

Our Prophetic Legacy – When To Listen and When To Speak

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A group of blind people heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch." So, they sought it out, and when they found it they groped about it. In the case of the first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard and smooth, like a spear.

Each person tried to understand the truth as he experienced it. From our broad view as the listeners of the story, it is obvious that the nature of the elephant includes and transcends each of the individual's experience. But from the perspective of each man, his experience felt true to him. What if each person had to make major life decisions based on his limited and false understanding of the reality in front of him? What if each person had to decide the direction of his society or country based on his understanding?

As we renew another year this Rosh Hashanah, we are asked to hit the reset button and return to our deepest sense of what is true. We have to do

this because our connection to others and to God is predicated on our experience of truth. The Talmud teaches that “Truth is the seal of the Holy One,” Rashi, the foremost medieval commentator on the Torah teaches that this saying refers to the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, formed from the first letter of the alphabet, *alef*, the middle letter, *mem*, and the final letter, *tav*. While the letters of the word truth can span the alphabet, so too, every moment and aspect of our lives and ourselves is pervaded by a deep truth that is hidden most of the time by our limited perspective, much like the blind men.

When the High Holy Days come around, many of us reflect on not only our own lives and actions, but what does it mean to be a Jew. What does it really mean to be a part of this tradition and people? Our sages wanted to make sure the 1/3 of the Jewish Bible, the Tanach was the words of the Hebrew Prophets. The prophets were connected to God’s truth because they knew how to listen deeply to God’s voice. In addition, they were outspoken and political about all the places in society they did not see God’s truth and moral values reflected. They insisted that the status quo needed to be a place where all of humanity, as created in the Divine image, was honored and respected. **The prophets knew how to listen, and they knew when they must speak.** Each one of us is called upon, as members of the Jewish tribe to not just admire these ancient prophets, but to emulate them. Being Jewish is to know how to listen deeply, and then to have the “*hutzpah*” – the nerve to speak out about what is true, morally and ethically, and work to implement it.

So how do we listen deeply to hear the voice of truth? This gets tricky. If we understand truth to be certainty, then who is to say that we are not like one of the blind men, convinced of our perception, but missing the larger picture. One of the major reasons that we can't see the larger picture is because our thinking process doesn't actually search for truth, but instead seeks to find confirmation for certain beliefs we already hold.

Psychologists now have file cabinets full of findings on "motivated reasoning," showing the many tricks people use to reach the conclusions they want to reach. When subjects are told that an intelligence test gave them a low score, they choose to read articles criticizing, rather than supporting, the validity of IQ tests. When people read a fictitious scientific study that reports a link between caffeine consumption and breast cancer, women who are heavy coffee drinkers find more flaws in the study than do men and less caffeinated women.

But self-interest is not the only factor influencing our reasoning. People feel very identified with their groups, whether those be racial, regional, religious, or political. Political opinions function as "badges" of social membership. They're like the array of bumper stickers people put on their cars showing the political causes, universities, and sports teams they support.

Our ability to hear truth is not only influenced by the groups that we identify with, but also how we label other people and groups. When we imagine that the best way to understand one another is by figuring out which category in our lives a person fits into, we create distance. We are seeing something in this country that I think is unprecedented, at least in my lifetime, due to the labels we give others, which is the experience of disgust.

In this past year we've seen people demonize each other more and more, mostly through social media and in person depending on the labels we assign to each other. We are not just saying that others are wrong or I don't like them, but we're saying they're horrible, they're evil, they're disgusting, they're revolting. And, on college campuses now, we are seeing more the urge to silence others from expressing their viewpoint. And this happens on both sides of the political spectrum.

Disgust is different than anger -- you know about this with kids. They fight 10 times a day, and they love each other 30 times a day. They just go back and forth: they get angry, they're not angry; they're angry, they're not angry. But disgust is different. Disgust paints the person as subhuman and morally deformed. Disgust is like indelible ink. There's research from John Gottman on marital therapy. If one of the faces of the married couple shows disgust or contempt, that's a predictor that they're going to get divorced soon, whereas if they show anger, that doesn't predict anything, because dealing with anger respectively is actually very healthy.

Our strong identification with our groups, the ways we label others – all color our experience of personal definition of truth, all block our ability to listen to God’s voice through the other – to listen like the ancient prophets.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield teaches that we can look to the journey of our ancestor Abraham as a model for how to approach relationship in pursuit of truth. One of the elements that characterizes Abraham’s journey is his willingness to keep moving forward even when he didn’t know where he was going. When we enter into dialogue with another towards common understanding, it’s important to truly open ourselves up to reaching a destination in our thinking that we cannot predict. When we feel strongly about something, whether personal or political, our interactions with other are usually about trying to assess where the other’s perspective fits or does not fit into our already existing model. If it doesn’t seem to fit, we either internally close down the conversation, or we try to persuade or convince the other to see it our way. We don’t know who we would be if we didn’t cling to cherished opinions, identities, and positions, and so to truly enter a dialogue and be open to whatever outcome, even if we change in the process, is the journey of Abraham.

Another element that characterizes Abraham’s journey is the willingness to enter conflict and still stay connected. God wants to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham actually argues with God. Abraham tells God that if God surrenders a sense of justice and goodness, then God isn’t God.

Arguing with God can be as sacred as accepting God. We don't have to disconnect because we disagree.

As inheritors of the legacy of the Hebrew prophets, we not only need to listen to God's voice by opening to other perspectives beyond our own biases and beliefs, but we also need to know when to speak. When we hear a voice of moral clarity, we need to plant our feet down in our sense of truth, and transcending media portrayals and political alliances, speak out to our friends, our community, and most importantly our leaders.

These past few months, we have experienced some horrible facts – the largest physical gathering of white supremacy and hate that we have seen in two decades. These organized groups have been expressing their white supremacist, racist, and anti-Semitic ideologies online for a long time, but were now emboldened to not only come to protest the taking down of statues, but to march armed under a Nazi flag to promote the use of violence to “take back what is theirs.” This march and rhetoric was not just another expression of free speech, and the expression of opinions. This was rhetoric and ideology that is deeply destructive to the core values that the United States and Judaism are based on.

And in a deeply shocking response, the leader of our country did not speak out swiftly and unequivocally against these expressions of hatred and bigotry. He did not step forward and say in no uncertain terms that there is no place for this kind of hateful and destructive expression in the United

States. If you are supporter of Donald Trump, please hear that it is in accordance with Jewish values to support our leadership without supporting their every action or inaction. There are some issues that just demand speaking up. The late Elie Wiesel taught that silence is collusion with the perpetrators of evil.

A family friend of mine shared an incident a couple of days after the rally in Charlottesville:

"I headed to Target today with my three year old daughter. I was feeling excited about turning 29 weeks pregnant and looking forward to celebrating Shabbat with my family. On our way to Target I was practicing the "Shabbat song" with Rita and by the time we got to the store she was practicing it with hand claps and everything.

As we were on our way out of the store I overheard a man and a woman near me say "Hey that's that Jewish song....yeah yeah it is." And then, "Oh yeah she's got that curly Jew hair... yeah the kid too." At this point I was alert and I could see them out of the corner of my eye. It was what seemed to be a husband and wife with a middle-school aged son (who was laughing the entire time as they went on). I started to push my stroller faster since everything in my being was hyper focused to protect my daughter at all costs.. "Oh look she hears us! She's speeding up!" They started moving closer to me and getting louder, "Filthy Jew. Yeah filthy Jew

and her filthy Jew kid." And then... "Donald Trump is going to take care of you! Yeah! We don't have to worry now! Trump's going to take care of you!" My heart was pumping through my entire body. My daughter was singing loudly "Shabbat Shalom...Shabbat Shabbat Shabbat Shabbat Shalom" completely unaware of what was going on. I was focused on just getting out of there and getting to my car without making eye contact or interacting with them. I turned a corner and the woman said "Oh look she's pregnant! Great she's having another filthy Jew." I got out of the store, ran my daughter to our car checking for any sight of them the entire time, got in and just held her so tight.

Now, I truly do not think that our president is anti-semitic, but there are consequences to his silence and there are consequences to ours.

According to the tracking by the Anti Defamation League, in 2016, there was a 34 percent year-over-year increase in incidents – assaults, vandalism, and harassment — with a total of 1,266 acts targeting Jews and Jewish institutions. The surge has continued throughout the year and we have already experienced over 2000 incidents. As far as our country has come since the horror of the holocaust, the normalizing of hate speech and behavior allows this reality to grow.

Today in Washington, rarely do elected officials from different parties agree with one another. In fact, often they even fail to agree with members

of their own party. So, when an issue comes along that unites our elected officials – both Republicans and Democrats, we should take notice. Elected officials from both parties have come out strongly against this recent display of white-supremacy, racism, and anti-semitism, even as members of our own tribe have defended the President's lack of leadership on this issue. This is the time to show our moral courage by not compromising our own sense of what is right and necessary, ignoring the ancient core values of our own faith which we honor and love. We need to insist that our communities, our congress, and our President speak out unequivocally and directly that there is no place for destructive and hateful ideology towards any person based on the color of their skin, religion, or sexual orientation.

The legacy of our prophets is knowing when to listen and when to speak. This coming year, may we put into practice both, and have the wisdom and understanding to know which is needed.