

**Living in Truth Amidst Hatred**  
**Rabbi Paul Steinberg / Congregation Kol Shofar / Nov. 3, 2018**

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to the change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

You know that one? – that’s the Serenity Prayer, adapted from the Christian Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. It is the most commonly used prayer in 12 Step meetings, which serve alcoholics and addicts of all varieties, including addictions to substances, as well as behaviors such as gambling, overeating, codependency and more.

I want to take a second and explain addiction because I think it speaks to the moment – I think you’ll see how: addiction is a spiritual disease – there is no medical cure for it – it’s a spiritual disease in the sense that the addictive behavior itself is the presenting symptom, while the root cause is an internal division of self that manifests in obsessive thinking, isolation, and a debilitating habit of self-deception, where one rationalizes what is irrational; where a person is in such internal turmoil and consumed with such fear that he or she will twist their own judgment to the point of justifying the benefits of literally ingesting poison ... or behaving dangerously, destructively, even criminally. Therefore, one of the underlying spiritual principles of the 12 Steps is honesty, rigorous honesty, whereby one continually cultivates a relationship with him or herself that is honest about one’s self and the conditions and circumstance of one’s life. This takes humility, lots and lots of humility. Because rigorous honesty – continually seeking out the truth involves recognizing our own faults, fears, patterns of behavior, and when we are wrong. It’s a life of daily *teshuvah*, repentance, self-reflection, and response.

See, what the process of recovery from addiction teaches is that many of us are not honest about ourselves and our lives. We like our lies, we really do – not just addicts of course, but all of us do. And when we live in a culture of dishonesty and mendacity, addictive behaviors are even more tempting as a solution to our problems. Abraham Joshua Heschel understood this when he gave a fiery speech about culture and politics, transcribed in his book *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. He said: “What do people want – I’ll tell you what people want. [take a second and think about this- there’s a lot of ways that this next sentence could go] ... What do people want, he says ... in every human being is the desire to be deceived. Self-deception is a major disease.”

So, I raise the issue of addiction because the internal divisions caused by dishonesty and self-deception, which characterizes the spiritual malady of addiction, is now pervasive in our entire culture and society, and Pittsburgh is the most recent and dramatic – explosively violent and dramatic – expressions of this cultural, spiritual sickness. It demands that we all, each and every one of us, to wake up, to look at ourselves and to do *teshuvah* – to return to our core, to recover our integrity and pursuit of truth.

Because, the fact of the matter is, that when we really take a look at living the truth, when we are honest about honesty, we recognize that honesty and truth is actually slippery business. And yet honesty and the truth are for the Jewish tradition one of God's attributes, one of God's names – *Emet*. Maimonides, the great Jewish genius of the 12<sup>th</sup> century said: *Chotmo shel ha-kadosh baruch hu emet hee*, Truth is the seal of the Holy Blessing One. Truth is God's signature - literally.

I mentioned before the serenity prayer, which is not just in 12 Steps, but really it has become absorbed by our cultural gestalt. And at the heart of the prayer is a path to honesty, a path to the truth about ourselves and our relationship to the world. It names the constant tension of seeking truth, knowing what we must accept and when we must act:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to the change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Accept the things I cannot change* – the truth is that there are things in the world, in my own life that I cannot change. I cannot change what other people think and feel, I cannot change the rampant corruption and injustices all over the world – certainly not by myself. The truth is that this is not my world, I don't run the world ---nor would anyone want me to. This is God's world and acceptance of what is, that is the answer.

*Courage to change the things I can* – The truth is that even though I cannot control the world, I can choose how to respond to the world. I can adapt my behavior and speech to serve the best needs of the hour both for myself and others. This may be God's world but God needs me, we are each God's partner in this world; God needs each and every one of us to be godly, as we are created in God's image – *b'tzlelem elohim*; God needs us to embody our principles and values when we are called to do so. And that takes courage. The single most important of human characteristics is courage. It takes courage to be honest and just; it takes courage to be calm in the face of anger and hatred; it takes courage to do what is right; it takes courage to love your neighbor as yourself, to forgive, to be hospitable to strangers; it takes courage to have faith in God, in ourselves and in humanity. Courage isn't being fearless; courage is acting with integrity and honesty despite being afraid. As Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav said: *Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, v'ha-ikar lo lefached klal* – the whole world is a narrow bridge, but the most important thing is courage – to not let fear drive you.

And *the wisdom to know the difference* – to know when to be in acceptance. And acceptance is not becoming apathetic or unsympathetic; it's not throwing your hands in the air and saying, "it doesn't matter," but rather to allow for God's pacing in my life, God's timing to guide me. The wisdom to be in acceptance and then, when I am called, to know that it is time for me to act. So much of our lives is about living in this tension: the tension between acceptance and action. But that wisdom is

inaccessible if we are not humble, if we are not honest and have not surrendered to a higher truth.

One of those areas for me, as a Jew – where I live in the tension of acceptance versus action is regarding anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is a part of our story going all the way back to Pharaoh, the Pharaoh who arose to power and “did not know Joseph,” says the Torah. The Pharaoh who said: “Look, these Israelites are too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase, otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies and rise from the ground” [Ex. 1:9-10]. And just in that statement we learn the definition of anti-Semitism, and that it is rooted in two fundamental ideas: 1) these people are different than us – they are other; and 2) they can’t really be trusted – they will seize the opportunity to undermine us. That’s anti-Semitism and really the root of all racism and xenophobia; it’s just that simple: they’re a different kind of human (maybe not human at all) and they can’t be trusted. The existence of the Jewish people is indeed born of anti-Semitism and we are historically defined as being the other, the stranger, the immigrant, the alien, the outsider.

So much is anti-Semitism a part of our story that is integrated into our language in ways we take for granted. Take for example, the word *shul*, which we use all the time for synagogue. We go to *shul*. The word *shul* is actually a sad historical remnant of anti-Semitism. *Shul* is not Hebrew, it’s Yiddish, and it doesn’t mean synagogue – it means a school. So why do you call a synagogue a school? Because in the Middle Ages, Jews were often brought into certain places when the governments decided that they were needed and then they were kicked out when they didn’t need them anymore. And one of the most common pieces of anti-Jewish legislation was this: you may come back into the city or the country, but you may not build a synagogue, unless it was in a place that there already was a synagogue. So if you needed extra land, you couldn’t have it. And, as you might imagine populations expanded in some places and, in the place where synagogues were built other buildings were now there, especially churches. And they would never let you build a synagogue where a church was. So what did the Jews say: we’re not building a synagogue, we’re building a school, we’re building a *shul*. We need a place for our kids to study and everybody needs schools. Now, the fact that they happen to pray there is totally secondary because, as you know, Jews don’t need a temple to pray, Jews can pray anywhere. So, built into the fabric of our language is this alienated, global truth.

Anti-Semitism has been a part of our story since our inception and it has never gone away. It tends to bubble up to the surface in times of cultural and social stress and we see it now, flaring up more and more in America today.

Yet, even under the duress of anti-Semitism, throughout our history, we Jews have also perpetrated prejudices – and we do it to ourselves; we victimize our own. We have subjugated women in our religious rituals and culture, refusing them equal

status, as is still the case in many communities today and a hot button issue in Israel; we have alienated gays and lesbians; we have condoned beating children as punishment – “spare the rod, spoil the child” is interpreted from our Bible [Prov. 13:24], our Jewish book; we have neglected and underserved those with special need in our communities; and we have denied legitimacy to other Jews who practice Judaism differently and belong to different movements. In fact, just this week, the Chief Orthodox Rabbi in Israel refused to call the Etz Chaim, Or L'Simchah synagogue in Pittsburgh a synagogue in his public statement because it isn't Orthodox.

I was living in Israel in 1995, serving as a *mitnadev*, a volunteer on a Kibbutz just between Nazareth and Afula. On November 4th that year – the anniversary is tomorrow – after singing *Shir la-Shalom*, a song of peace, at a rally, Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister, was shot to death - assassinated. Do you know by whom he was shot? Not an outsider. Not Hamas or the PLO. But by Yigal Amir – an Israeli, a religious Jew murdered him. One of us.

I don't bring up these less than honorable moments and matters in Jewish history as a way to make us bristle or to embarrass us. On the contrary, I bring them up because if we are to do healing as a community, to practice *teshuvah* and engage in in our own individual healing, we have to acknowledge when we have missed the mark, when we've turned down dark alleys and dead ends if we are to honestly learn from our mistakes. We have to be honest, relentlessly and rigorously honest, if we are to act with wisdom in our time. The truth is what's at stake and the truth takes no sides.

There is a reason, by the way, the Rabbis teach, that the word for truth in Hebrew is *Emet* – a word of three letters: *alef*, *mem*, and *tav*. *Alef* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *mem* is the very middle letter in the alphabet, and *tav* is the last letter. First, middle and last, so it is they say that truth comprises the beginning, the middle and the end; it holds the whole of the story, enveloping each and every part of our narrative, even the uncomfortable places. *Emet*, truth is not a word from which any other word or letter can hide, because it encompasses them all.

Regarding Jewish prejudice, however, the most frustrating wrong-turns and shameful expressions of Jewish violence and hatred has largely been perpetrated between Jews and Jews – between one Jew and another. And I want to bring this up today because it has to stop. A lot of this happens on social media, but not just on social media. It happens between Jews that don't know each other, but just as commonly it happens within families.

I have a lot Facebook friends and it stuns me to see a Jew post something critical of Israel or in support of Israel over something controversial and then a host of fellow Jews begin to label and accuse and insult and degrade, not giving any benefit of the

doubt. It abhors me to see a Jew mention something political and be lambasted, shamed, and out-casted by other Jews, right there in the public square. Name-calling and all. The pure vitriol is mortifying.

Just this past week, I personally committed the mortal sin of posting something about a governmental policy and how I view it as a Jew. I said nothing about a particular politician, but simply noted a policy concern. Sure, I am not an expert in policies, but I'm a citizen and this is my personal Facebook. I admit in advance: it was a mistake. I should know better and I know how Facebook works. But, immediately, the hate that I got from other Jews. One person said I should go back to Israel and deal with fighting to merely exist. That was a Jew who said that to me. Another Jewish person chimed in on my totally public feed and called me "brain dead" ... mind you, these are Facebook "friends" okay ☺ By the way, I took it down, so don't worry about going and looking for who and what.

But "go back to Israel." "Brain dead." What is going on? I have seen Jewish families who cannot gather for the holidays because they can't talk to each other over politics. Pro-Trump versus anti-Trump, Democrat versus Republican has literally caused a civil war amongst our people. This is not our way. Jews are supposed to be able to argue with each other and still stick together – that's what we're famous for!

The response to the heinous act in Pittsburgh and every disgusting act of ignorant hatred is not more entrenchment, more tribalism, more fear and anger, more objectification of the other, but of honestly looking within and seeing where each one of us can open ourselves up to more love, more mercy, more forgiveness, more compassion, more commitment. How within my own community, within my own family can I foster greater care and kindness? How can I bring more faith into my own experience, faith in myself, faith in other people – faith in humanity, and faith in God?

The most traumatic and important moment in Jewish history was in 70CE when the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple – it's what led us to thousands of years living in Diaspora. The Rabbis ask why – why did this terrible thing happen? Did they say, it was the Republicans, it was the Democrats, we were right and they were wrong, but they just wouldn't listen? When real tragedy happens, that kind of rhetoric is just adolescent! Our sages say: the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* – baseless hatred between Jews. Baseless hatred ... let that sink in – baseless. That's an amazing insight! What does that mean, says the tradition: the students of one Rabbi wouldn't share a meal with or marry with the students of another Rabbi – all Jews, all part of the same team, but they refused to eat together or allow love to take its natural course together, all over who's right and who's wrong. That's why the Temple was destroyed. ... I wonder maybe the Temple wasn't worth it if that's how we're going to treat each other.

What is it that draws us to such certainty in our positions that we are willing to tear apart other people, to rip down relationships with our brothers and sisters? It has come to the point where we cannot even refer to moral behavior as common ground. Morality has been flattened and shrunk to mere tribalism – tribalism within tribalism. You're good if you're with us, bad if you're against us no matter what you do. What?! Sometimes my tribe is wrong. Sometimes the other side is right. If I can't see that then I have become blind and lost in my own self-absorption, my own lies and I am not living for a higher purpose. As Hillel taught us, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" How can I truly love my neighbor, how can I truly see and understand another person with such a narrow view of morality?

Let me tell you, there are some things that are above partisanship: morality is not partisan, human dignity, human rights are not partisan – no matter the flavor of human; the truth is not partisan. Morality, human dignity, and truth are God's, not ours with which to yield power over others.

In his book, *The Gifts of the Jews*, religious scholar Thomas Cahill talks about the Ten Commandments and he says that the difference between the Torah and the Ten Commandments and every previous form of law was that the Ten Commandments have no qualifier. In other words, in other cultures, the law would say something like, if you steal then this consequence will happen – usually something violent and gruesome. If you murder then you will be put to death. If you do this, then this, etc.

But the Ten Commandments don't have a qualifier. It simply says: Do Not Steal, period. Do Not Murder. Honor your Parents. Do Not Lie about Other People. Period. Because these are not relative laws – they're not to be debated depending upon the person, or the circumstance or the place. They're truth and they're universal, and written into the moral and spiritual structure of nature, just as gravity is written into the physical structure of nature.

We may change, we may come and go on this planet, but there are things bigger than us and we should be humbled by it. We don't own these principles of truth, they will outlast us all.

As a congregation we've been studying Reverend Ed Bacon's book, *8 Habits of Love*, for the last few couple of weeks, and that's basically what he says in his chapter on the habit of truth: Not any of one us owns the truth. And that can be uncomfortable. Sometimes we make up stories, we project, and self-deceive just so that we feel that we are in control and that we have a grip on the truth. And sometimes we live our lives according to these stories that we make up and addictively cling these narratives of we think we're supposed to be doing. And then something happens, and we wake up one day and say, 'You know what, I haven't been living my truth. I've been doing this all these years, believing this idea all these years, but that's not true at all.' And then we have to do *teshuvah* and get real and apologize and forgive ourselves, so that we can move on and start really living again. We have to know

this about ourselves – that we are imperfect and flawed and vulnerable and we get it wrong sometimes.

The truth isn't yours or mine, it's something that we all share – each of us hold a piece of it and if we are practicing love and inviting in God or what Ed Bacon calls the Beloved then we can recognize it in the other.

The Rabbis ask the question: When God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai, is it really possible that everyone heard the same thing – that everyone received the same Torah? I mean what if someone was deaf and couldn't hear at all, or what about small children and babies, did they comprehend the same thing as adults? They say no, not everyone heard the same thing, each person heard *lefi kocho*, according to his or her own strength. Each person heard what they were able to hear and what they needed to hear. So what does that mean? It means that each one of us holds a piece of Torah that no one else holds. Each one of us holds a piece of truth that helps to complete the whole puzzle of God's truth. So what should we be doing? We should be listening to each other, sharing with other, communing with each other, teaching each other, and talking to each other, because each one of us has what the other is missing. Only together, only by recognizing the beauty and truth in the other do we heal and become one.

*God, let us listen to one another, have faith in one another. Circumcise our hearts so that we may look within and find compassion so that we can recognize the tzelem elohim in each and every human being. Send us mercy and grace in this difficult time and give us the courage to live in our truth, to honestly live according to our principles and values.*

*God, grant **us** the serenity to accept the things **we** cannot change, courage to the change the things **we** can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

Shabbat Shalom