

Yom Kippur 2024 - The Power of Truth

It's amazing how much can change in a year.

I realized that for the first time when each of my children was born. It was incredible to see how a tiny helpless bundle of flesh that could barely keep its eyes open was transformed in the space of a single year into a child that could walk, learn, express emotions, and interact with the surrounding world.

And the process of rapid growth over the course of each year continued. What my children were capable of, and who they were becoming, by age two was totally different from who they were at one year of age. And in those early days of parenthood, I came to understand how a new reality - a new world - could be created in just one year.

This truth about the human experience - how much things can change in a year - is on my mind today, for very different reasons.

This past Monday, we commemorated the first anniversary of the outbreak of the war in Israel. Just over one year ago, on October 7, 2023, Jews across the globe watched in horror as news of the horrific Hamas attack on Israel began to come to light. On that day alone, more than 1200 men, women, and children were killed, and 254 people were taken hostage.

This attack, and the war that it precipitated, was the largest threat to Israel's safety since the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and it represented the greatest loss of Jewish life in a single day since the Holocaust.

The attack shook all of us in the worldwide Jewish community to our core. It opened our eyes to the truth of Israel's continuing vulnerability, despite its past military successes. It made us realize that the homeland we thought of as our "safe haven" was perhaps not as strong as we had hoped.

But for many of us Jews, particularly those of us in the Diaspora, the things that took place in the weeks and months following the attack were perhaps even more

painful and disillusioning than the attack itself.

In the aftermath of October 7, we were treated to a remarkable show of gaslighting and victim-blaming, as non-Jews from nearly all corners of society attempted to explain away our pain, reminding us that we really had to put the actions of the crazed Hamas terrorists “in context” and realize that they had reasons for doing what they did.

We were shocked to see our victimhood and our pain met with anger and erasure, as people tore down pictures of the hostages and protested outside the Nova music festival exhibit in Manhattan.

When we tried to defend Israel, we were yelled at and spoken over by people, many of whom know little about Judaism and have never been to Israel, yet claim that they know more than we do about what Zionism is, and what does and does not constitute anti-Semitism.

Some of us learned that the social and political movements that we ascribe to don't think that we have the right to be a part of those groups if we identify as Zionists.

Some of us who have spent years trying to build bridges with people of other religious and ethnic communities felt - like a knife in the heart - the devastating silence that ensued when those whom we thought were our friends failed to acknowledge our pain.

All of these rude awakenings joined together to shatter many of our illusions about what it means to be a Jew in the world today.

One such illusion that we had apparently held was that we Diaspora Jews were somehow removed from whatever existential issues Israel might face in its seemingly endless string of wars and terror attacks.

Many of us thought that we in the Diaspora were stronger and safer than our brothers and sisters in Israel. After all, we live in enlightened Western countries like the US, where we can attend the best liberal arts colleges and get good jobs and be members of polite society, unlike our brothers and sisters in Israel, who

need to serve in the army and who have to go running for their bomb shelters every time there's a rocket attack. Surely we're in a less precarious position than the Jews in Israel - right?

The French Jewish philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy comments on the shattering of this illusion in his new book *Israel Alone*, which highlights the ways in which the events of the past year have changed our reality as Jews.

Lévy writes, "October 7 marks the alignment...of Israel with the diaspora. The two paths of Judaism are now on the same footing and are intersecting. And the material and spiritual Jewish strength that is essential to the survival of real Jews...has revealed its hidden weakness. There is nowhere in the world where Jews are safe."

Lévy points out that in the wake of October 7, we now realize that our fate, and the fate of our brothers and sisters in Israel, is intertwined. If they are not safe, neither are we.

Bernard-Henri Lévy also highlights another illusion that has been shattered for us in the aftermath of October 7 - that we modern Jews are somehow different from our ancestors, that we are immune to the kinds of fears and tribulations they experienced.

Lévy writes, "Whether we are secular or mystic, modern or observant, whether we are Yiddish-speaking Hasidim from Williamsburg, freshmen at MIT, Californians or New Yorkers, we all find ourselves thrown into the situation of our elders. We had hoped to escape it. But here it is."

We modern American Jews have grown used to speaking about the struggles of our ancestors in the past tense - because for us, they *were* in the past. The pogroms of Eastern Europe, the Holocaust - all of these traumas were part of the history books, mentioned in our grandmothers' stories about the old country, witnessed when we visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

We got used to the feeling that that kind of trauma is not something that happens to us now, in our day - but October 7 proved us wrong.

Another illusion that was shattered in the wake of October 7 was the idea that the lessons learned from the Holocaust - perhaps the most painful episode in our people's history - had helped to make us stronger and safer in the post-Holocaust world.

According to this idea, the Western world had been chastened and shamed by the events of the Holocaust and had learned that committing genocide against the Jews was wrong, and that Jews deserved to live peacefully and without being victimized. But did the world really learn this lesson?

Back in 2021, even before the events of last October 7, the writer Dara Horn responded to the continuing specter of anti-Semitism in her incisive book *People Love Dead Jews*. The book highlights the ways in which people strip Jews of our identity in an effort to make us into a sort of universal symbol of suffering and martyrdom that's supposed to teach the world some great lesson.

At the outset of the book, Horn shares a story from the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam. Apparently, several years ago one of the museum's employees was an observant Jew who came to work wearing a kippah.

His supervisors told him to cover his kippah with a baseball cap. Why? Because, as a spokesperson later explained to the press, the Anne Frank House aims for "neutrality."

What exactly is the question that the Anne Frank House is trying to be "neutral" about? Whether Jews, including religious Jews, exist? Whether we have the right to exist, and to - God forbid - display our Jewishness in public?

Apparently, after a four-month process of deliberation, the museum finally decided to let the employee wear his kippah to work. Horn observes that four months "seems like a rather long time for the Anne Frank House to ponder whether it was a good idea to force a Jew into hiding."

What kind of world are we living in when a Jew can't display the symbols of his Jewishness at the Anne Frank House?!

We might have thought - we might have hoped - that in the wake of the

Holocaust, the world had learned not to devalue and dehumanize Jews - to accept us as human beings and to allow us to live as our authentic selves. But episodes like the one from the Anne Frank Museum suggest that for much of the world, this is still a bridge too far.

In Dara Horn's view, episodes like this one demonstrate that in the minds of many of the people in this world, it's okay to be visibly Jewish as long as you're dead - like if you're a Holocaust victim in a grainy black-and-white photo in a museum.

Then the rest of the world can feel sorry for you, and they can congratulate themselves for feeling sorry for you - but they don't have to have the uncomfortable experience of actually interacting with you - and they don't have to, God forbid, support you when you have the temerity to suggest that your people and your homeland should be able to defend themselves against aggression.

Dara Horn suggests that the world hasn't been able to learn from the Holocaust about how it should relate to living Jews because the Holocaust has been de-Judaized and turned into a universal human tragedy.

This view is shared by the Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi, who takes perhaps an even more pointed view of the situation in his article published this past May, entitled "The War Against the Jewish Story." In Halevi's view, Holocaust education has been an abject failure, because it has tried too hard to be universalistic - to apply the lessons of the Holocaust to various forms of racism across the globe.

According to Halevi, Holocaust education has focused too much on the general concepts of racism and genocide and not enough on the particular racism and the particular genocide that defined the Holocaust - the hatred of Jews and the attempted eradication of the Jewish people.

This has enabled antisemites and anti-Zionists to invert the lessons and meaning of the Holocaust for their own purposes - to say that now the Jews are the ones who are enacting a genocide - when in fact it is we who are still desperately trying to protect ourselves from evil forces that want to eradicate us.

These thinkers - Dara Horn and Yossi Klein Halevi - highlight the ways in which the gains we thought we had made in the wake of the Holocaust have actually been largely imaginary.

The past year has been incredibly difficult for us in large part because of the shattering of these illusions that we had about ourselves and our position in the world. Having our eyes opened to realities that we had not been aware of has been painful.

But - the thing that has been perhaps even more painful is the fact that the world that is so quick to judge us is not willing to recognize the kinds of truths that we can't help seeing.

One of the most infuriating things for me over the past year has been the refusal of those who criticize Israel to engage with the truth, to take an honest look at the situation in the Middle East in all its complexity, and to recognize the very real dangers that Israel faces.

People are all too ready to chant slogans about how Israel is an oppressor and a colonizer - but when they are challenged to actually engage with the many facets of the Israel-Hamas conflict, they look away. And, what's worse - they refuse to name and recognize evil for what it is.

Last month, the BBC aired the documentary "Surviving October 7: We Will Dance Again," which chronicled the attack on the Nova music festival.

However, the BBC didn't air the same version that had been shown here in the US - they showed a version that was edited to remove an opening line that referred to Hamas as "terrorists."

BBC world editor John Simpson published an article explaining the network's refusal to use the word "terrorists" to refer to Hamas.

He wrote, "Terrorism is a loaded word, which people use about an outfit they disapprove of morally. It's simply not the BBC's job to tell people who to support and who to condemn — who are the good guys and who are the bad guys."

If we live in a society in which we are afraid of naming, clearly and unflinchingly, who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, then it's true that Holocaust education has failed - we have learned nothing from the Holocaust.

In his article, Simpson further explained, "It's always been like this in the BBC. During World War Two, BBC broadcasters were expressly told not to call the Nazis evil or wicked, even though we could and did call them 'the enemy.'"

Is he actually proud of this? The BBC's refusal to call evil by its name is apparently so much a part of its proud history that it dates back to a refusal to pass judgment on the Nazis.

I am all for journalistic integrity and objectivity - but I think that this supposed gesture towards impartiality is disingenuous. I don't think that calling people who commit acts of terror "terrorists" is editorializing. I think it's telling the truth. But apparently it's too hard for so many people to articulate the truth, to look the truth in the face.

But truth is one of the crucial things that our world, and our faith, are built upon. In one of our earliest Rabbinic texts, Pirkei Avot, the sage Rabban Gamliel asserts that truth is one of the three foundational elements of our reality. He says,

"On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace."

Rabban Gamliel's statement expresses how critical truth is to the preservation of our world - without truth, our world as we know it would not be able to exist.

One of the oldest tropes in Jewish folk literature is the concept of the golem, a mythical creature that is created out of clay by humans and then brought to life by the use of certain words or incantations. Once brought to life, the golem can be used to protect the Jewish community.

Stories of golems date back to the time of the Talmud, but they reached a peak in the Middle Ages, when the idea of the golem became particularly captivating to European Jews living through the traumatic era of the Crusades.

The golem story was a kind of pre-modern superhero fantasy. It reflected the

Jews' feelings of powerlessness and their wish that they could create a kind of savior that would give them protection.

In some classic versions of the golem narrative, the golem was brought to life when its creator inscribed on its forehead the three letters of the Hebrew word *emet* - truth. When the golem was no longer needed, it was stripped of its power by erasing the *aleph* in the word *emet*, leaving just the word *met*, which signifies death.

The concept of the golem is fascinating - one of the most intriguing things about it is the role of truth in bringing the golem to life. According to the golem story, not only is truth so powerful that it can give life to something inanimate - truth is what gives us our strength. Truth is the tool by which we create a power that can save us from harm.

The play on words between *emet* - truth - and *met* - death - suggests that for us Jews, the choice we are faced with isn't really the choice between life and death - it's the choice between truth and death. Those are our two options in this life. We can tell the truth, and let the truth be our power, or we can perish.

The past year has presented us with countless uncomfortable truths. It has shattered our illusions about our place in Western society and in the world. And it has woken us up to the fact that those who seek to delegitimize us do so by distorting and avoiding the truth. But we can't let them do that - there is too much at stake for us.

One of the prayers that we recite multiple times on the High Holidays is the liturgical poem known as "*V'chol Ma'aminim*."

This prayer, attributed to the early medieval poet Yannai, presents a roster of theological ideas, connected by the words *v'chol ma'aminim* - "we all believe."

The prayer asserts, "*V'chol ma'aminim she-hu kol yachol*" - "We all believe that God is all-powerful," and "*V'chol ma'aminim she-hu tzadik ve-yashar*" - "We all believe that God is righteous and just."

If this phrase - "we all believe" - strikes you as something that's perhaps a little

odd for us Jews to say, I get it. Our Jewish nation is so diverse and so opinionated that it's hard to assert that we *all* truly believe anything.

And what's more - the Jewish religion is actually one that allows for a multiplicity of theological ideas. The Torah spends way more time telling us what to do than it does telling us what to think. In our tradition, it's okay to doubt or to question our beliefs.

In a way, I think that this complexity is actually part of the reason why "V'chol Ma'aminim" became part of our High Holiday services, and why it continues to resonate with us today. This prayer challenges us to reflect on those core beliefs that tie us together as a people despite our differences and our doubts.

It challenges us to find our truth - and it encourages us to speak our truth into the world, to say without fear or hesitation what it is we believe in, to assert our truth in the presence of others.

Maybe what the Jewish community needs today is an updated "V'chol Ma'aminim," reflecting the truths that unite us at this unique time in our people's history.

We Jews may disagree on a lot of things - how to practice our religion, how we feel about the current Israeli government, what we think is necessary to end the war and bring the hostages home - but there are so many truths and commitments that unite us, and we need to articulate those to the world, together.

We need to have the courage to stand up and say, to each other and to the rest of the world, *V'chol ma'aminim* - we all believe. We all believe that Israel has a right to exist, that we have a right to exist.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that Jews everywhere have a right to live openly as Jews, and to practice our religion in safety and dignity.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that we don't have to erase who we are in order to make anyone else more comfortable.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that we want peace for the entire Middle East, but that that peace cannot come at the cost of Jewish lives.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that the days of Jews being slaughtered without defending themselves are over.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that the truth can give us life, and that when we speak the truth, we become God's partners in creating and sustaining a just world.

We are different than we were one year ago. What we have learned this past year has caused us so much pain, but we are stronger with our eyes open. And we need to use that strength to keep articulating our people's truth, over and over again, and to demand that humanity stop turning away from the truth.

Bernard-Henri Lévy made the case that the long period of our people's vulnerability may not be over in the way that we thought it was one year ago. Despite our comfortable homes and our relative political and economic power, the events of the past year taught us that the long night of our people's history is not quite finished. We are still vulnerable. We still have much to fear.

But if the era of our vulnerability is not over yet, then neither is the era of our liberation.

The process by which our people began to be truly free when our state was founded in 1948 is still in progress. Our liberation is still unfolding. It is still our Independence Day.

And the more truth we bring into the world, the faster our redemption will come.

V'chol ma'aminim - we all believe that this year can be better than the last. May God help us make it so.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah - may we be sealed in the Book of Life for a good New Year.