

Michael Cummins sermon on truth for RH 5779

Preparing for Rosh Hashana, and looking at Teshuvah literature, what stood out for me this year was an expression that is used over and over again to describe the God to whom we pray for forgiveness, rav chesed v'emet. You might recognize it

“The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, v'nakeh

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְדּוֹ אַפַּיִם
| וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת |

נִצָּר חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָה לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד | עֵוֹן אָבוֹת
עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנִים בְּנִים עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים:

rav chesed v'emet, God is overflowing with lovingkindness and truth.

The reason I took notice is that in a passage about God's gracious willingness to forgive, truth seems a strange term here. Truth is usually related to justice, not compassion. The truth is that if you have sinned, and you deserve to be punished.

So why is truth mentioned? That question brought me back to graduate school, where I studied philosophy, and learned that truth has different meanings. If we understand truth as it is most commonly understood, as truth telling, as speaking accurately about the way the world is, then the passage seems problematic.

But there is another sense of truth that we regularly use, when we use expressions like: this is a moment of truth, or what is your truth, or most commonly, when we use truth as an adjective to say that something or someone is real, or genuine.

So for example, from a factual point of view, anyone who wears a softball uniform and plays for a team is a teammate, but when we say Jennifer is truly a teammate, we mean more than that. We mean things like, she puts the team above personal glory, or she plays hard every game, or that she is there for me when I have a problem off the field. That's what a real teammate is, a true teammate. The noun truth has become the adjective true.

But we can also use truth as a noun in this kind of existential sense as well. When Joe comes up with the bases loaded and two out in the bottom of the ninth, it is a moment of truth for him. Something will be revealed about Joe's nature or essence as a baseball player.

Let's demonstrate this. What is the translation of the Yiddish word mensh? Man

But what do we mean by mensch? A person who has integrity, who is compassionate, who is genuine, who cares about other people. It's not about gender is it. A woman can be a mensch.

So truth as essence or authenticity is about values. And that explains our verse: rav chesed v'emet. Emet is in the context of an appeal to God's chesed, to God's lovingkindness. So what might it mean?

There are thirty or so major English translations of the Bible, and to research this, I looked up our verse in every one. I could let you speculate that I spent all day in a library looking them up, but since we're talking about truth, I'll tell you that there is a website where you punch in a biblical verse and the thirty translations pop up in a few seconds. Here's what I learned. Emet is translated as truth by the majority of translators, but about 30-40% of the time, emet is rendered as faithful or loyal, and certainly that is what is intended by the Torah here.

There are lots of gods out there, but the true God, the real God, the authentic God, Israel's God, is committed to the Jewish people. God is loyal and faithful. So of course, God expresses chesed, lovingkindness, more so than strictness, God rewards more than punishes in judging us, because God loves us. That is the truth of God that our passage is conveying. In other passages we get other messages about God's essence, but here, and the reason we pray this on the High Holidays, is because this passage emphasizes the truth that the authentic God is gracious, loving and forgiving.

Now, I'd like to take the next step and ask, what does Judaism say about emet in general and what does that have to do with what we are doing the next ten days, what does truth have to do with teshuvah?

Let's start with truth as truth telling, as speaking words that accurately correspond to reality.

So here I have a big revelation for you, Hold on to your seats: Judaism teaches that people should tell the truth. I know you're surprised, so let's take a closer look. In the Torah, interestingly, it's phrased in the negative. Instead of "tell the truth", we get "Don't lie." In the

(ס) לֹא־תֵעָנֶה בְּרֵעֶךָ עֵד שֶׁקֶר:)

ten commandments, we are prohibited from bearing false witness, and three chapters later in Exodus, we are commanded, m'davar sheker tirschak. Distance yourself from falsehood.

In Leviticus 19, we get the most sublime short list of Jewish ethics in the Torah, which is why in liberal Judaism we read it on Yom Kippur afternoon.

It starts with You shall be holy for I, your God am holy, and it includes leaving the corner of the fields for the poor, don't put a stumbling block before the blind, judge poor and rich by the

same standards, and many more, and it ends with the core principle that the later rabbis considered the bedrock of Jewish morality, Love your neighbor as yourself

Scholars have named this passage the holiness code, and verse 11 of it reads

לֹא תִגְנוֹבוּ וְלֹא תִכְחָשׁוּ וְלֹא תִשְׁקְרוּ אִישׁ בְּעַמִּיתוֹ: 11

don't steal, don't deny, as in don't deny what is true or right, and finally, don't lie.

Why all these are in the negative is a good question. One explanation is that you can tell the truth and still do evil, usually by telling a partial truth, so the phrasing, stay away from falsehood, is significant. In the same spirit, witnesses in American courts swear to tell the whole truth, because half-truths can be misleading.

So speaking truthfully is a central Jewish value, but as we all know, there are times when it is permissible to tell a lie. In fact, there are times when it is the right thing to do.

You might recall that last year I mentioned the two leading schools of rabbis in the first century, Bet Hillel and Bet Shamai disagreed on how to greet a bride. If she has a deformity, says Bet Shamai, praise something other than her beauty, because the Torah says, medavar sheker tirschak, stay away from falsehood. Bet Hillel says that all brides are beautiful on their wedding day, and we follow Bet Hillel. But on the whole, white lies are the exception.

So, let's now connect this to Teshuva. Teshuva, I'm sure most people know but to remind us all, teshuvah is the closest Hebrew word we have for the English word repentance, but literally it means to turn, and it is the turn to God, or the return to God, and it is the turning away from that which is against God, that is, from sin.

The word for a sin is chet, which is originally an archery term for when you miss the mark. So the antidote to sin is to improve one's aim, one's moral direction.

The goal of going through the process we are undergoing in the next 10 days of teshuvah, the ten days of return, is in Jewish language, to become a repentant, a baal tshuvah, and then a tzadik, a righteous person. A repentant person in Judaism, Maimonides famously gives us this definition, is a person who returns to the same place in which they have previously sinned, and this time acts rightly. One makes a better choice, because this time when they experience the temptation of behaving badly, they overcome it.

A Tzadik, in contrast, no longer feels temptation to act badly. A tzadik has so internalized righteousness, it never occurs to them to sin. Instinctively, sub-consciously, without having to make a choice, they do the right thing.

Now, the interesting thing, is that most of us largely act as tzadikim already. We don't have to think about not cutting in line at the super market or returning a lost item or giving our spouse the benefit of the doubt or visiting a friend who is in the hospital or sacrificing for our children.

None of us are 100% tzadikim, or even close, but truth be told, the vast majority of us are on the right track.

And that should make us feel good, but at the same time, we shouldn't let it go to our heads. If we take our moral responsibilities seriously, as Judaism demands that we do, then we have to ask, how can more and more of me act more like a tzadik. And we should be humbled by how daunting a task it is. We all know how hard it is to change ourselves.

My friend, rabbi Marc Margolius, was in a leadership program with the leading modern Orthodox rabbi of this generation, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, who said, the goal of Judaism is get each of us to behave better, by about 10%. As a young rabbinical student, he was appalled. Just 10 percent!?! Today, as a parent with grown children, he recognizes what a great accomplishment it is to change just a little. So let us be realistic. It's a great accomplishment to improve ourselves, even just a bit.

Let's now, put truth and teshuvah together. What role does truth play in our quest to become better people?

First, lies clutter our brains, for to maintain a lie, we have to remember it, and repeat it and probably elaborate on it, lest we get caught. The several spiritual traditions that I know all demand truthful speech, and one of the main reasons is that we need to clear space in our minds for spiritual pursuits. This usually involves a simplification of our lives and a lessening of external demands on our time. Truth-telling is regarded as an important first step.

Second, trust is dependent on truth. Here we meet another moral virtue that is connected to truth-telling, the virtue of honesty. We trust people who we think are honest. Those are the people we like and love, the people that we make commitments to and agreements with. It's hard to think of any area of life where we are better off as a society when people lie a lot, whether it's family life or education or politics or business.

We see similar results when we take it to a personal level, to teshuva. To change, we need to have a basic trust in ourselves. That at our core, we are good, and we can access that good to be better. I am one who thinks that turning inward, that peeling away the layers of ego and deceit, so that I can see my soul, is what brings me into contact with the Holy One, in Whom I trust that this world is created for good, and that includes me.

Third, the quest for knowledge, if its sincere, is guided by truth, and that includes self-knowledge. Just as a doctor can't prescribe an effective treatment without an accurate diagnosis, we can't do teshuva if we fail to see our moral selves with some degree of accuracy. It's not at all easy. It takes work and effort to tell the truth about ourselves, to ourselves. It might take the help of a therapist. It certainly takes the help of our friends and family. In the end, just as there is a need for AA meetings to begin with people being real by saying, I'm an alcoholic, we all have a need to get real by seeing where we are missing the mark and telling it, truthfully, to ourselves.

I'll add, I find that it helps to say it to God as well, which is what the high holiday liturgy asks us to do. When we confess how we are missing the mark, God may or may not "hear" what we say. Each to his or her own theology. But what is certain is that when we pray, WE hear. I agree with the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, who said every prayer is answered as it is spoken, because praying itself is what counts, the act of prayer is the answer to prayer, and one of the reasons is because when we pray, if we pray sincerely, we articulate and enable ourselves to hear the deepest longings of our hearts. For me, having the conversation with my soul that prayer enables is a key step in the process of self-change.

Finally, according to our tradition, truth is essential if we are to learn how to love. Earlier I mentioned the holiness code, which ends Love Your Neighbor as Yourself. Here is the complete ending, verses 17 and 18 of chapter 19 of Leviticus.

לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חַטָּא: 17

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.

לֹא־תִקָּם וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: 18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

Don't hate your neighbor in your heart. How do I do that? Reprove him when he behaves badly. Don't bear responsibility for his wrong-doing by remaining quiet. Instead, tell him the truth. Not my truth, the truth. We all know what bad behavior looks like. The Torah is pretty clear. American law and ideals are pretty clear. So I shouldn't hide behind rationalizations or say it's none of my business or shy away from an unpleasant conversation, because if I speak truth, I'll never feel the need to take revenge and I will not carry a grudge that festers in me and draw out anger and hatred and resentment. The result: I will be able to fulfill the commandment, love your neighbor as yourself.

I shared this with my spouse Jody who warned that this process can also be unproductive. People can rush to judgment before they know all the facts, and if you reprove somebody, especially in your family, with an air of self-righteousness, you probably won't be listened to, which undermines the truth you tell. Rav CHESED v' emet, without lovingkindness, the truth may not come forward.

But if I do all that the holiness code asks me to do, with humility and wisdom, if I am compassionate and honest and truthful, I'm not just truth telling, I am true to my neighbor, that is, I'm a real neighbor, the kind of neighbor we'd all like to have, a neighbor who cares enough to tell me the truth when I need to hear it, and loves me.

Thus Judaism leads us from truth as truth-telling, to truth as essence or authenticity. If I speak truthfully, I am on the way to being a mensch.

I close with two final teachings from the tradition. The word emet begins with aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, proceeds to mem, the middle letter, and ends with taf, the last letter of the alphabet. And in the mythic understanding of our tradition, God creates the world, the universe, with words. Truth, then, is all encompassing; truth is the essence of everything. It permeates our universe, and emet is meant to permeate all of our lives.

Second, the Talmud teaches that truth is the chatimah of God, the seal of God. It surprised me to learn this. From what I know of Judaism, I would have thought that Tzedek, justice, or chesed, loving-kindness, would have been chosen.

But truth is the seal of God. Think of a wax seal that the ancients used to seal a document. The seal is your sign, it stands for you and what you say. And God's seal is truth.

I find this intellectually inspiring, and here's why I find this to be true in my experience. When I find truth, which I think of as a part of what is sacred in this world, I have a real opportunity to discern God's presence. Truth is not something we make up. Rather, it's a recognition. It's seeing clearly. I experience truth as a discovery, not as an invention. Truth is something that calls out to us, finds us, and draws us toward it, to learn or to discover what's real, and to see the best that this world has to offer. Truth is revealed—revealed to those who search with sincerity and listen well. And one kind of truth, moral truth, asks us to rise above selfish and short-term interests, to be the moral person, to be the menshe, that we can be. Teshuvah means to turn and return; truth leads me back to God.

My prayer for us in the coming 10 days is that we re-discover the joys of truth telling and the joys of being true, joys we already know well, so that when we blow the shofar on Yom Kippur ten days from now, we might be just a little bit better than we were this past year.

L'Shana tova v'ticateyvu, Happy New Year, and may we be inscribed in the book of life.