

For a couple of decades now, the Oxford English Dictionary (the OED) has been announcing what it deems the “Word of the Year”—the most important word or expression currently in the public sphere—and other dictionaries like Miriam Webster in America and Macquarie here in Australia, have followed suit. Nowadays, the selection is usually based on the number of times people look up a particular term on that dictionary’s website, and *that’s* influenced by words frequently used in political rhetoric, coined by television talk show hosts, or bantered around in schools and social media. This past year, The OED’s word was a hyphenated phrase: “Post-Truth.” Macquarie’s was the term “fake news.” And Miriam Webster’s word was “surreal.” Post-Truth, Fake News, and Surreal—people around the globe spend a lot of time looking up the meaning of these words. We, as a society, are engaged in a search... for truth.

Of course, underlying this phenomenon is a more *consequential* search for truth that’s become prevalent lately: the desire to establish the truth or falsehood of claims made by politicians and the media. In an age when news sources that critique a policy or president are labelled—by the attacked—as “fake news” sources... In an age when objective facts fail to sway public opinion, leaving many to claim that we are living in a “post-truth” era... In such an age, citizens are trying hard to discern what is really true so they can hold their public officials accountable, and even determine whether those officials have rightfully earned their leadership positions. At a recent rabbinical conference I attended in the States, our group of rabbis met with a panel of journalists, reporters, and bureau chiefs from the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and CNN, each of whom shared with us that they’d seen their readership and viewership grow exponentially during and since the 2016 election there, because citizens want to be more informed and vigilant. To distinguish themselves from [quote] “fake news” sources, these media outlets take much more care now to inform their audiences where and when a photo or report originates. Because people want to know what’s really real, and really true. This is responsible, necessary, and important.

But while the contemporary search for truth may be responsible, necessary, and important, it’s not particularly *religious*. In ancient times, “seeking truth” was, for our people, a *religious* pursuit. People turned to the prophets of our tradition not only to foretell how events would unfold, but *to help them know right from wrong in God’s eyes*. They turned to our sages and scholars to help them understand *how to live according to God’s will*, as expressed in the Torah, which they believed to be a “teaching of truth”—*asher natan lanu torat emet*. Truth-seeking was a *sacred* exercise. Finding truth wasn’t so much about uncovering facts as it was about *discovering* sureness—greater certitude about things like how to shape one’s life and direction; clarity about what to celebrate, and when to mourn; how to treat those around us; which values and principles should rise to the top when making soul-wrenching decisions... These religious or spiritual questions are just as present and pressing today, and we mustn’t let them be drowned out by the more sensational discourse about “truth-seeking” and what *counts* for truth in the modern age. It’s okay to play the *political* game of truth—seeking and publicising provable facts that establish or undermine the legitimacy of a person’s power, control, and policy. But amid the banter and the use of truth to take others to task, we mustn’t neglect the more personal, spiritual work of seeking the sort of truth that can guide our lives. This, too, is consequential—profoundly so—and it’s

why so many of us come here today: to seek and encounter a different kind of truth—a truth that neither the press nor the internet can help us find.

In fact, few resources can really help us encounter the type of truth I'm talking about. Because the truth about truth is that typically *we* don't find *it*; typically, *truth* finds *us*, and in moments when we least expect it. If we reflect enough, we can likely each pinpoint a moment when truth barged into our lives unexpected. I'll share a personal example, so you'll see what I mean. Some of you already know the story.

On the way to our shul in Nashville one Friday night 10 years ago, David and I were driving along at some 80 kilometres per hour. Darkness fell early that evening, as the sky was still overcast from some violent weather we'd had earlier in the day. I saw two bicyclists up ahead so I gave them some space as I passed them, then started easing back into my lane. And that's when I heard a dreadful, sickening, clunking 'thud' on David's side of the car. "What was that?" I asked David in a panic as I pulled over, terrified. "What did I hit?" I couldn't see anything but darkness in the rear-view mirror. My heart was racing. My mind imagined the absolute worst: Was it...*a person*? Had I not cleared *all* the cyclists in swerving to avoid them? Had there been a third, less visible one on the road?

Paralyzing horror and dread quickly turned to disbelief upon hearing David's breathless reply. "It was a cow," he said. "A huge, black cow." The animal's dark colour had obscured it in the night; David saw it only after the passenger side mirror had smashed into its enormous head. We stepped out of the car. "It must have gotten free during the storm earlier," David surmised. "It walked away uninjured," he said. "But another instant and we all would've..." We both gazed at the mirror shattered in pieces on the ground, broken wires dangling, shards of glass and plastic covering the grass at our feet. Miraculously, the only other damage was a small dent in the back door. The timing was chilling. Had I not swerved to avoid the cyclists and just remained in my lane, there's no question that David and I would have hit the mammoth creature head-on. As it was, the only impact occurred as the cow's head glanced off the mirror and into the back door.

Staring at the shattered mirror, all the thoughts and images that would pass through my head in the coming days, along with their attendant emotions, seemed captured in that moment—which I've come to refer to as "a moment of pure truth." A moment of truth in which there was no filter left between us and a very plain, sobering reality: what could have happened to us; what could have happened to others. We could have taken a life. We could have lost ours. Staring at the dangling wires where once there was a mirror, we were, in that moment, face to face with the now undeniable, unadorned, unglamorous *truth* of just how quickly our fortunes can turn—how life can be transformed in a heartbeat, literally.

Truth finds us. We all stand in a moment of truth at some point or another in our lives, even if the circumstances aren't always life-threatening. Maybe you experienced such a moment during the past year, perhaps at a birth, or upon holding a newborn grandchild for the very first time. Perhaps upon hearing your child or grandchild practicing for b'mitzvah, when you were suddenly transported back in time to your own. Perhaps when your plane touched down in the land of Israel for the very first time, or you first touched a hand to the cool stone of the Kotel. Or maybe your moment of truth came upon receiving a difficult diagnosis, or when you realized that someone important to you was more gravely ill than you'd thought. Maybe it came when you heard the first patches of earth fall on the grave of

someone you loved. These are the moments that stop us in our tracks. They hold the potential to redirect our lives, because they bear (and bare) a truth that we're blind to most of the time: a truth about what really matters. A truth about our fragility of body and resilience of soul. A truth about what's possible in life, and what's not. A truth about what lives on after we go—what's finite, what's infinite... These are the truths that find us in those moments. They catch us by surprise, as we speed along through life. What happens in those moments is so *cognitively* confounding—yet so *spiritually* clarifying—that they make us slow down and reconsider our life's direction. And this is the start of *teshuvah*—literally, “a turning.” *Teshuvah* is a spiritual pivot that changes how we live, and it begins with a moment of truth.

Even though I'm a rabbi, I can assure you it isn't lost on me that moments of truth happen for most people *outside of* shul. Ours happened in a much more mundane moment *on the way* to shul—just driving along the highway. Moments of truth often happen in ordinary time, not sacred time, finding us when we least expect them. So why do we come *here*? What are we seeking *today* if we can't predict when truth will find us, and we know that the moments that contain it can happen at *any* time and *any* place? How does our presence here today move us closer to *teshuvah* if the moments that initiate our turning happen elsewhere in place and time?

To answer this question, we need to recognise that it is impossible for human beings to stand in a moment of truth for more than just a moment. We humans have neither the time nor the constitution to dwell indefinitely in the overwhelming flood of emotions that fill our moments of truth: gratitude, relief, horror, fear, love, awe, humility, shock and disbelief. We can't endure so much at once and still function—still *live our lives*—at the same time. The ancient midrash even teaches that in making humankind, God had to cast the angel of truth to the ground! This is the great spiritual irony of the human condition. We seek a truth to guide our lives, but if every moment were a moment of truth, we'd quickly perish. I *tried* to cling to the truth that was laid bare in that moment by the roadside. I told David I didn't want to fix the car mirror right away. It seemed important to live for at least a little while in that mirrorless space—face to face with the unfiltered reality of human perishability. How could we just move on? Shouldn't something change about how we live? Patching up the mirror would somehow put us at one remove from the realities—and priorities—which, for the moment, seemed so very clear. But as David wisely pointed out, “it's not safe to drive without a mirror.”

So we fixed it. But we did leave the dent in the side door, for years. It wasn't pretty. But I knew on some level that we'd benefit more from this daily reminder of what it was to face a moment of truth, than we ever would from a perfect paint job. Every time I stared into that dent in the door, I could feel my vanity give way to something much more sobering and profound. A sense of life's fragility. A sense of gratitude to God. A sense of new priorities—that driving safely was more important than arriving on time. Each stare into the dent was a spiritual pivot—a moment of turning—a moment of *teshuvah*.

Today we remember the mirror and stare into the dent. The shattered glass and the rusting, wrinkled crease in the otherwise smooth and glossy machinery of our lives. This is why we come today. To relive our moments of truth and recall what they revealed to us when we first encountered them. To revisit the sobering realisations that make us turn and

change our behaviour. Each moment of truth changes us. Each transforms the assumptions, priorities, and principles by which we live. Each creates a distinct ‘before-and-after’ that remains with us for the rest of our days. We cannot dwell in those moments, but we can learn from them, see the world differently, and change. Today we revisit our moments of truth.

For some, the liturgy of the service paves the way for this visit: we reencounter a sense of the momentous when the choir reaches its highest, resonant notes in *Avinu Malkeinu*, or when we collectively chant *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun, erech apayim v’rav chesed ve’emet*—“Adonai...full of grace *and truth*...” For some, the silences in our service are what stir the soul—the first time we’ve paused for such intense introspection since this time last year. For some, the sound of the shofar drowns out all the noise in the world that matters less, reawakening us and putting us back in touch with a sense of what’s most fundamental and important in life. These intense moments of our service are opportunities to revisit our most intense moment of the past year. To stare into the dent once again, just briefly feeling the chilling, profound power of that moment. Regaining the spiritual clarity that it bore.

During the *aseret y’mei teshuvah*—the next 10 days between now and the Day of Atonement, let’s reflect on those moments. Talk about *your* moment of truth with your loved ones over Rosh Hashanah lunch. Contemplate how you’ll conduct yourself in this *post-truth* era of your life. What did holding that new baby teach you about how to treat others? What did touching the Kotel teach you about the presence of God? How did hearing the words of a diagnosis inspire you to spend your time differently? Truth appears in different guises to each of us: “Reality may be read through an infinity of lenses,” writes Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. Share the lens through which you glimpsed truth. Reflect on what that moment revealed. What do you know now that you didn’t know before? How will it change you? What’s your new top priority? What can you let fall by the wayside, now that you know what truly matters?

Truth is alive and well in our age. We crave it, we seek it, and we recognise it when it appears, often uninvited, into our lives. We can’t linger in our moments of truth for too long, but we can revisit them and, in doing so, learn from them and turn from them. We may or may not live in a post-truth era. But we can live post-truth lives shaped by post-truth insights, values, and visions guiding us in new directions more enlightened than before. Teshuvah begins with a moment of truth—the dent in the exterior, the shattered glass—the spiritual pivot of the soul. *Shana tova*.