

“You can’t handle the truth!” Jack Nicholson’s famous line, I believe from the movie *A Few Good Men*, captures the point of Rabbinic stories which describe G-d hurling the angelic avatars of Truth out of Heaven so as to allow the creation of human beings. It seems that His democratic court was evenly divided, with *Chesed* and *Tzedek* supporting the creation of humanity, while *Shalom* and *Emet* opposed – so G-d expelled *Emet*, leaving a majority in favor.

At least, that is one way of reading the story. Another is as follows: Truth opposed the creation of humanity because “humanity is entirely lies”, in other words because humanity had no access to truth. G-d accepted the argument that human survival required access to truth, and so threw Truth to earth where humans could find it – in other words, he agreed to reveal the Torah. In this version truth is essential for human existence – we can’t handle the absence of truth.

Talmudic thinkers will recognize immediately that these two readings are not mutually exclusive – perhaps some truth is essential for human existence, but too much is deadly. I want to explore the contours of that accommodation through readings of two traditional Jewish stories, the first the narrative of the Deposition of Rabban Gamliel (Talmud Berachhot 27b-28a) and the second Sefer Yonah.

A. After Rabban Gamliel is removed from his *nesiut* for repeatedly humiliating Rabbi Yehoshua in public so as to preserve his absolute halakhic authority, the new administration immediately overturns his restrictive admissions policy, and the result is an efflorescence of Torah study. This depresses Rabban Gamliel, who wonders whether he has been responsible for constraining the growth of Torah in Israel. But he then has a dream, in which the new students are symbolically represented as whited sepulchers, as fancy barrels containing nothing but ashes. As the result of this dream he finds the strength to return to the Beit Midrash as simply a colleague, to accept defeat in halakhic conversations, and finally to apologize to Rabbi Yehoshua. In other words, he does *teshuvah*.

On the surface, this is a fairly conventional, though beautifully executed, story of an arrogant but essentially good-hearted aristocrat who is taught humility. But it contains an astounding interjection by the narrator – the dream was not true, but rather was sent by G-d so as to ease Rabban Gamliel’s depression! All the subsequent developments – specifically, Rabban Gamliel’s return to the rabbinic conversation, his willingness to accept defeat, and his apology – stem from Rabban Gamliel’s false belief in that dream.

Here G-d preserves Rabban Gamliel for His service by abandoning truth.

B. Yonah is introduced as “the son of *Amittai* = my truth”. While it is of course possible that this was simply his father’s name, the Rabbis did not see it that way. Instead, they identified Yonah as the boy resurrected by the prophet Elyahu, whom they saw as the human embodiment of the value of uncompromising Truth.

Emet is also conspicuous, albeit by its absence, when Yonah explains to G-d his objection to participating in the warning of Nineveh. “For I knew that You are a Divinity Who is gracious and merciful, long-tempered and *chesed*-abundant, Who can be reconciled to evil (alt. “Who changes his mind regarding punishment”). Yonah presumably has in mind Exodus 34:6, where Hashem describes Himself to Mosheh as “a Divinity Who is gracious and merciful, long-tempered and *chesed*-abundant and *emet*.”, and he deliberately replaces *emet* with changeability. This is not intended as praise.

Yonah's resurrection and his mission both center on whether the survival of human beings is compatible with Truth. Eliyahu was willing to let a deadly and devastating comprehensive drought continue until Israel acknowledged and acted on the truth that only the one G-d exists. G-d, however, is unwilling to risk the chance that Israel will refuse, and so be destroyed. Accordingly, he plays on Eliyahu's one human connection – to Yonah's mother – so as to compel Eliyahu to ask for mercy at the expense of Truth. Having requested and received mercy, Eliyahu cannot with consistency thwart the Divine desire to save Israel. Accordingly, the trial at Mount Carmel is convened – the people, caught up in Eliyahu's moment of triumph, slaughter the prophets of Baal and declare Hashem to be the only true divinity – and so it rains. The next day, of course, the people are back as they were.

So Yonah grows up knowing that his very existence undermined Eliyahu's commitments. Of course he does not wish to be part of yet another such charade. One wonders what he – and Eliyahu - thought each year on Yom Kippur, surrounded by crowds of deeply moved penitents who would be no different tomorrow than they had been yesterday. They saw the Divine willingness to accept *teshuvah* as a failure to uphold Truth.

Yet Hashem here is not changeable – in each case he seeks out and accepts even ephemeral repentance, even at that means the Eliyahus and Yonahs must leave His service. Perhaps what He keeps trying to teach them is that their job is to bring Truth to Earth rather than to discover where/if it can already be found.

A2. Rabban Gamliel's policy was to instruct the Beit Midrash guard that only students whose "insides matched their outsides" could enter. Some of my students imagined the guard as having a mirror to hold up that displayed each applicant's soul, to see whether it matched their immaculate appearance. The Kotzker Rebbe's coruscating vorts sometimes play that role in my life.

If we could not recognize that there is a standard of truth toward which we broadly aspire, not even the most ephemeral of repentances would be possible. Without the stories of Eliyahu and Yonah, the Talmudic narrator would not have dared say that the dream was false.

But Rabban Gamliel's policy was mistaken – like the mirror of Erised, the mirror of Truth About Oneself should not be freely available, perhaps especially at a school. We are entitled, even encouraged, to think of ourselves as somewhat better than we actually are. Repentance – or at least some kinds of repentance - requires a strong and confident sense of self. G-d k'b'yakhol perjures Himself to permit this, as He does to preserve marital harmony. This is a lesson that those of us with a particularly critical bent should take to heart. If I looked in the mirror, I suspect I would know this includes me.

May this Yom Kippur, and this year, provide us all with the ideal combination of self-worth and self-knowledge, so that we may collectively achieve the state in which self-worth and self-knowledge are one and the same.

Gemar chatimah tovah

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א"ר סימון: בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים וחבורות חבורות: מהם אומרים 'אל יברא', ומהם אומרים 'יברא' –
הה"ד (תהלים פה) "חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוה נשקו" –

חסד אומר 'יברא, שהוא גומל חסדים';

ואמת אומר 'אל יברא, שכולו שקרים';

צדק אומר 'יברא, שהוא עושה צדקות';

שלוה אומר: אל יברא, דכוליה קטטה.

מה עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא?

נטל אמת והשליכו לארץ –

הה"ד (דניאל ח) "ותשלך אמת ארצה".

אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבון העולמים, מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסייה שלך? תעלה אמת מן הארץ!

הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים פה) "אמת מארץ תצמח".

תהלים פרק פה:יא-יב

חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוה נשקו:

אמת מארץ תצמח וצדק משמים נשקף:

יונה פרק א פסוק א

ויהי דבר ה' אל יונה בן אמתי לאמר:

שמות פרק לד:ו

ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת:

יונה פרק ד:ב

ויתפלל אל ה' ויאמר:

אנה ה'! הלוא זה דברי עד היותי על אדמתי - על כן קדמתי לברח תרשישה!
כי ידעתי כי אתה קל חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה:

תהלים פרק פט: טו-טז

צדק ומשפט מכון כסאך חסד ואמת יקדמו פניך:

אשרי העם יודעי תרועה ה' באור פניך יהלכון:

משלי פרק טז:ו

בחסד ואמת יכפר עון וביראת ה' סור מרע:

משלי פרק כ

חסד ואמת יצרו מלך וסעד בחסד כסאו: