Civilly Speaking: A Curriculum

UNIT 6 — It's NOT just HOW You Say It
(truth matters.)

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**Learners Handout**

1. **Exodus 23:1**
   (1) You must not carry false rumors; you shall not join hands with the guilty to act as a malicious witness:

2. **Rashi on Exodus 23:1:1**
   (1) Thou shalt not hear a false report — Take it as the Targum renders it: thou shalt not accept (listen to) a false report. This is a prohibition addressed to one who is about to accept a slanderous statement, and it is addressed also to a judge — that he should not hear the pleadings of one party to a suit before the other appears (Mekhila d'Rabbi Yishmael 22:23:1; Sanhedrin 7b).

**Questions for discussing the song**
1. What do you think ben Ari is trying to say with song?
2. What is the cage he is trying to avoid?
3. He describes a lot of people as being or not being a certain way. What does he want us to do with that information?
4. Why is he afraid of Wikipedia?
5. He appears to be critical of internet culture. What makes you think so (or why do you disagree with that statement)?
6. Why do you think he calls himself Don Quixote? What battle is he fighting?
7. In an interview he said the sectors refer to the many different sectors of Israeli society. They are defined by economics, by kind of Judaism, by national origin, by race, by religion in general and even the accent in one’s Hebrew. He says he is not a “bridge between the sectors” and that the sectors can burn. What does this mean? Why is he saying it do you think?
8. The song begins “How easy it is to go along with your brain on automatic – a condition that doesn't demand effort.” How does this connect to our conversation about honesty and the truth?
9. Look through the lyrics. Which phrases bring to mind aspects of our conversation about honesty and the truth?
Wikipedia
Lyrics by Hanan ben Ari and Keren Peles, Music by Hanan ben Ari

How easy it is to go along with your brain on automatic – a condition that doesn’t demand effort
Just to tag and bark\(^1\), to distract and to sacrifice as much as you can to the rating gods\(^2\)
Everything is already arranged in our heads, drawer upon drawer.
We cannot be bothered by reality to see that every leftist is a traitor; every Arab is a suicide bomber,
Every Haredi is a thief and all settlers murdered Rabin,
All Tel-Aviv is vegan, All Netivot\(^3\) is a folk traditional,
All the orthodox are primitives in tzitzit and deleted Darwin along the way.

Don’t lock me up in a cage
Don’t sum me up in Wikipedia
I am everything, I am nothing at all
Eternal\(^4\) light dressed in a body
So don’t lock me up in no cage

Call me a Don Quixote that dares to challenge,
Put a price on my head and guillotine me in the square
The time of the demons is past and the king is naked
Erase everything you knew about me up to now
No, I am not the settler; I am not God’s representative,
Not a frummer\(^5\) who excludes women,
not a bridge between the sectors
The sectors can burn, burn up all prejudice
May everyone have a chance to write their own story
Because if everything is already known
And revealed cliché by cliché.
Let’s not allow reality to disturb us from seeing
That every Mizrahi\(^6\) is discriminated against,
Every secular person is a dirty blasphemer,
All the women should go to the kitchen and
All the Russians – the Russians love Stalin!
All the extremes have already been,
All members of Knesset are bribe-accepting vermin,
All the Ethiopians are runners
And those that don’t sing with (Idan) Reichel

Don’t lock me up in a cage
Don’t sum me up in Wikipedia
I am everything, I am nothing at all
Eternal\(^4\) light dressed in a body
So don’t lock me up in no cage

The day will yet come...

The day will come
when you won’t lock me up in any cage
You won’t summarize me on Wikipedia
I am everything, I am nothing at all
I came naked and so I will return
So don’t lock me in any cage
You will not lock me in any cage
NOTE TO THE TEACHER
This final learner’s resource sheet is not separated into three different age levels. We believe this lesson will work with all three groups. The source material is not too esoteric for anyone. And while the conversations will be different, each informed by the maturity and experience of each learner, each group will be able to have an interesting and engaging exploration. Throughout the Leader’s guide, we may make suggestions that are intended to work better with one or two levels more than the third. That said, we believe in Jewish teachers. We rely on you to select the ideas and conversations you feel will move and engage your learners best. We would love it if your shared what you learn works best for you!

Big Idea
If we are serious about entering into civil discourse – in debating multiple perspectives and ideas with open minds and in a manner that respects all participants (and bybstanders) – then the truth matters. The unregulated nature of the internet has allowed sanctions in place in the form of civil laws against libel and slander has made it easier than ever for anyone to make a public statement with no reference to actual facts. And broadcast and cable media then report those postings as news.

In this lesson we conclude our series by exploring the ideas of honest and truth telling. These are not the meta-Truths that people in a society might view as self-evident (e.g.: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness). We are talking about accurate statements of accepted facts. We see today many examples of the Big Lie – saying that something false is true loudly and often until at least some people begin to accept it as truth.

Set Induction – Two Truths and a Lie (20 Minutes)
We will be playing a party game that is quite popular in some circles to get us used to shading the truth.

1. Ask each person in the room to think up three things about themselves. Two should be true, and the third should be a lie. The more outrageous the items are the more interesting and fund the game will be. Here is an example about Ira:
   - I was in a Diet Pepsi commercial that aired during the Super Bowl featuring Ray Charles and Joe Montana. I received royalties for it.
   - My son and I skydived last summer. It was terrifying.
   - I danced in a performance of the Twyla Tharp Dance Company. People paid to attend.

2. Once everyone confirms they have thought of two truths and a lie, ask one person to share their three items. Tell them the order is unimportant.

3. After the first person has shared the group has to come to consensus on which answer was the lie. The person who shared now reveals the truths and the lie. (Ira has never skydived – as of this writing.)

4. Repeat the process until everyone has shared. Have fun.

5. When everyone has gone ask “Well, that was fun. Do you think the truth is important? Why or why not?”
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6. **ASK** “Does it matter in other contexts? Why or why not?”

**Activity – Text Study: Exodus 23:1 (25 Minutes)**

On the first page of the Learner’s Handout are the text of Exodus 23:1 and Rashi’s commentary on it. Following up on the game, chavruta pairs might be a challenge, especially for younger learners. We suggest a whole group text study and conversation, using the questions on the page.

1. Invite someone to read the quote from Exodus
2. **ASK:** What are the two commands here?
3. **ASK:** What do they have to do with each other?
4. **ASK:** Can you give one or two examples that we might recognize of someone violating these mitzvot, or can be seen clearly making an effort to observe either or both of them?
5. **SAY:** Today, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others spread people’s words further and faster than ever before. **ASK:** Does your understanding of the quote from Exodus suggest how we should behave on the internet? Are things different there?

(Note: If you would like to dedicate time to pursue this, we recommend [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/technology/section-230-hate-speech.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/technology/section-230-hate-speech.html). It is an article that discusses a specific loophole in US law that says that web sites are not subject to the same slander and libel laws as publishers of print media.)

6. Invite someone to read the quote from Rashi
7. **ASK:** In this comment on the first text, Rashi suggests that it should not be read as “carry” a false rumor but rather as “listen” to one or accept it as true. How does that change our role in fulfilling this mitzvah?
8. **ASK:** What is our responsibility now?
9. **ASK:** Can you give one or two examples that we might recognize of someone violating this understanding of the mitzvah, or can be seen clearly making an effort to observe it?
10. **ASK:** Does Rashi give us anymore guidance on how we should act online?

**Activity – Music Video Exploration (45 minutes)**

1. Introduce the video “Wikipedia” by Hanan ben Ari.
   a. **EXPLAIN** that Hanan Ben Ari is an Israeli music superstar. Born in the religious village of Karnei Shomron and having studied in several Religious Zionist yeshivas, he still managed to become a crossover hit among Israel’s secular public.
   b. **TELL** them that there are subtitles on the screen to help them understand and that we have the lyrics on our handouts to assist our conversation afterward.

2. **Show** the video. Sound quality and as large an image as you can manage are very important because of the subtitles. It can be found at [http://bit.ly/BenAriWikipedia](http://bit.ly/BenAriWikipedia).
3. Let’s **divide** into chavruta for the last time. Pairs or threesomes should **discuss** the questions and the lyrics, both of which are on the handout. They should be prepared to share their answers.

4. Here are the questions with some possible responses.
   
a. What do you think ben Ari is trying to say with song?

b. What is the cage he is trying to avoid?

c. He describes a lot of people as being or not being a certain way. What does he want us to do with that information?

d. Why is he afraid of Wikipedia?

e. He appears to be critical of internet culture. What makes you think so (or why do you disagree with that statement?)

f. Why do you think he calls himself Don Quixote? What battle is he fighting?

g. In an interview he said the sectors refer to the many different sectors of Israeli society. They are defined by economics, by kind of Judaism, by national origin, by race, by religion in general and even the accent in one’s Hebrew. He says he is not a “bridge between the sectors” and that the sectors can burn. What does this mean? Why is he saying it do you think?

h. The song begins “How easy it is to go along with your brain on automatic – a condition that doesn’t demand effort.” How does this connect to our conversation about honesty and the truth?

i. Look through the lyrics. Which phrases bring to mind aspects of our conversation about honesty and the truth?

5. Here is partial text of an interview from 2017 with Hanan ben Ari. It may inform your conversation.

Ben Ari cemented his position in the Israeli music scene this past year, when one of his songs, 'Tutim' (strawberries) was named ‘song of the year’ in the Israeli annual Hebrew song chart which aired on Army Radio.

The single we are about to hear, 'Wikipedia,' caused a storm among the religious public when it was released in 2017. In the song, he begs the public not to look at him as a representative of the larger religious community, and implores the public not to believe in stereotypes.

"Erase everything you knew about me up to this point," Ben Ari sings. "No, I am not a settler, not a representative of God, not someone who segregates women, not a bridge between the societal sectors."

The song caused a storm in the religious community. Many thought that Ben Ari was trying to hide his affiliation with the Religious Zionist community, criticism that he rebuffed.

"Stop putting people in a cage and saying, 'He’s religious, he makes music for the religious and he does music that deals only with religious issues,'" Ben Ari said.

6. We put some footnote numbers in the text. Here is some additional information about some of the terms.

1 **Tag and bark** – add a hashtag or tag a an image and use all caps to make a point

2 **Item ratings** – Likes and emojis
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3 Netivot is a town in southern Israel. Initially a refugee and absorption camp for immigrants from Morocco and Tunisia. For many years, Netivot suffered from high unemployment it was also home to the tomb of the Baba Sali, a Moroccan-born kabbalist.

4 Infinite – The Hebrew here is Ein Sof, which is the name of the highest sphere of the Kabbalistic tree of life.

5 Frummer – An orthodox Jew, possibly Haredi (ultra-orthodox).

6 Mizrahi – A Sephardic Jew, descended from Jews who lived from Spain, across North Africa or through the Middle East. As a group, their history in the modern State of Israel is worth learning, as it sometimes differs from those descended from European origins. We are attempting to remain neutral here to avoid influencing conversation.

7. After 20 minutes (or if the conversation dies down) bring the group back together and discuss their answers, inviting people to share insights they learned from their partners. If it does not flow from the last few questions, bring us back to the original issue of honesty and truth telling from Exodus.

Final Activity – Sacha Baron Cohen

If you wish, and if there is time, you might want to show the speech that Sacha Baron Cohen gave at the ADL (http://bit.ly/SachaADL). On the next four pages you will find the transcript for the final 16 minutes of the nearly 25 minute speech. **We beg you – choose no more than a five to eight minute clip.** Our experience with using video is that more than that amount of time leads to eyes glazing over, loss of focus and occasionally snoring. Obviously if you are showing amazing comedy or action and adventure, a little more time would be fine. Although Cohen is occasionally funny in this speech, it is still a speech.

There are a few places where the conversation we have had so far will be enhanced by discussing the speech. We suggest that you **copy** the relevant sections of the transcript and distribute it for the conversation. You may find it easier to go to the speech online to cut and paste your own copy, as the .pdf of this lesson may not be as simple to maneuver. You will find it on the ADL website at http://bit.ly/SachaTranscript.

Option 1 – Internet trolls and free speech. Run from 8:35 – 13:35, an even five minutes. Cohen begins to lay out his case for limiting what may be allowed on internet platforms. He points out that the argument that the principle of free speech means that they cannot limit what people post. This is a very interesting conversation, although it goes a bit afield from where we have been so far.

Option 2 – Is there objective truth? Run from 13:35 – 19:51, six minutes and 16 seconds. Here he gets into the idea of whose truth is acceptable. And he makes it clear that there are indeed facts in evidence that can be accepted as truth and those that are clearly falsehoods and can be rejected. He does not address the grey area.

Both of these sections should generate a great deal of conversation.

We hope that you have found these lessons helpful, and would love to hear how they worked (or failed) with your learners. You can send feedback to us at jiw8212@gmail.com.

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I’m speaking up today because I believe that our pluralistic democracies are on a precipice and that the next twelve months, and the role of social media, could be determinant. British voters will go to the polls while online conspiracists promote the despicable theory of “great replacement” that white Christians are being deliberately replaced by Muslim immigrants. Americans will vote for president while trolls and bots perpetuate the disgusting lie of a “Hispanic invasion.” And after years of YouTube videos calling climate change a “hoax,” the United States is on track, a year from now, to formally withdraw from the Paris Accords. A sewer of bigotry and vile conspiracy theories that threatens democracy and our planet—this cannot possibly be what the creators of the internet had in mind.

I believe it’s time for a fundamental rethink of social media and how it spreads hate, conspiracies and lies. Last month, however, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook delivered a major speech that, not surprisingly, warned against new laws and regulations on companies like his. Well, some of these arguments are simply absurd. Let’s count the ways.

First, Zuckerberg tried to portray this whole issue as “choices…around free expression.” That is ludicrous. This is not about limiting anyone’s free speech. This is about giving people, including some of the most reprehensible people on earth, the biggest platform in history to reach a third of the planet. Freedom of speech is not freedom of reach. Sadly, there will always be racists, misogynists, anti-Semites and child abusers. But I think we could all agree that we should not be giving bigots and pedophiles a free platform to amplify their views and target their victims.

Second, Zuckerberg claimed that new limits on what’s posted on social media would be to “pull back on free expression.” This is utter nonsense. The First Amendment says that “Congress shall make no law” abridging freedom of speech, however, this does not apply to private businesses like Facebook. We’re not asking these companies to determine the boundaries of free speech across society. We just want them to be responsible on their platforms.

If a neo-Nazi comes goose-stepping into a restaurant and starts threatening other customers and saying he wants kill Jews, would the owner of the restaurant be required to serve him an elegant eight-course meal? Of course not! The restaurant owner has every legal right and a moral obligation to kick the Nazi out, and so do these internet companies.

Third, Zuckerberg seemed to equate regulation of companies like his to the actions of “the most repressive societies.” Incredible. This, from one of the six people who decide what information so much of the world sees. Zuckerberg at Facebook, Sundar Pichai at Google, at its parent company Alphabet, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Brin’s ex-sister-in-law, Susan Wojcicki at YouTube and Jack Dorsey at Twitter.

The Silicon Six—all billionaires, all Americans—who care more about boosting their share price than about protecting democracy. This is ideological imperialism—six unelected individuals in Silicon Valley imposing their vision on the rest of the world,
unaccountable to any government and acting like they’re above the reach of law. It’s like we’re living in the Roman Empire, and Mark Zuckerberg is Caesar. At least that would explain his haircut.

Here’s an idea. Instead of letting the Silicon Six decide the fate of the world, let our elected representatives, voted for by the people, of every democracy in the world, have at least some say.

13:35 Fourth, Zuckerberg speaks of welcoming a “diversity of ideas,” and last year he gave us an example. He said that he found posts denying the Holocaust “deeply offensive,” but he didn’t think Facebook should take them down “because I think there are things that different people get wrong.” At this very moment, there are still Holocaust deniers on Facebook, and Google still takes you to the most repulsive Holocaust denial sites with a simple click. One of the heads of Google once told me, incredibly, that these sites just show “both sides” of the issue. This is madness.

To quote Edward R. Murrow, one “cannot accept that there are, on every story, two equal and logical sides to an argument.” We have millions of pieces of evidence for the Holocaust—it is an historical fact. And denying it is not some random opinion. Those who deny the Holocaust aim to encourage another one.

Still, Zuckerberg says that “people should decide what is credible, not tech companies.” But at a time when two-thirds of millennials say they haven’t even heard of Auschwitz, how are they supposed to know what’s “credible?” How are they supposed to know that the lie is a lie?

There is such a thing as objective truth. Facts do exist. And if these internet companies really want to make a difference, they should hire enough monitors to actually monitor, work closely with groups like the ADL, insist on facts and purge these lies and conspiracies from their platforms.

15:34 Fifth, when discussing the difficulty of removing content, Zuckerberg asked “where do you draw the line?” Yes, drawing the line can be difficult. But here’s what he’s really saying: removing more of these lies and conspiracies is just too expensive.

These are the richest companies in the world, and they have the best engineers in the world. They could fix these problems if they wanted to. Twitter could deploy an algorithm to remove more white supremacist hate speech, but they reportedly haven’t because it would eject some very prominent politicians from their platform. Maybe that’s not a bad thing! The truth is, these companies won’t fundamentally change because their entire business model relies on generating more engagement, and nothing generates more engagement than lies, fear and outrage.

16:52 It’s time to finally call these companies what they really are—the largest publishers in history. And here’s an idea for them: abide by basic standards and practices just like newspapers, magazines and TV news do every day. We have standards and practices in television and the movies; there are certain things we cannot say or do. In England, I was told that Ali G could not curse when he appeared before 9:00 pm. Here in the U.S., the Motion Picture Association of America regulates and rates what we see. I’ve had scenes in my movies cut or reduced to abide by those standards. If there are standards and practices for what cinemas and television channels can show, then
surely companies that publish material to billions of people should have to abide by basic standards and practices too.

17:44 Take the issue of political ads. Fortunately, Twitter finally banned them, and Google is making changes, too. But if you pay them, Facebook will run any “political” ad you want, even if it’s a lie. And they’ll even help you micro-target those lies to their users for maximum effect. Under this twisted logic, if Facebook were around in the 1930s, it would have allowed Hitler to post 30-second ads on his “solution” to the “Jewish problem.” So here’s a good standard and practice: Facebook, start fact-checking political ads before you run them, stop micro-targeted lies immediately, and when the ads are false, give back the money and don’t publish them.

18:47 Here’s another good practice: slow down. Every single post doesn’t need to be published immediately. Oscar Wilde once said that “we live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities.” But is having every thought or video posted instantly online, even if it is racist or criminal or murderous, really a necessity? Of course not!

The shooter who massacred Muslims in New Zealand live streamed his atrocity on Facebook where it then spread across the internet and was viewed likely millions of times. It was a snuff film, brought to you by social media. Why can’t we have more of a delay so this trauma-inducing filth can be caught and stopped before it’s posted in the first place?

19:51 Finally, Zuckerberg said that social media companies should “live up to their responsibilities,” but he’s totally silent about what should happen when they don’t. By now it’s pretty clear, they cannot be trusted to regulate themselves. As with the Industrial Revolution, it’s time for regulation and legislation to curb the greed of these high-tech robber barons.

In every other industry, a company can be held liable when their product is defective. When engines explode or seatbelts malfunction, car companies recall tens of thousands of vehicles, at a cost of billions of dollars. It only seems fair to say to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter: your product is defective, you are obliged to fix it, no matter how much it costs and no matter how many moderators you need to employ.

21:04 In every other industry, you can be sued for the harm you cause. Publishers can be sued for libel, people can be sued for defamation. I’ve been sued many times! I’m being sued right now by someone whose name I won’t mention because he might sue me again! But social media companies are largely protected from liability for the content their users post—no matter how indecent it is—by Section 230 of, get ready for it, the Communications Decency Act. Absurd!

Fortunately, Internet companies can now be held responsible for pedophiles who use their sites to target children. I say, let’s also hold these companies responsible for those who use their sites to advocate for the mass murder of children because of their race or religion. And maybe fines are not enough. Maybe it’s time to tell Mark Zuckerberg and the CEOs of these companies: you already allowed one foreign power to interfere in our elections, you already facilitated one genocide in Myanmar, do it again and you go to jail.
In the end, it all comes down to what kind of world we want. In his speech, Zuckerberg said that one of his main goals is to “uphold as wide a definition of freedom of expression as possible.” Yet our freedoms are not only an end in themselves, they’re also the means to another end—as you say here in the U.S., the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But today these rights are threatened by hate, conspiracies and lies.

Allow me to leave you with a suggestion for a different aim for society. The ultimate aim of society should be to make sure that people are not targeted, not harassed and not murdered because of who they are, where they come from, who they love or how they pray.

If we make that our aim—if we prioritize truth over lies, tolerance over prejudice, empathy over indifference and experts over ignoramuses—then maybe, just maybe, we can stop the greatest propaganda machine in history, we can save democracy, we can still have a place for free speech and free expression, and, most importantly, my jokes will still work.

Thank you all very much.