

In about one month The Oxford English Dictionary will chose its annual “word of the year”. To qualify for this particular honor of being the WOTY, a word must have been “judged to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance.” Some past winners have included “selfie”, “carbon-neutral”, and “the smiley-face-with-tears-of-joy emoji”. On November 8, 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary chose its “word of the year” from a group of finalists that included “adulthood”, “woke”, and “Latinx”. Last year’s word, cemented in our collective consciousness along with the date on which it was revealed, was “post-truth”.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “post-truth” as “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” It is most commonly used in conjunction with the noun “politics”, as in the OED example: “in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire”. The concept of “post-truth” has been in existence for the past decade, but its usage spiked in frequency by 2,000% starting in 2016 in context of Brexit and the presidential election in the United States. The term has moved from being relatively new to being widely understood in the course of a single year - demonstrating its impact on national and international consciousness.

The word of the year does not define the totality of human experience as we mark time as a species, any more than the color of the year or the song of the year, or even the year’s digits. Some of these chosen words seep into our collective conversations, like “unfriend” and “Sudoku”, and some never gain that same iconic status, like “hypermiling”- which I only now know to be an energy-efficient strategy of driving. Notably, “Post-truth” was selected as the 2016 word of the year even before results of the election were known. Oxford Dictionaries President Casper Grathwohl said, “It’s not surprising that our choice reflects a year dominated by highly-charged political and social discourse”... “Fueled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time.”

Given that Judaism, like any religion, is a systematized collection of personal beliefs, the default assumption might be that this and other faiths would be on the side of “circumstances in which facts are less influential in shaping opinion than appeals to emotion and belief.” But I submit to you that Judaism as a religion and as a community imperative is entirely entwined with the validation of truth, not post-truth; and that it has never been more important and more urgent to look to the values and the practice of our faith if we want both truth and Judaism to survive.

Our people know the power of words- what was said and what was written down. From the very first words of our most sacred text, from the very beginning of the story we tell to imagine how the world came to be, we believed that with a single word you could create a world, and with a single word you could bring it down. In our creation story, all that we know is said to be created with words. God speaks, with nothing and no one to hear, and the world takes shape, fills with light and life and wonder. Whether we consider this narrative of creation to be poetry or prose, history or story, we recognize the truth in this device- that when you name something it becomes real; that words are the tool that humanity uses to fix the shape of what we see around us and connects us to what is most powerful, most divine. We read this story at the birth of each new year, which is formless and undefined until we name it and call it into being with the sound of the shofar. We know words matter because they make matter and meaning. We know it's never just "locker-room talk" or idle gossip. Words move people, which moves the world.

Our legendary teachers believed in this wordly power of world-building, and asked many of the same existential questions about truth that philosophers, Jewish or not, have considered over time and still today. What is the difference between "truth" and "fact"? How sure can we be of our "certainty"? How can we fix the boundaries of reality given our demonstrably imperfect trust of our own senses? The most contemporary Jewish thinker I'd like to add to this chain of tradition is Brooke Gladstone, the cohost of WNYC's *On the Media*. Her book *The Trouble with Reality*, published just this past year, is dedicated to confronting our current era of post-truth and "moral panic", but ties closely to this tradition of Jewish ethics. Like many Jewish thinkers before her, she challenges our assumption that reality, and truth, must be what is physically observable and concrete. She asks, "In reality what are we able to confirm with our 5 senses?" noting that any answer would have to ignore "such problematic entities as electrons, the recession, and the number 5 ... Part of the problem stems from the fact that facts, even a lot of facts, do not constitute reality. Reality is what forms after we filter, arrange, and prioritize those facts and marinate them in our values and traditions. Reality is personal."

The rabbinic sages in the age of the Talmud recognized this power that each of us possesses, and created multi-layered discourses on the notion of how words can bless and words can curse and words can kill. They believed even a remark of passing cruelty could cause literal injury to its target; barbed words could "drain the blood" from a person's face, and pierce the heart of God. Words with this kind of legendary power could create truth, and one person's scornful words could endanger its existence.

Faced with the basic interpretive task of living, the talmudic rabbis laid out ground rules for a method of truth-seeking that is still in use today. Talmudic arguments can stretch out over generations, with proponents of different sides debating one another without ever being in the same room, or even living in the same time. But sources must be cited, and prioritized in terms of contextuality. Most importantly, just as much as the winning stance is carefully codified and fixed, so too, the dissenting opinion that lost is preserved with equal emphasis, just like decisions made by our courts today. Now, I won't pretend that the ancient sages were always gracious winners or demure losers- but even during times of our people's deepest uncertainty about survival, there is a Jewish imperative to record dissent and take its reasoning seriously.

The oldest template for Jewish study is the partnership of chevruta, a talmudic "study-buddy", a friend and an intellectual adversary who can become your greatest teacher. Why study in pairs, especially paired with someone with whom you disagree? The Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 7a) quotes a verse from Proverbs (27:17) to exemplify such a relationship: "Iron sharpens iron, so too does a person sharpen the countenance of their friend." This teaches us that just as one iron sharpens its friend, chaverav, so do two scholars sharpen each other with [joint study of] halachah, of Jewish law." A second source is introduced for commentary, this time by the prophet Jeremiah (23:29): "'Is not My word like as fire?' said the Eternal". This teaches us that just as fire does not ignite itself, neither do the words of Torah exist with one [who studies alone]..." True learning and greater wisdom cannot be achieved by yourself, but rather only in dialogue and open conversation where ideas are exchanged instead of echoed.

When faced with making judgements, laws, and decisions by which the rabbis and their community would have to abide, the Talmudic sages took a surprisingly humble view of their own certainty. Human beings have the need for certainty hard-wired within us. Without it, we would never make it through a single day, since every day is basically a never-ending stream of constant decision-making. But in highlighting this tradition of dissent, the rabbis placed an emphasis on humility. Rather than treating uncertainty as a non-entity, they recognized and even depended on the possibility of their decisions being wrong. They weighed their options on everything from the most dire to the most inconsequential choices; and by doggedly debating and painstakingly recording the different perspectives in the room they built consensus as a community and sharpened their own skills and reasoning as individuals.

Post-truth is the antithesis of this intellectual and ethical tradition. As Tom Nichols writes in his book, *The Death of Expertise*, when in decision-making we only seek to reinforce our own "confirmation bias", when we "look for information that only confirms what we believe, accept

facts that only strengthen our preferred explanations, and dismiss data that challenge what we accept as truth,” it is a misguided attempt for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they’re wrong about anything. “It is a new Declaration of Independence: No longer do we hold these truths to be self-evident, we hold all truths to be self-evident, even the ones that aren’t true.”

Our strongest defense against a post-truth mentality, which is a truly dangerous thing, is our own humility, and our own willingness to seek out challenging partners and information that make our search for truth more rigorous and real. Even when we are certain in our decisions, or in circumstances where action is required, we must remain aware that there is always more to learn beyond what we know. The true danger is not in making a judgement and having to admit that it was wrong. The danger lies in the death of nuance; the complete cognitive closure that occurs when a person believes that there is honestly nothing more to know or consider outside of themselves. Especially at this turning of the year, the High Holy Days call for the acknowledgement of when we made these misjudgments, the open acceptance of our own humility and uncertainty, and our promise to reexamine and make things right.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a 20th century Orthodox rabbi, wrote extensively about an ethical philosophy he called “Nekudat Bechirah”. Literally, this phrase means “point of choice”, and Dessler uses it in reference to the front-lines, as it were, of our moral conflicts. He writes (Michatv M’Eliyahu/Strive for Truth) , “There are decisions we have made in our our lives so many times that they are no longer decisions... There are also choices we have never had to make and likely will never have to make... The place where these territories meet is the place of choice- bechirah. On the spectrum of what we know to be ethical and what we know to be unethical, we make choices only at the bechirah point. This is the point where our values come into conflict and so the choices are not obvious. Each individual’s bechirah point is unique, and it moves as we grow and change.” When we are searching for what is true for us, when we are making our own judgements and decisions in this coming year, what would it mean for us as individuals to seek out our own “bechirah points”? Where is that place for you that is just beyond the border of what you believe? Who is the strongest, most thoughtful partner who could teach you something new, whether it is by reading or debating or just hearing them out?

You do not have to change your mind, or theirs- that is not the way you “win” at this endeavor. You do not have to sit back and subject yourself to someone spouting a line of thinking that is hateful or harmful or antithetical to the truth you see. And this is not to say that there is no point in ever taking a stand- “You cannot fight fire with uncertainty and indecision.” (Arie

Kruglanski, “The Price of Certainty”) But in pursuing truth in your life, where do you see an opportunity to admit to something of which you are not yet totally sure and challenge yourself to find a great thinker on the subject with whom you might not agree? How might you sharpen both your judgement and theirs through open, equal dialogue where you are prepared not to just find flaws in someone else’s thinking, but flaws in your own? In this new year, who or what is in a position to productively push you further towards your newly redrawn lines of bechirah, for the sake of heaven, or for the sake of truth?

In a very small way, each of us could impact the Oxford English Dictionary’s choice for the word of the year for 2017. It’s all about frequency of usage; which words are we writing, posting, sharing, and saying most of all? In the very same way, each of us has a massive impact and amount of control on the way we live and the way we remember 5778. On Yom Kippur when we as a community recite our sins as one with the words of Al Cheit, the majority of the sins that we confess are trespasses of speech- 11 out of 43. In this year, will our words be full of despair or hope? Will the words we shower upon others be of kindness, welcome, and blessing? Will our values, our watchwords, the ones we repeat over and over again be ones of truth, words we can be proud of?

I think, that more than anything else, the Jewish people are a receptacle of thousands of years of words. Whether it is a 140 character tweet or an entire Torah scroll, we must consider our words carefully and hold ourselves accountable to them. The medium may have changed from parchment to screen, but words have lost none of their potency, even in their proliferation. We continue to be moved by incredible stories and beautiful sentences, as well as destroyed by careless comments and callous critique.

As people who live by words, let us also stand by them, and mean what they say. In this new year, what truth will we tell? What words will we will use? Who will hold us accountable? What will be the impact of our words? We will encounter occasions where we realize just how much our words matter, and how our prayers, poetry, and prose can change our world as we live in it.

This past year of 5777, while not without its blessings, has been a very difficult year- especially for truth tellers and truth seekers. As a nation we are engulfed by scornful name-calling, empty promises, and outright lies. The saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”- but that’s not a Jewish saying. In Pirkei Avot (2:5) Rabbi Hillel says instead, “In a place where all are acting inhumane, it is up to us to be human.” Even in a moment where others, including our leaders, have lost sight of these values, or purposely shoved them aside, we must

care even more deeply about our words and clinging to the truth. From a year of “post-truth” we must move to year of whole truth- and that power is in our reach.

This is my blessing and my hope for us in this new year. Let our words make worlds, let them be powerful, thoughtful, and deep. May our words make an impact, not by being launched but by being planted. May our words grow roots, provide nourishment, shade, protection, inspiration, shelter, and love. May our words grow into something mighty, and may they be a blessing.