

TRUTH: Cast Down and Resurrected

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People have an ambivalent relationship with truth. On the one hand, truth forms the basis of any real relationship; on the other hand, we “can’t handle the truth.” Of all the attributes ascribed to God, perhaps the most difficult is *emet* / truth. How do we relate to truth on the High Holidays? What might we learn from its presence—and absence—in our liturgy?

Truth has long been viewed as the enemy of human existence. Indeed, according to a classic *midrash*, were it up to truth, people would never have been created:

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) ח:ה

אמר ר' סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראות אדם הראשון נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים וחבורות, מהם אומרים יברא, מהם אומרים אל יברא ה"ה "חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוש נשקו" (תהלים פה:יא), חסד ואמת יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, אמת ואומר אל יברא שכולו שקר... מה עשה הקב"ה נטל אמת והשליכה לארץ

Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 8:5

*Said Rabbi Simon: when the Holy One was about to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and companies, some of them saying: "Let him be created," while others urged: "Let him not be created." Thus it is written: "Love (*hesed*) and truth (*emet*) fought together*

(*nifgashu*), righteousness and peace combated each other (*nashku*)" (Psalm 85:11). Love said: "Let him be created, because he will perform acts of love." Truth said: "Let him not be created, because all of him will be falsehood."... What did the Holy One do? He took truth and cast it to the ground, as it says: "You cast down truth to the ground" (Daniel 8:12).¹

In this conception, people can't live with truth. By contrast, God's seal is truth,² and in the 13 Attributes following the sin of the golden calf, Moses describes God as "full of grace, merciful, patient, and great in love (*hesed*) and truth (*emet*)" (Exodus 34:6). A God of truth seems destined for a difficult relationship with human beings, who can't coexist with truth.

But a funny thing happened to God's attributes over time: the aspect of truth disappeared. It was, as it were, thrown to the ground. In the eight other appearances of the list of Attributes in the Bible,³ only one (Psalm 86:15) retains *emet*. Moses himself doesn't mention it when defending the people later in the sin of the spies (Numbers 14:18). Perhaps most daringly, the review of the sin of the golden calf, as recorded in Nehemiah 9:17, simply removes this attribute, even though it is retelling the story of Exodus 34, which

- 1 Translation from: *The Book of Legends*, eds. Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, trans. William Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 13. Note that the verse from Daniel is in their translation but does not appear here in Theodor-Albeck's Hebrew text.
- 2 See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 55a.
- 3 Namely: Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Nahum 1:3; Jonah 4:2.

introduces truth as one of the 13 Attributes.⁴ It seems we prefer a God who is not known for truth. After all, if God were truthful about our sinful behavior, who would be able to survive?⁵

And yet, truth never fully disappears. Even in the *midrash* which notes that truth was flung to the earth in order for people to be created, truth is resurrected. As Bereishit Rabbah continues:

אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים מה
את מבזה אליכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ ה"ה
"אמת מארץ תצמח" (תהלים פה:יב).

*The ministering angels dared say to the Holy One:
"Master of the universe, why do You humiliate
Your seal? Let truth arise from the earth." Hence
it is written: "Let truth spring up from the earth"
(Psalm 85:12).*

I want to examine three places where truth re-emerges in our High Holiday liturgy, as a way of understanding better how we might relate to this most difficult attribute.

1. JONAH AND TRUTH— A CAUTIONARY TALE

Jonah repeats the list of attributes of God, but strikingly removes truth from the list:⁶

יונה ד:ב
אֵתָהּ אֶל-לִי חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם אֶךְר אֲפִים וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנֶחֱם עַל
הָרָעָה

Jonah 4:2

*You are a God, merciful and gracious, patient,
abounding in love, repenting of evil.*

As noted by Devora Steinmetz, Jonah stands in contrast to Moses here. While Moses—in Exodus and Numbers—recites the attributes in order to protect the people, Jonah is upset with God's merciful ways, preventing his prophecy of destruction to the people of Nineveh from coming true.⁷ For Jonah, God's entirely merciful ways are something to scorn. Jonah wishes for a God of truth, but sees only a God of mercy.

Where does truth re-emerge in the story of Jonah? It appears in the narrative connected to Jonah himself: he is Jonah ben Amitai, that is, Jonah, son of Truth.⁸ God may embody mercy, love, and forbearance, but Jonah embodies truth. He complains against a God who is missing this attribute. Ultimately, God's mercy defeats Jonah's truth: the people of Nineveh are not destroyed in forty days, as the prophecy predicted (Jonah 3:4). Rather they repent and, appealing to the hope that their returning (*va-yashuvu*) will be mirrored in God's returning (*shav*), are saved (3:8-9). Truth is nowhere to be found, except in the character of Jonah. Indeed, the root of *emet* (א.מ.ת.) disappears from the story immediately after the first verse of the book. In the universe portrayed here, truth is discarded in favor of mercy, love, and return, resulting in the saving of thousands of human and animal lives. Jonah embodies a harsh truth whereas God embodies the attributes of love. In this tale, truth stands for destruction. It must be defeated.⁹

⁴ This is at least as bold as the Rabbinic move to cut off the list of Attributes in the middle. See Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 393.

⁵ Psalm 130:3: "If You keep account of sins, YHVH, God, who will survive?"

⁶ He echoes almost word for word Joel 2:13, which may point to a larger relationship between these books. See Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. xxxix and p. 37. Translation here adapted from NJPS.

⁷ Devora Steinmetz, "Jonah, Son of Truth," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, eds. Gail Reimer and Judith Kates (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 308-324, esp. p. 319.

⁸ Also noted by Steinmetz; see previous note.

⁹ See Steinmetz, p. 312, for a different model of truth, embodied in the widow of I Kings 17: "The widow's definition of *emet* stands in contrast with the one that Jonah and the early Elijah seem to hold: *emet* characterizes the prophet who brings change; mercifully and boldly challenging fate is what a prophet does who has God's word of truth in his mouth."

2. TRUTH AS PRECURSOR TO ADMISSION

In Jonah, truth is the enemy of return; Jonah—speaking through the guise of *emet*—believes that people should be punished for their past sins. But what if truth re-emerged in another garb? How might truth actually help in the process of return?

Although the 13 Attributes are a centerpiece of the Selihot liturgy on Yom Kippur, another version of the Attributes appear as an introduction to the Vidui / the Confession, also a staple of Yom Kippur liturgy. We state the following:

אנו עזי פנים - ואתה רחום וחונן
אנו קשי ערף - ואתה ארך אפים

*We are brazen—
but You are **merciful and gracious**
We are stubborn—
but You are **patient***

Again, this is not a full list of God's attributes; truth is nowhere to be found. Indeed, it seems a reprise of Jonah's list (or the first part of Moses'). We entreat God who has thrown truth to the ground.

But, again, truth re-emerges. Immediately after this section of the liturgy, we introduce the confession by saying: "But (*aval*) we have sinned." As I have noted elsewhere,¹⁰ *aval* only appears twice in the Torah, and both times it is not translated in the traditional Aramaic translations as "but/however," but rather as "*be-kushta* / in truth." This liturgical phrase is best rendered, then: "in truth, we have sinned."

In this re-emergence, truth is the precursor to confession. We can't survive in a world of only truth, but we also can't admit our sins unless we are confronted with truth. Although God may not hold us against the measure of strict truth, we might start to hold ourselves accountable in that way. Here, truth is not the

enemy of human existence, but a pathway to a deeper relationship with ourselves and our actions. Truth is the first step to taking stock of one's life, which, in turn, is the first step to living a different life.

3. CALLING TO GOD IN TRUTH

One of the reformulated list of attributes of God appears in the Psalm known in the liturgy as "Ashrei." There, we read:

תהלים קמה:ח
חֲנוּן וְרַחוּם יִקְוֶה אֶרֶךְ אֲפִים וְגָדֹל חֶסֶד

Psalm 145:8
Gracious and merciful is God, patient and great in love.

Again, truth is missing from this description of God, mirroring almost word for word other versions of the attributes in the Bible (most notably Psalm 103:8). The praise for God in this Psalm overlooks God's attribute of truth. Who wouldn't want to praise such a God?

But truth re-emerges in "Ashrei" as well. In verse 18, we read:

תהלים קמה:יח
קָרוֹב יְקִוֶּה לְכָל קוֹרְאֵיו
לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֱמֶת:

Psalm 145:18
*God is close to all those who call to Him
To all who (will) call him in truth.*

It is as if truth has been "cast to the ground" again from verse 8, but springs up in verse 18 as the mode in which we are meant to call out to God. In fact, these two verses of the Psalm are linked through a literary clue, noted by medieval authorities.¹¹ While every other stanza of the Psalm is broken into two sections with the conjunction "and" (the letter "*vav*" in Hebrew),

¹⁰ Elie Kaunfer, "Aval Chatanu (But/In Truth We Have Sinned): A Literary Investigation," in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2012), pp. 181-185.

¹¹ See Reuven Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure, and Impact," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 113/1 (1994), pp. 37-58, here p. 51, n. 69. See in addition to the sources listed there: *Piskei Ha-Ri" D Le-Rabbi Yeshaya DiTrani Ha-Zaken Le-Berakhot Ve-Shabbat*, eds. Avraham Yosef Wertheimer and Avraham Liss (Jerusalem: Makhon Ha-Talmud Ha-Yisraeli Ha-Shalem, 1964), p. 7-8.

these two verses are not. The medieval authorities read into this a clue that this Psalm should be recited daily.¹² But regardless of the practical import, the literary linking seems intentional: truth has migrated from verse 8 to verse 18.

What is the significance of calling God in truth? The phrase is actually quite rare; people don't call God "in truth" elsewhere in the bible (although they "*daber* / speak" in truth). Perhaps truth is a certain stance toward God: being honest with oneself, being true to one's emotions in prayer, being real in one's self-representation. Elsewhere, Rabbinic sources equate "truth" with "Torah."¹³ Perhaps, then, this verse is a charge to call out to God through the language and values of Torah. This stance of truth is critical: God only listens to those who speak in this language of truth.¹⁴

But there is one final transformation that happens to truth, imagined by one of the poets of the High Holiday liturgy. Although Psalm 145:18 is quoted faithfully in one of the famous poems, *Le-Eil Orekh Din*,¹⁵ we read in a different *piyyut* for Rosh Hashanah,¹⁶

קרוב לקוראיו באהב

[God is] close to those who call Him in love.

Here, the synonym for "truth" is "love." By calling in truth, might we access a deeper capacity to love? If we were honest with ourselves, with our emotions, with our connections, might we not love more? This substitution forces us to ask: what prevents us from a truthful evaluation of our deeper feelings toward one another and toward God? Perhaps truth, as cast down to the earth, is actually the tool that can help us return—to ourselves, to our God, and to our loved ones. We cannot bear to live a world in which God acts entirely in truth, with no love. But we cannot also

bear to live in a world in which we don't access truth. We need to be honest about who we are, and we need to be honest with our deeper emotions. A world protected from that kind of truth is a colder one. But a world in which the truth of our emotions is revealed could be the world of love we so deeply hope and pray for. ♦

¹² Based on Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 4b.

¹³ See, for example, Jerusalem Talmud Rosh Hashanah 3:8. Contrast this with the mystical explanation of the Zohar II:57a.

¹⁴ See Vayikra Rabbah 17:1; Sifrei Bemidbar #42; and others.

¹⁵ Where we read: "*Karov Le-Korav Be-Emet*/God is close to those who call Him in truth." See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor Le-Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), vol. 1, p. 79.

¹⁶ Goldschmidt, p. 168.