

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth

A D'var Torah on *Parashat R'eih* (Deut. 11:26 – 16:17)

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*"R'eih anochi notein lif'neichem hayom b'racha uk'lalah."
"See, I place before you this day a blessing and a curse."*

Will the real False Prophet please stand up? As the Hebrews prepare to enter the Promised Land, communication with God will transition from Pillar-of-Smoke-By-Day / Pillar-of-Fire-By-Night / Thunder-and-Lightning-on-the-Mountain to Prophets¹. The Hebrews are forewarned that false prophets will appear among the true, and the people are commanded to heed true prophets and to reject false prophets. How are the people to tell the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet? Any attempt to lead the people to other Gods or to violate the Torah is proof-positive that the prophet is false. Neither miracles, nor signs and wonders, nor even evidence of success or prosperity justify a prophecy away from God.² A false prophet is a false prophet is a false prophet.

Although the Hebrews received the Truth of Divine Revelation amidst fire, smoke, lightning, thunder, signs, wonders and miracles, henceforth Divine direction would be via human prophets. True prophets would be mixed among false prophets, and the Hebrews would have to use their heads to differentiate between the two — without reliance on active divine intervention, miracles, or worldly success. They are instructed that a “prophet” who leads to other gods is, by definition, a false prophet, but in the end people would have to decide whether to believe.

Why does the Torah devote all of Deuteronomy 13 and half of Deuteronomy 18, one-and-a-half chapters, to this seemingly simple matter? Deuteronomy 18:16 states that the Hebrews requested an end to direct Divine communication. In Deuteronomy 18:17 God replies that the people have done well in this request. The word that God uses, *heitivu*, is a variation of *tov*, the word that God speaks in daily approval of the first six days of creation. God states that future Divine communication would be via prophets (human beings). In a Freedom of Information Act echoing Eve and Adam’s devouring the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the people take a leap of knowledge by stating, “You send the messenger. We will judge the message.” This time God agrees.

¹ A prophet (Hebrew, *navi*) is a human agent invested by God with the responsibility of communicating Divine will and direction.

² See “Re’eh 2, The Medium and the Message”, *Studies in Devarim*, by Nehama Leibowitz, Eliner Press; World Zionist Organization; 1993.

Parashat R'ei starts, “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse....,” meaning that even Divine revelation was given in the context of each individual’s freedom of choice. Choice requires information and understanding, consistent with Jewish tradition as is reflected in the traditional prayer, “*natan lasekhvee veena l’havkheen bein yom uvein lailah*”, in which Jews give thanks to God for granting them the ability to think rationally.

The people are told: You will soon change lifestyles. You will enter the land, conquer its inhabitants, not take on their gods or traditions, listen to true prophets, disregard false prophets, and make informed choices of your own free will. No one disagrees. The laws (*mitzvot*), which have come fast and furious, have been given to a wandering, tribal people emerging from slavery. The laws soon will have to be adapted to agricultural and urban lifestyles, and the interpretation and expansion of *Halachah* will be off and running. In Jewish tradition, religious ethical and moral teaching includes everyday as well as religious matters. The pronouncements of prophets will go far beyond the religious realm and encompass all issues of everyday life. Here is the meeting of Divine law, human understanding, and free will. Because everyday life has religious significance, accurately understanding the world — including ourselves — takes on religious significance.

Even today, we are surrounded with endless offerings of information, some of which is correct, much of which is not. How does one decide what is true?

1. How do you define "truth"?
2. How do you determine if something is true?
3. How do you determine if something someone tells you is true?
4. How do you determine if someone is telling you the truth?

I polled our Torah Study *talmidim* on these questions and wish to thank and acknowledge those who replied. The answers were thoughtful, eloquent, and creative. Question 1 — “How do you define truth?” — is challenging. People opined that “truth” describes the way the world is, or alternatively, it describes people’s understanding or experience of the way the world is. Several axes were cited that describe truth: subjective vs. objective truth, relative vs. absolute, provable vs. improvable, testable vs. untestable, evidenced vs. faith-based, experienceable vs. non-experienceable, and consistent truth within a simple, clearly understood framework versus not-necessarily-consistent truth within a complex, not clearly understood framework.

“What is laid down, ordered, factual is never enough to embrace the whole truth: life always spills over the rim of every cup.”³

³ Boris Pasternak.

Question 2: “How do you determine if something is true?” Noting that we must frequently evaluate information, that such evaluations must be practical and accurate, and that truth is a multifaceted gem, the Torah Study *talmidim* presented well-reasoned, flexible strategies for evaluating truth. These included: 1) consistency with known facts, 2) internal inconsistency, 3) reality testing, 4) variations on the scientific method, 5) research, 6) ethical and emotional “sniff” tests, 7) opinion of authorities, and 8) personal judgment. Respondents acknowledged that 9) something may be partially true, true in some situations but not in others, or true based on a specific perspective or context, 10) truth may require collaboration with others, 11) truth may require an interactive process, 12) some truth may be beyond human ability, and 13) some truth may be unprovable. Finally, recognition was given to 14) the importance of remaining open to new knowledge that is inconsistent with prior understanding.

“Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.”⁴

“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”⁵

Question 3: “How do you determine if something someone tells you is true?” This is part of *Parashat R’ei*’s challenging “Who is a true prophet? Who is a false prophet?” questions. Realizing that a large part of our knowledge comes from other people, the emphasis here is on the message — is it true or not? This is where Question 1’s philosophy and Question 2’s guidelines are put to work.

“Fifty million Frenchmen can’t be wrong.”⁶

“If the majority of people say something wrong is right, it is still wrong. Right?”

Question 4: “How do you determine if someone is telling you the truth?” This is the other part of *Parashat R’ei*’s question. The emphasis here is on the messenger — should this person be believed? Respondents gave considerable attention to evaluating messengers, including their reliability, track record, character, motives, and presentation.

“Who are you going to believe—me or your eyes?”⁷

Thus far, the message and the messenger have been the center of attention. There remains the recipient. Self knowledge and education are quite important in pursuing truth. Examples spring from cognitive-dissonance research. A person’s values and well-being, perception and understanding,

⁴ Albert Einstein.

⁵ Albert Einstein.

⁶ Billie Rose and Willie Raskin (song title, 1927).

⁷ Groucho Marx.

and behavior and actions all interact and manipulate each other. To “know thyself” is a major commitment.

We dance around another face of truth. The truth is what a person believes. Whether truth is subjective or objective, absolute or relative, provable or unprovable, testable or untestable, evidenced or faith-based, experienceable or non-experienceable, and consistent or inconsistent, if a person believes it, for that person it is the truth. Most people are well-intentioned, and most false prophets (sources of incorrect information) believe their (incorrect) messages. It is well to keep this in mind in the interest of *Tikun Olam*.

“The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility ... The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.”⁸

⁸ Albert Einstein.