous demand became an incomprehensible truth. And when God later provided the ram and told Abraham not to harm his son, then this act of compassion became a merciful truth. Abraham's understanding of truth evolved with each encounter with God, with each trial and challenge, with each relationship with the members of his family.

Abraham was a model seeker. And others have walked in his footsteps. In more recent times, the man of steel stood for a similar mission: "To fight for truth, justice, and the American way." But we are not Abraham and we are not Superman. In reality, most of us spend our time running from the truth rather than fighting for it. As Edward R. Murrow, the World War II t.v. journalist, known for his honest reporting, keenly observed, "Most truths are so naked that people feel sorry for them and cover them up."

We clothe truth in all kinds of brilliant garments. A recent study determined that an astounding one in five interactions in the general community is deceitful. (Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*) We know it is wrong, and still we persist. Dishonesty is a spiritual illness. Dishonesty erodes truth, undermines trust, and damages souls, especially when we are dishonest with ourselves and those we love.

What it comes down to is that seeking truth must be an act of protest. To speak truth is to go against the grain, to defy the ministering angels who accused mankind of falsehood, to seek out honesty and meaning in our souls and in the most hidden places in the earth. The Indian writer and philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, captured it best. "It is only those who are in constant revolt that discover what is true, not the man who conforms, who follows some tradition. It is only when you are constantly inquiring, constantly observing, constantly learning, that you find truth, God, or love."

What does this mean for us? It means that the discovery of truth is a life-long journey, from discovery, to questions, to disappointments, to revelations, to different shades of understanding. The quest for truth, of course, begins when we are young.

My boys have recently discovered one of their first truths – not everything belongs to them. The top three words in their vocabulary these days are "bye", "more" and "mine." Do you recall that scene in the movie, "Finding Nemo," with the seagulls all

shouting “mine, mine, mine, mine”? That is what it sounds like in our house. With all the toys in our home, they have to fight over the same one, pulling it out of the other’s hands, shouting “mine”, “mine” back and forth, over and over again. Micah and I are trying to teach them the hard truth about sharing. Although they are learning this lesson in small ways, really, they are beginning to learn a profound truth – the truth that we do not really own anything, that all possessions are impermanent, all things are on loan to us, entrusted to us but for a short while.

We discover all sorts of truths when we are young. You can probably remember that one of the first lessons you were taught was to always tell the truth. For children, truth is black and white. But overtime, truth becomes more complex and full of shades of grey. As we grow up, one of the most startling truths we all learn is that our parents are flawed. At some point, we all discover this hard truth. Fortunately, my kids do not know it yet(!), but someday they will – the realization that our parents will not always be there for us, that they are not infinitely patient, that they have made poor choices in their lives, that they don’t have it all figured out. We eventually come to learn the truth that none of us is perfect and that we live in an imperfect world.

As we journey through life, truth becomes harder and sometimes inconvenient. At times, it is the confusion alone that is truth. Like Abraham, we have to adjust our understanding of truth to make way for new realities and new truths. This is why Krishnamurti said that we have to fight for truth. Because the alternative is to give up, to run away, to cover truth up. This complacency and neglect of the pursuit leads us astray and alienates us from our true selves.

In a few moments, the *shofar* will shake us from our slumber and call us to task. It is time to face the truth about ourselves and the world around us. It is time to uncover pretense and see ourselves at our core, for who we really are, and who we want to be. Let us begin to tell the truth.

As I look back on the year that has been, and look ahead to a fresh slate in 5769, I have reflected on some of my own truths. On a personal level, the truth is that I am not a perfect mom, wife, daughter, friend, or rabbi. I have gotten defensive when I should have said, “I’m sorry.” I have worked too late. I have not exercised enough. I have not engaged enough in my own prayer life. In the rush to do things, I have failed to pause and appreciate the moment. I should have called my grandmother in Florida more often. I could have responded to more people in need.

On the communal level, there is another truth that I cannot deny. As I look out to you today, the truth is that I would like to see more of you here more of the time. I believe as a congregation we are in an exciting time of change. We have more and more families joining us, children and adults are engaging in deeper levels of study, we are experiencing innovative and spiritually uplifting worship, we are making strides to reach out and care for our members and the community. It is a great time to be part of PTBE, and we need you. We need you to be present, to participate, to engage, to connect, to be an active member of our community, to seek truth here.

And there are national truths that I have been thinking about. Like the 37.3 million people in the past year living in poverty in our nation. Like the 45.7 million people in the U.S. who did not have health insurance. (*U.S. Census Bureau*)

I believe the religious right in our country has monopolized what they claim is the truth for too long. As liberal Jews, we have to make sure that our moral values, our truths are equally heard and accounted for.

The truth is that climate change and global warming continues unfettered and our government has done little to truly reverse the damage. The truth is that we can make a difference in our everyday actions and choices.

And the truth is that Washington can make a difference. It is time again to speak truth to power. In this important election year, the stakes for truth are especially high. I want our nation's leaders to stop spreading lies, to speak the language of truth, and to fulfill their promises for improvement and change.

These are some of my truths. What are yours? What are the truths you see in yourself, in our community, in our nation, in our world? In what ways in the coming year can you be more honest with yourself and others? How will you seek out new truths?

I will conclude with one final story about the truth. The Hebrew word for truth is *emet* (or if you adhere to the Ashkenazi pronunciation – *emes*). If you attend services here, you have probably heard some of our members say the word “*emes*” loudly; it is the first word of the prayer that immediately follows the *Shema*. *Emet* is an extraordinary word because it is made up of the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet – *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*. You see, truth frames all the letters and has the potential to shape all the words we speak.

For thousands of years, Jews have attributed special powers to the word “*emet*.” One man in particular actually made this word come to life. His name was Rabbi Judah Loew, and he lived in 16<sup>th</sup> century Prague. During that time, the Jewish people of Prague lived in fear of being attacked. As legend has it, Rabbi Loew decided to protect the Jews against pogroms by creating a golem, a creature in human form made from the earth. Using his knowledge of secret kabbalistic teachings, he went down to the riverbank and there made a man's shape out of clay. He followed the prescribed rituals and recited the special Hebrew incantations. Finally, he inscribed one word on the creature's forehead, and it came to life. The word was “*emet*.”

The golem obeyed the rabbi's every order and helped to protect the Jews of Prague. However, as the golem grew bigger, he also became more violent and started spreading more fear. Rabbi Loew was promised that the violence against the Jews would stop if the golem was destroyed. The rabbi agreed. The rabbi removed the first letter from the word “*emet*”, thus changing it to “*met*” (meaning “death”), and life was removed from the golem. But, if you were to travel to Prague today, some people would say that the golem is still there protecting the people.

We are not so different from the golem. We, too, are made from the dust of the earth, and to the dust we will one day return. Like the golem, we need truth to fully live. In the year to come, let us find the courage to inscribe truth before our eyes, so that we may be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.