

Shabbat Yitro 5781

February 6, 2021

This morning I'd like to start a conversation with you about Truth and about what it means to speak and seek and be guided by truth. I want to talk about truth today because we are living through a time when the value of truth is under threat and also because our tradition has so much to teach us about it. And the Torah portion we read today – Parshat Yitro – invites us into that conversation.

Every year I learn something new from Yitro, not only from the parsha named after him, but from Yitro himself. Yitro is Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest, a non-Jew, and a deeply wise and loving man. Besides God, Yitro is the only other figure in the Torah who teaches and advises Moses, and Moses heeds his words with as much honor as he heeds God's. For all God's warnings about falling under the spell of non-Israelite practices and being wary of human authority figures, God does not interfere or meddle in the conversations between Moses and Yitro. God allows Yitro's advice to influence Moses and Israelite society as deeply as God's own commandments.

Of all the impact Yitro has on Moses, he is most famous for teaching him how to delegate. When Yitro hears about the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and comes to the Sinai Wilderness, bringing Moses' wife and children, Yitro sees Moses adjudicating disputes among the Israelites every day from morning to evening. And he says to Moses, why are you doing this work all by yourself? **לֹא־טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה** -- "This thing that you're doing is not good." You're going to wear yourself out like this. And Yitro advises Moses to appoint judges from among the Israelites and to delegate minor cases to them, so that he can judge the major ones, and still have the energy to lead the people. (I like to assume that, with this advice, Yitro is also urging Moses to spend less time at the office and more time with his family.)

But what caught my attention this year was not Yitro's wise advice to create a sustainable system of government. What caught my attention were the character traits that Yitro tells Moses to seek out among the people he selects to serve as judges. Yitro says to Moses:

You shall seek out from among all the people **אֲנָשֵׁי־חַיִל יִרְאֵי אֱלֹהִים** -- people of honor who revere God and **אֲנָשֵׁי אֱמֶת שְׂנֹאֵי בָצַע** -- people of truth who spurn unjust gain. It is these kinds of people that you should appoint as chiefs over the people.

When it comes to selecting worthy judges over a nation, Yitro teaches Moses, and teaches us, that they must be honorable, humble, and righteous. And he teaches that they should be *Anshe Emet* - "people of truth." In studying this with Rabbi Tsadok, she pointed out wisely that Yitro doesn't say simply that the judges should tell the truth or be able to distinguish truth from falsehood. He says more generally that the judges should be people *of* truth. So, what I want to know is: what does it mean to be Anshe Emet? And how might we ourselves learn to be Anshe Emet and to set over ourselves leaders and judges who are Anshe Emet?

Without any further reading, Yitro's words alone offer us an idea of who Anshe Emet are. He says the judges should be **שְׁנֵאֵי בְּצַע** -- that is, people who are **שְׁנֵאֵי בְּצַע** -- who do not seek power through money or violence, who do not serve to become wealthy or to manipulate for their own benefit. An Ish Emet, he says, is someone who prioritizes the greater good, making his judgments based on what is true and right, not on what is in his own interests.

Toward the beginning of the parsha, it says that Yitro went - **אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר** he went to the wilderness to reunite Moses with his wife and sons. Rashi teaches that the verse specifies that Yitro went into the wilderness, a fact we should already know, to teach us that Yitro himself was an Ish Emet. How so? He was an Ish Emet because he left the luxury and splendor of his high stature in his own Midianite society and opted to brave the Sinai wasteland in order to hear the words of the Torah. Unlike other kings and chiefs, we know from the Hebrew Bible, who would rather stay comfortable in their high chambers, unreceptive to the words of foreigners, Yitro seeks out truth – wherever and whomever it may be coming from.

Centuries later, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov affirmed this view. In a chillingly relevant statement, Rebbe Nachman taught, “One who always wants to be victorious is very intolerant of truth. The truth may be staring him in the face. But because he is determined to win at all costs, he ignores it completely. If you want to find the real truth you must rid yourself of the urge to win. Then you will be able to see the truth, if you wish.”

We learn then that if we want to know the truth and be guided by it, we must consider our motivations. We must ask ourselves – and our leaders must ask themselves – Am I seeing the whole picture? Am I hearing all the voices that hold a stake in this? Am I willing to let go of being right for what is true?

Of course, the conversation extends much further. We must consider, as the rabbis did, the fact that there are situations in which multiple truths might live in tension with one another. There's the famous story of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, two schools of thought, who argued about a particular legal matter. And in the midst of presenting the two sides, a Bat Kol, a voice from God, rang out, declaring “*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Hayim*” -- the arguments of these and those are true. But instead of merely accepting this, the rabbis make a decision and rule in Beit Hillel's favor. Why? Because Beit Hillel would always teach Beit Shammai's words before their own. We learn from two things from this story: first, that we can't always afford to “agree to disagree.” A verdict has to be reached. And second, we should favor those who actively learn and consider the words of those with whom we they disagree.

Our rabbis also consider more nuanced questions about truth, like in the case where it may be inappropriate to tell the truth. In many cases they encourage people to favor being kind rather than brutally honest.

But for all their willingness to probe the value of truth, there is no question that truth and truthfulness are absolute, unequivocal values and that we must always aspire to them. The rabbis go as far as to say that “The Holy One, blessed be God, hates a person who says one thing with her mouth and another in her heart.”

I knew that in opening this conversation about truth that we would barely begin to scrape the surface of what it means to pursue and live according to truth. But nonetheless, I feel it is our sacred duty at all times, and especially now, that we take the time to dig deep into what it means to be Anshe Emet, and to aspire to be so. Yehuda Kurtzer, a leading thinker and teacher and the current president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in North America has written aptly:

“Because of phenomena like the [now former] president maligning the news media, or bots writing fake news stories -- [and I would add a culture that seems to spurn truth], it’s not just a question of letting different truths coexist but of defending the truth against falsehood.” Kurtzer says that people tend to go looking for facts to support an existing world view, rather than making up their minds based on the facts they learn. Jewish institutions, and Jews generally, may be in for a period of wrestling with the competing demands of maintaining pluralist dialogue and battling pernicious myth.”

We are living in an age when the value of truth has been degraded. We have become used to accusations of "fake news" and claims of "alternative facts", to cyber manipulation, the stubborn denial of demonstrable evidence, and to calculated obfuscation. As we stand at the precipice of possibility, when a pandemic has awoken our country to the urgent need for rebuilding, we have a sacred and moral obligation to reclaim Truth as an absolute value. In the coming weeks and months, let’s commit ourselves as individuals and as a community to being truth-tellers and truth-seekers and to demanding that our leaders do the same.

Shabbat shalom.

TORAH

A. Parshat Yitro

וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבְנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הַמַּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר-הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹהִים:

Yitro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought Moses’ sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. (Exodus 18:5)

Rashi: INTO THE DESERT — Indeed we know that they were in the wilderness, and it appears unnecessary to state that Jethro came to Moses there. But by stressing this Scripture is speaking in praise of Jethro: that he was living amidst all the splendour that

the world could provide, and nevertheless his heart prompted him to go forth into the desert, a waste place (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 18:5:2), to hearken to the words of the Torah.

וְאַתָּה תִּחְזֶה מִכָּל-הָעָם אַנְשֵׁי-חַיִל יִרְאַי אֱלֹהִים אַנְשֵׁי אֱמֶת שְׂנֵאֵי בְצַע וְשִׁמְתָּ עֲלֵהֶם שְׂרֵי אֲלֹפִים שְׂרֵי מְאוֹת שְׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים וְשְׂרֵי עֶשְׂרֹת:

You shall also seek out from among all the people men of honor who fear God, **men of truth**, who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens... (Exodus 18:21)

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׂוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אִשְׁרֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׂוּא:

You shall not swear falsely [take God's name in vain] by the name of Adonai your God; for Adonai will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.

Rashi: "IN VAIN" — for no valid reason, idly. What is a שבועת שוא, an oath taken for no valid reason? If one takes an oath declaring something, the nature of which is evident, to be different from what it is: e. g., swearing about a stone pillar that it is of gold (Shevuot 29a).

B.

One who always wants to be victorious is very intolerant of truth. The truth may be staring him in the face. But because he is determined to win at all costs he ignores it completely. If you want to find the real truth you must rid yourself of the urge to win. Then you will be able to see the truth if you wish.

Rebbe Nachman of Beslov, Likutei Maharar 1:122

C.

(ו) וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְסוּגֵן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת |

The LORD passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed: "The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and TRUTH... (Exodus 34:6)