

Yom Kippur 5762

Is There in Truth No Peace?

The following is a sermon given by Rabbi Freundel at Keshet Israel Congregation. As many of our members asked to see that talk in writing, Rabbi Freundel has made it available to all of us.

by Rabbi Barry Freundel

This morning marks a transition for me and for the congregation. Until now, every talk that I have given since September 11 has dealt with the terrible events of that day. Today, I am going to look at something else. My comments will touch on the aftermath of September 11, but will not deal directly with that horror. In truth, the ideas I will talk about today have meaning for areas of human experience beyond the events of September 11 and the specific aftereffects of that terrible day.

I believe this is an important transition because one of the dangers of the tragedy and of the magnitude of the terror attacks is that we can get emotionally stuck in that moment and find ourselves unable to move forward. Although the memory and pain will in some fashion live with us forever, the truth is that it would be an even greater tragedy if we did not begin to move to a new space and find a new way of functioning than the reality we have lived with since September 11. I think this is a particularly appropriate step to take in the moments before Yizkor because Yizkor is a ritual that has helped Jews throughout the centuries transform tragedy from a current reality to an important and significant memory. It does not mean that we forget those whom we have lost. It does mean that we begin to learn to live meaningfully against the tragedy.

As both I and the Mahzor have mentioned repeatedly during our services, this is the time of year that commemorates the creation of the world and particularly of mankind. There is a famous Midrash about the creation of human beings that I am sure many of you know. I find it particularly meaningful today. When G-d was contemplating bringing human beings into existence in this world, an act that would be a vast departure from anything that had been done previously, the Biblical verse says, (Genesis 1:26) "na'aseh adam bezalmeinu kedmuteinu" (let us make man in our image after our form). The obvious problem with the verse is that G-d speaks in the plural. How many gods are there? Don't we believe absolutely that there is only one G-d? So to whom is G-d talking when He says, "Let us make man...?"

There are a number of responses to these questions in our sources. The one I want to focus on appears in the Midrashic comment (Bereshit Rabbah 8:5) that G-d asked the advice of four angels before creating human beings. These angels

were the angel of kindness, the angel of righteousness or justice, the angel of peace, and the angel of truth.

When G-d asked whether He should create a human being, the angel of kindness responded and said, "I want you to create human beings. No other entity in this universe can perform acts of selfless kindness in the way that human beings can and will." We have all been witness to the truth of that comment in what we have seen over the past couple of weeks on the part of our fellow Americans. Animals and other forms of life may occasionally perform an act of bravery, but they cannot create an ethos of altruism and kindness the way human beings have done and continue to do. So, too, the angel of righteousness and justice, said, "Create a human being. The concepts of justice, of pursuing perpetrators of evil actions, of creating systems designed to bring right to the world -- these are things that only human beings can do. If you don't create human beings, I shall be out of business; there will be no place for me in this world."

On the other hand, and this is a remarkably cautionary statement, the angel of peace took the opposite position. "War is a phenomenon that comes only from human beings," the angel said. "Animals don't make war, and they certainly don't engage in the kind of destructive activity that human beings are capable of. Don't create human beings," the angel pleaded, "because human beings will be the enemy of peace." Similarly, the angel of truth said, "Don't create human beings. Of all who exist in the created universe, only humans can lie. Falsehood, dissembling – those are things that will come to the world with human beings. Please, do not create the human being."

G-d was faced with a hung jury, with two angels in favor of creating Man, and two angels against it. The Midrash goes on to say that in the best tradition of Chicago politics, G-d took the angel of truth and hurled it into the ground creating a two to one majority in favor of creation which then allowed Him to proceed with bringing human beings into the world. The Midrash immediately comments on the fact that G-d chose truth to hurl into the ground and not peace. The comment should give us pause. The lesson, according to the Midrash, is that peace can be shattered forever, giving us nothing but war, while truth, no matter what you do with it, will eventually grow out of the ground and make its presence felt.

The Midrash is profound as it stands, but on somewhat deeper analysis it appears to hint at something perhaps even more meaningful, but also more troubling. This is true because a close reading of the text suggests that there is a basic incompatibility between the value that we know of as "truth" and the value that we know of as "peace". And, most importantly, that the human condition is such that somehow you cannot have both truth and peace existing simultaneously if you want to have functional human beings. In a very real sense that seems to be true.

We have in this world seekers of truth. They perform a very important service. But one does not think of them as people who promote peace. We can be very specific here. I doubt that we will ever see the day when an investigative reporter will publish a story exposing the failings of someone in high public office in the morning and then go and have a pleasant lunch with the same individual that afternoon. Investigative reporters may perform an important service, but they don't create peace between themselves and their targets.

We can put this in a Jewish context. The Biblical prophets roundly criticized the excesses and moral failings of the kings of Judah and Israel. Those kings did not respond with peaceful acts directed at the prophets. Instead they sought to keep them from speaking and sometimes tried to kill them. In one case, they actually succeeded in murdering one of the prophets (2Chronicles 24:20-22).

We can put this in the current context as well. We have been told that we are engaged in a search for the truth of who perpetrated the horrible actions that occurred on September 11, and of who supports terrorism. Yet, even here, we have had to mitigate the search for truth in the face of a desire for the peace of coalition building. I found it fascinating to hear the President and his spokespersons and cabinet members constantly emphasize that a heavy toll would be exacted of any nation that chose to continue to harbor terrorists. By focusing on what will occur from here on and not raising what has happened in the past, it is clear that even in this search for truth, there will be limits to that search for the sake of the peace of the coalition.

On the other hand, there are seekers of peace in this world. And they, too, perform an important service even though, in these past couple of weeks, they have taken a real blow to their position. Anyone who is a seeker of truth knows that if you expose every detail of every offense you are not usually going to bring peace between warring parties. Those situations need finesse. Truth often needs to be romanced, or you are never going to be able to reconcile the people involved.

The Torah itself indicates that this is necessary in several places. The one most germane to the High Holidays deals with the impending birth of Isaac, an event that we read about on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. G-d, in the person of his angels, informs Abraham and Sarah that even at the advanced age of 100 and 90 years old, respectively, they will still have a child. Sarah laughs (Genesis 18:12) indicating that she doubts this to be true because, after all, her husband is so old. G-d is concerned about this lack of faith and wants to bring it to the attention of Abraham (Genesis *ibid.* v. 13). When God does so, He romances the truth. Instead of telling Abraham that Sarah had laughed about Abraham's age, he tells Abraham that Sarah had laughed and said that she, Sarah, was too old. In that way, peace within the family was kept intact while the message and the concern about Sarah's lack of faith was given to Abraham. This is yet another indication of an apparent incompatibility between truth and peace.

You can also see the strengths, the advantages, and the again seeming incompatibility between truth and peace by examining the Biblical personalities most closely associated with each of these two values. On the side of truth, we have a combined personality, that of Pinchos, Aaron's grandson, and that of Elijah, who some claim are both the same person (cf. R. David Kimchi to Judges 20:28). Both Pinchos and Elijah can fairly be called zealots for truth. They were both people who, in pursuit of the truth, did whatever was necessary to have it shine brightly and clearly for all to see. And so, when King Ahab and Queen Jezebel brought the Ba'al cult into Israel, Elijah confronted them in the fiercest of terms. (His stories can be found in 1Kings 17-2Kings 2). When the Jews refused to choose between Ba'al and G-d, Elijah called down a seven years' long famine upon the people of Israel because of their dalliance with a false god. When two people, a man and a woman, were blaspheming publicly, Pinchos picked up a spear and killed both of them in the search for uncompromising truth (Numbers 25:15).

Nonetheless, Elijah suffers the fate that I am suggesting will be the lot of many truth seekers. Elijah confronts the priests of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel (1Kings 18:19ff), where he demands that the Jewish people choose between G-d and Ba'al. He calls down fire from heaven that destroys the priests of the Ba'al. Nonetheless, the people are still hedging their bets, worshipping G-d on Shabbat and Ba'al on Tuesday or Wednesday or whenever his holy day was. Elijah is so fed up with this lack of a willingness to take a stand for truth that he runs away and hides in a cave on Mt. Sinai so that he can be alone with his G-d. There simply was no peace for him with anybody else. Frankly, G-d roundly criticizes him for this "religious retreat" and he is told to go back and deliver one more message to Ahab after which his career as a prophet comes to an end.

On the other side of the equation, the classic symbol of peace is Aaron, Moses' brother. If you've ever attended services in a congregation called Rodef Shalom (pursuer of peace), or Ohev Shalom (lover of peace), you have been in a building named for the personality characteristics that are most closely associated with Aaron (Avot 1:12). Aaron is a seminal figure and there are many successes attributed to him in bringing peace to people who were otherwise seriously at odds. Nonetheless, Aaron falls into the trap of many peace seekers.

This morning we read of the death of Aaron's children. There are many suggestions in Rabbinic literature that his children walked into the Holy of Holies to offer their own sacrifice when it was not appropriate to do so, and thus were struck down because of their arrogance (Eruvin 63a; Sanhedrin 52a; Vayikrah Rabbah 20:10). It is reasonable to suggest that Aaron's seeking peace and, therefore, his unwillingness to confront his children and correct their faults as they were growing up resulted in their developing this arrogance that allowed them to act in this fashion.

So, too, Aaron is at the very center of the incident of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). In fact, he is the one who seems to create the idol in the Biblical story (Exodus 32:4). A close reading of the story -- aided by Rabbinic interpretation of the text -- reveals that Aaron understood that this was an abomination, and wanted to stop it. But, instead of speaking the truth, instead of confronting the perpetrators and telling them that what they were doing was wrong, Aaron tried to finesse the situation. For that reason, he told the perpetrators to go and get their wives' jewelry to use for the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:2). His assumption was that the women would refuse to give up their jewelry (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:10). His plan did not work. When the women refused, the men came back with large amounts of gold of their own. If you read the text carefully, you can also see that Aaron used the wrong type of tool to create this Golden Calf (Exodus 32:4). I presume that he tried to ruin the first attempt at the project and hoped that before the Jews had time to regroup and start the project again, Moses would return from Mt. Sinai and put a stop to all this. Again, Aaron was wrong. His fundamental problem was that of the peace seeker: he could not confront the people and speak the truth, even when it was necessary.

The same type of dichotomy exists in general philosophic statements made by the Rabbis concerning the issues of truth and peace. Before we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we recite a verse that begins with the words, "rosh devarcha emet" (the beginning of your words is truth) (Psalms 119:160). This, by itself, indicates the importance that we place on truth in understanding G-d's words to us. Sefer Hasidim (#258) makes an intriguing point. If you, in fact, look at the beginning of G-d's words to us, at the words "Bereshit barah Elokim" (in the beginning G-d), and if you take the last letter of each of these three words, the letters are taf, aleph, and mem. If you scramble the order slightly, that spells emet, the Hebrew word for "truth." So, in fact, the beginning of G-d's words, the beginning of the Bible, is truth. Furthermore, the letter aleph, the first letter of truth is also the first letter of the alphabet, the letter mem, the middle letter of the word emet, is the middle letter of the alphabet, and the letter taf, the last letter of the word emet, is the last letter of the alphabet. This suggests that all of the letters together make up truth (Sefat Emet, Bamidbar, Balak 660 (1900)). Of course, it is the letters that go into making up all of the words of the Bible. The image created is that truth permeates and exists everywhere. Finally, the signet ring worn by G-d, by which he seals decrees such as those that are completed today, on Yom Kippur, bears the word emet. So claims Rabbinic literature (Shabbat 55a).

On the other hand, when we put the Torah back into the Ark, we will sing the words "kol netivoteha shalom" (all its paths are peace) (Mishlei 3:17). Similarly, whenever we recite the central prayer of our liturgy, the amidah, (which we do a minimum of three times every day, four times on Sabbaths and festivals, and on this day, five times) we end the prayer by requesting of G-d "sim shalom" (please grant peace). Similarly, when the priests offer the priestly benediction a bit later

today, they will conclude it with the words “veyasem lecha shalom” (and may G-d grant you peace) (Numbers 6:26).

Obviously, both truth and peace are critically important values as we look at Jewish life and lore. Yet, notice that *emet*, truth, is said to appear at the beginning, while *shalom*, peace, appears at the end. This again suggests a tension, or somewhat of a dichotomy between the two values.

We can bring this back to today as well. What type of judgment do we want G-d to render this day? Do we want it to be a judgment of peace or a judgment of truth? Well, I assume that depends on who and what we are talking about. When it comes to the perpetrators of the acts of terror, we want an absolutely truthful judgment on the part of G-d. We want to know who did it. We want to know why. And most of all, we want to know that they are going to get their just rewards. On the other hand, when it comes to the judgment that G-d renders for me, and those close to me, I'd like a judgment of peace, a judgment that romances the truth a little bit. I don't want the exposure of every single thing that I've done wrong in the past year. I'd like the facts to be mitigated and some of them forgotten. This is the dichotomy that we speak of when we speak of G-d operating either under *midat hadin* (his aspect of justice), or *midat harachamim* (his aspect of mercy). Again, we want both of them in different situations, but they clearly lead to different types of results.

Finally, there is the human dimension. People who are by nature truth seekers do not have much regard for peace seekers. More often than not they will think of them as wishy-washy, mealy-mouthed, touchy-feely, not able to stand up for anything of importance and, therefore, as people for whom they have very little respect. On the other hand, those who are by nature peace seekers will see truth seekers as argumentative, obnoxious zealots, people who simply like to cause trouble, people who cannot get along, and they will have very little regard for them as well. Again, both are values we think are important, yet they seem incompatible.

What do we do with all of this? How do we find a way to live with these two values and not see them constantly as conflicting with one another? We can add to that challenge the fact that this is what Torah expects us to do. We are told “*ha'emet vehashalom 'ehavu*” (truth and peace you shall love) (Zechariah 8:19). How, in effect, are we ever going to be able to love both truth and peace?

It seems to me that a large part of the problem is that we think like Westerners, in the Greco-Roman tradition. In that tradition things tend to be hierarchical, things tend to be linear. We are, in all of the situations that I have described, supposedly forced to choose between truth and peace and to decide which is more important and which is less so. That leads to the sense that they are irreconcilable.

But Judaism is a religion that grew up in the East, and we need to think in more Eastern terms here. We need to think of life as much more of a pendulum swing and to recognize that even when the pendulum swings and we move in the direction of the one as opposed to the direction of the other, it is precisely at that time that the pressure needs to build for the corresponding value. Let me explain this more specifically. In an optimal world both truth and peace should be present in equal measure at all times. But it is very rare that we are in such a position. Situation by situation, day by day, we do not find ourselves in the perfectly balanced middle. Instead, the pendulum will swing first one way and then the other. What we need to recognize is that, in fact, in certain situations either the value of truth or the value of peace is going to be dominant. However, when that happens, precisely because one of them is dominant, it is at that point that the love for the other value must manifest itself. And, if there is a moment when we can -- without undermining the importance of a response to a particular situation -- inject the corresponding value, if we can find a moment when we can strike a blow for either truth or peace when it seems to be absent, then we will be fulfilling the verse "truth and peace you shall love."

Let me be even more specific: there are times in life when the value of truth is paramount. When that value is the focus of what we are doing, we are probably going to war against those about whom we are seeking the truth. That is what is happening in our world today. Nonetheless, in the midst of that search for the truth, it is critically important not to abandon our love for peace. It is absolutely necessary that we recognize that the values of peace are still essential to all of us. And if, without compromising the war effort, without undermining our opposition to and our attempt to destroy terrorism, we can find a place to strike a blow for peace, we can find a way to inject values of peace within this terrible situation that becomes important in a fundamental way. It is the true indication that we love both truth and peace.

Frankly, if we don't do that, we run a different risk. That risk is that we will value only the rigorous pursuit of truth; we will become bellicose; we will become martial; we will become aggressive and antagonistic; we will take steps to create a society such as that of ancient Sparta, or others that have existed in history, where militarism and military accomplishment were the only measures of the human being and of his success.

By the same token, we need to recognize that there are moments in time where peace is the ultimate value. At moments like that, we may often jettison a great deal of truth. Often, when we are protecting something particularly precious to us, the only way that life allows us to function is by giving up our search for the truth, and sometimes that is the only appropriate thing to do. Then the question must be: what do we do with the value of truth? If we continue to love truth, if we continue to find places and moments where we can inject truth, if we take a long view and promise ourselves that in the fullness of time the truth will out, if we

recognize the damage we are doing to truth for the sake of a peace that may be necessary, then we can still fulfill the verse “truth and peace you shall love.”

The danger, of course, is that we will not follow this course. The danger is that we will make a positive value out of lying to ourselves. The danger is that we will convince ourselves that the falsehoods we are telling ourselves are actually true. The danger is, finally, that we will rationalize these falsehoods and attempt to make them our reality even though we know they are not real. That, too, would be a fundamental violation of the expectation that truth and peace are things that we need to love. Most of all, what we need to recognize is that any time the pendulum swings in one direction or the other, we are out of balance. Something is wrong. Something is not the way it should be. The pendulum swing may be necessary, it may be important, it may even be critical to survival, to justice, to comity, or to a sense of being able to work together, but one must recognize that it is an unstable, out of balance situation. “Haemet veshalom ehavu” (truth and peace must you love), that is the bottom line.

The real challenge for all of us today is that in the midst of a pendulum swing that is truly radical, that moves us towards an extreme. In the midst of what appears to be our going to war -- a just and legitimate war -- the value of peace still has to be there to make its stand before our eyes. Peace still has to be something that we promote, particularly now, when so much of our identity and our agenda are focused on the search for truth and the war that will probably result from that policy.

All of this comes home to us in the last moments of Yom Kippur. The very last thing that we recite on Yom Kippur is a series of true statements: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One.” There is no more fundamentally true statement in Jewish literature than this phrase that summarizes our doctrines and our beliefs. In fact, for medieval philosophers the only truth that was absolute was the fact that G-d existed and that He was the one true power in the universe. We summarize that statement in our seven-fold repetition of the phrase “hashem hu ha’elokim” (hashem is Lord). Those are the very last words that we recite as Yom Kippur comes to a close. We then blow the shofar, a sound that reminds us of the absolute judgment and the absolute truth that comes with Yom Kippur. Frankly, it is entirely appropriate that at the very last moments of divine judgment we focus on truth.

But it is interesting to note what happens thereafter. We say a brief, two-line prayer in which we ask G-d to accept the supplications and prayers that we have brought to Him in the course of the Day of Atonement. Then we conclude with two paragraphs. The first begins “yehai shlamah rabbah” (may great peace descend upon us). The second, and last, begins “oseh shalom” (He who creates peace on high, may He create peace down below). In other words, we end Yom Kippur with this ringing announcement of truth and immediately balance it with statements about peace. It is always in the nature of our pursuit of these values

that when we focus on one we need to have the corrective of the other appear, so that within the search for peace there must be glimmers and inklings of truth, and within the search for truth there must be glimmers and inklings of peace. Maintaining both of these values is going to be our task in the months and years ahead. We are now all enamored with the search for truth. It is precisely at this moment that we must work hardest to fulfill the requirement of the Torah verse that we love not just truth, but peace at the very same time.

Shanah tovah.