

WARNING: THIS SERMON IS RATED PG-13

Truth, Lies and B.S.: Where's Jeremiah When We Need Him?

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Rosh Hashanah is a time for reflection. As I think back on the previous year, a year I would just assume forget, I am comforted by one thing: The Chicago Cubs are still reigning World Champions. Being a Chicagoan by birth and perhaps constitution, one of my favorite movies is, not surprisingly, *the Blues Brothers* – a film I joyfully introduced to my children this year. There's a ton of great dialogue in the film. (I'll spare us the "Illinois Nazi" bit which feels a bit too raw right now).

One exchange I love is when Jake, recently released from Joliet Penitentiary, concocts his plan to "put the band back together," only to be rebuffed by his brother Elwood. Dan Aykroyd in his deadpan delivery tells Belushi's Jake the band has moved on, taken straight jobs. Then Jake says, "You were outside, I was inside. You were supposed to keep in touch with the band. I kept asking you if we were gonna play again." And Elwood replies, "Well, what was I gonna do, take away your only hope? Take away the very thing that kept you going in there?" "You lied to me!" says Jake. "It wasn't a lie," says Elwood in his inimitable way, "it was just bullshit."

I know it's unusual for a rabbi to stand on the pulpit, on the High Holy Days no less, and use such colorful language. And yet, I honestly don't know how to speak to you this year, on this new year of all years, and act as if things are ordinary. I don't know how to stand before you *this* Rosh Hashanah without naming the fact that we as Jews, as Baltimoreans, as Americans, are in crisis. That would run the risk, I think, of sounding like BS, like fake news. I remember as a kid, listening to one particular sermon from my own rabbi. Rabbi Victor Weissberg stood before his congregation. A big man with a dark but greying beard and a booming voice, who could cite effortlessly Nietzsche or Rambam or Faulkner, he was no dispassionate scholar. He would get emotional on the pulpit at times, even cry. And that day when he discussed the uniquely objectionable human sin of objectifying our fellow man, he shouted at one point, "that's bullshit!" And as an adolescent who, at that point in my life was more enamored of Holden Caulfield than the prophet Jeremiah I thought, "this guy's alright; that's religion being real; that's religion I can respect!"

It was only years later I learned that Jeremiah, long before J.D. Salinger, was also concerned about bullshit:

One man cheats the other

They will not speak truth;

They have trained their tongues to speak falsely... (Jer. 9:4).

אִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ יִהְיֶה לוֹ

וְאִמַּת לֹא יִדְבְּרוּ

לְמַדּוֹ לְשׁוֹגֵם דְּבַר־שָׁקֶר...

The rabbit hole into which our nation has descended is so riddled with falsehood, is so Kafka-esque, so PT Barnum-esque, that we scarcely have the tools, let alone the bandwidth, to keep track of it all. I don't know about you, but the daily barrage of vitriol emanating from seemingly every corner, but pitifully, from the highest office in the land, makes me want to curl up on the sofa with 80's slapstick comedies all day. Perhaps it's fitting Barnum and Bailey permanently folded their tent this year. Who needs the circus? We've got CNN.

And yet, there's so much good in the world and, yes, in America too. The tragedy of the current *matzav* is that it threatens to eclipse the countless moments of basic kindness and decency, the compassion of teachers for students, the generosity of strangers who send money and well-wishes to Texas and Florida, the heroism of first responders. And we come to shul on Rosh Hashanah not to be depressed or anxious but, if not always uplifted, at least challenged to find meaning in a chaotic and at times morally suspect world. We know, somewhere within us, we must dream to defeat demagoguery and think to combat thoughtlessness. And while I am no scholar, I take solace in the rigor of research, of science and scholarship. So maybe that's why, in reflecting on Donald Trump's assault not just on foreigners or Muslims or people of color or the disabled or women but on facts, on truth itself, I found myself reading a prescient 1986 essay by Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt.

"One of the most salient features of our culture," he says, "is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this... But we tend to take the situation for granted. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what function it serves." In his essay, fittingly titled, "On Bullshit" and his later book of the same name, Frankfurt explains the difference between a liar and a bullshitter. A liar "...is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality." In other words, the liar quite simply wants to keep us from learning the truth.

Everybody lies. Sometimes we lie because we want to get away with something: we don't want to pay full price. Or we lie because we're embarrassed and don't want to admit we betrayed another's trust or broke the rules or had a failure of will. Or we lie because we're lazy. Sometimes the truth is just too involved, so we withhold or alter details. Jewish tradition is pretty critical of lying. The midrash points out the letters of the Hebrew word *sheker* (lie – *shin, kuf, resh*) are bunched together in the aleph-bet. And the letters themselves, picture their form for a moment, rest on spindly stems. The word *emet* (truth), on the other hand is comprised of letters with wide bases: *aleph, mem, tav* – if fashioned three-dimensionally out of wood, for example, each of these would stand with stability. And unlike the letters in *sheker*, which are grouped together, the *aleph, mem* and *tav* of *emet* are situated at the very beginning, the very end and the exact middle of the Hebrew alphabet. Lies are flimsy, faulty and easily toppled. Truth is stable and enduring. Any of us who has ever been caught up in a web of lies knows this all too well!

But lying isn't always the worst thing in the world either. The Talmud recognizes there are times when lying is not only understandable, but even preferable, and in rare cases, a mitzvah. If you lie to preserve a life or protect someone's dignity, these are laudable fibs. The classic Talmudic passage on the subject begins "*Keitzad m'rakdim lifnei hakalah? How does one dance before a bride?*" (*Bavli Ketubbot* 16b-17a). Which means, how should a wedding guest describe the bride if, in truth, he finds her unattractive? Shammai says, *kallah k'mot shehi*, tell it like it is! After all, the Torah says "keep far from falsehood" (Ex. 23:7). Hillel, on the other hand, says it doesn't matter what you think, it matters what the groom thinks. "*Kallah na'eh v'chasudah*," if he's happy, if he thinks his new wife is beautiful, who are you to say otherwise?

So lying is praiseworthy when it preserves life and safety, but also dignity. Elwood Blues wasn't BS-ing Jake, he was lying. And he did it because he wanted to protect his brother's feelings. Which brings me back to Frankfurt. Because the difference between lying and BS, and this is an important distinction, is that while the liar wants to keep his interlocutor from the truth, to the bullshitter, "the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him..." Liars actually care about the truth, which is why they're so careful to express their lies in a believable manner. Bullshitters aren't concerned with what's believable because they scoff at the very notion of objective truth.

The fact of the matter is that Trump didn't ascend to the presidency because he created a culture of bullshit, he did so because he is a product of that culture. You may have asked yourself, how could a man who came to political prominence on the libelous claim that a sitting president wasn't born in the US, be given a pass by so many millions of Americans? There are numerous reasons of course. One of them is racism. Another is sexism – many convinced themselves that Hillary Clinton's falsehoods were equal in frequency and worse in character than Donald Trump's. Another reason is priorities: I think a lot of people, include I suspect some of you in this room, believed there are simply more important things to worry about than how often or how much a president speaks truth. They thought he'd be better for Israel or that he'd put better justices on the Supreme Court or they simply thought they'd be personally better off with an anti-regulation, anti-tax president in the White House. Many assuaged their concerns about his temperament by thinking (or hoping) he'd be kept in check by congress or his advisors or his Jewish daughter and son-in-law.

So tens of millions of voters dismissed, with a wave of the hand, Trump's claims about Arabs across the river on 9.11 or Mexican rapists or his willful ignorance about Putin, Mike Flynn, David Duke or Steve Bannon. And they ignored or embraced or forgave his cyber-bullying, his fat-shaming, his womanizing and confessed sexual assault, his racist assessment of urban violence and so much more. "People...tend to be more tolerant of bullshit than of lies," writes Frankfurt, "...because we are less inclined to take the former as a personal affront. We may seek to distance ourselves from bullshit, but we are more likely to turn away from it with an impatient or irritated shrug than with the sense of violation or outrage that lies often inspire." Clinton should have known better, people thought. Trump can't be expected to.

But it's not only the fertile soil of hate, fear or anxiety about jobs or nostalgia for some false and jingoistic version of the American 1950's, in which the seeds of America's embrace of Trump's populism took root. For years now, we as a society have been complicit in the erosion of evidence-based claims, of facts. Earlier this month, Houston recorded the most rainfall of any city in America ever during Hurricane Harvey. And Irma set the all-time record for Category 5 status.

Scientists are virtually unanimous in their acceptance both of the fact of climate change and human agency in bringing it about. "*Hashamayim, shamayim LaShem*, the heavens are God's," says the Psalmist, *v'ha'aretz natan livnei adam*, but the earth was given to us." And what are we to do with it? *L'ovdah u'leshomra*, to till it and tend it. It's not a bourgeois, new-aged idea that we are stewards of our planet; it's ancient Jewish wisdom. Yet quietly and methodically, while Trump tweets some latest tantrum, Scott Pruitt is dismantling environmental protections by creating false choices between fact and fiction.

There was a provocative piece in *the Atlantic* before the Great American Eclipse this summer that illustrates the point: "The scientists are all talking like it's a sure thing," writes James Hamblin. "On August 21, the 'moon' will pass between the Earth and the sun, obscuring the light of the latter.... The astronomers [at NASA] claim to have calculated down to the minute exactly when and where this will happen.... This seems extremely unlikely. Meanwhile the scientists tell us... 'looking directly at the sun is unsafe.' That is, of course, unless we wear glasses that are on a list issued by these *very same scientists*.... You'd think there would be a balanced look at even considering the idea that the eclipse isn't going to happen. It's like no one is even thinking to question this. Where are their voices? ...I am not saying the eclipse isn't going to happen. I'm just saying there are two sides to every story."

This is funny, of course, because we know better. That's what makes it effective satire! There's aren't two co-equal sides. There's a right side and a wrong side; there's a true side and a false side. I wish Harry Frankfurt was writing satire. But he's not. I cite his essay today because "On Bullshit" is anything but. "The contemporary proliferation of bullshit also has deeper sources," he says, "in various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality and...therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are...."

How is it, you may have wondered this year, so many supporters of Donald Trump's approach to the presidency say he's honest? Because he is, in a manner of speaking, but what they mean is that he's emotionally honest; he's sincere. When he says he wants to punch somebody in the face or declares the *NY Times* the enemy of the American people, he means it. Here's Frankfurt writing thirty years ago: "One response... has been a retreat from... the ideal of correctness to... an alternative ideal of sincerity. Rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of a common world, the individual [tries] to provide honest representations of himself. Convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which he might hope to identify as the truth about things, he devotes himself to being true to his own nature. It is as though he decides that since it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts, he must therefore try instead to be true to himself."

Those who continue to support him may say, “even if we disagree with our president’s assault on facts, surely we can praise his unshakable devotion to what he feels is right!” “To thine own self be true.” The problem with this, though, is that we, all of us, are works in progress. Isn’t that the message of this season? Judaism demands not that we trust our instincts, and not that we ignore them either, but that we weigh the impulses of our hearts against the needs of our communities, the teachings of our tradition and the demands of our God. That we make critical decisions with humility. That even as we respect the godliness of all humanity, we never locate ourselves at the center of the universe.

נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרַתִּי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה

“I will place my torah within them and inscribe it upon their hearts....for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall know Me – declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:33-34).

From the “least of them to the greatest.” Sound familiar? These words made their way from Jeremiah to the “Prayer for our Country” including the version we read earlier today: “Pour out Your blessings upon this land, upon its leader, its judges, officers and officials who are devoted in good faith to the needs of the public....Uproot from their hearts hatred and malice, jealousy and strife. Plant among those of different nationalities and faiths who dwell in our nation, love and companionship, peace and friendship.” Jeremiah gets it again.

And Frankfurt gets it too. “...There is nothing in theory, and certainly nothing in experience,” he writes, “to support the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about himself that is the easiest for a person to know.... Our natures are, indeed...notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.”

Which is to say, sincerity divorced from relationship, from basic goodness and humanity, is fundamentally insincere. Or put differently, we as a society need to get over our populist obsession with sincerity and think more sincerely and urgently about integrity. How to do this and what that means for us as Jews and Jewish families in this country, in this historical moment? We’ll talk about that on Yom Kippur.

Shana tova!