



The Yom Kippur Debate

5778

Must we tell the truth at all costs?



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Motion:

**Fake News?
This House believes
that truth can be sacrificed
for the greater good.**



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Yom Kippur Debate 5778!

This is a superb opportunity to capture the attention and imaginations of the youth and students who fill our shuls on Yom Kippur so that we can discuss contemporary issues within the framework of our Jewish community.

The motion is:

This House believes that truth can be sacrificed for the greater good.

This year, in synagogues across the UK, we will be debating whether, against a backdrop of the perils of the 'Post-truth' age, we are duty bound *always* to uphold truth as a sacrosanct, non-negotiable value above all others, or whether there are circumstances in which truth may and should be sacrificed for a greater good.

The debate follows a very straightforward format.

Phase 1 opens with a thought-provoking discussion about **Joseph and his brothers** and whether the truths and untruths they tell, both by commission and omission, were necessary and forgivable or destructive, selfish and damaging.

Phase 2 focuses on **Post-truth**, a major global phenomenon of the past few years – and last year designated 'Word of the Year' by Oxford Dictionaries. This raises questions around the uses and abuses of truth by politics, the mainstream media and social media, whether in campaign slogans, headlines, home pages or 24/7 clickbait.

Phase 3 relates to issues within our own community in the context of Jewish **social** initiatives for teenagers and young adults. Opportunities for this age group to meet are a priority. But what and whose are the rights and responsibilities around truth when it comes to the release or retention of information about individuals in those social settings? When, if at all, does truth need to be divulged if it would sacrifice privacy and affect an individual's reputation?

To facilitate an informed debate, we have compiled useful resources from general and Jewish sources. This resource pack has been designed for 4 debate presenters (2 for the motion and 2 against) as well as a debate moderator. Each contributor has a section of notes that relates to their part. Please use these as a guide and a gateway to sharing your own opinions. Hopefully the audience will get involved too with great questions and comments.

Tremendous thanks to Julie Apfel for this year's debate theme and for her expertise in writing this resource pack; to Jeremy Wootlif, Director of Worthwhile.TV for producing the trigger clip; to Rabbi Michael Laitner for reviewing the content; and to the Tribe team & Neil Moss for their valuable contributions. I also want to acknowledge David Turner, the Chairman of South Hampstead Synagogue and the young people of the South Hampstead community for helping to initiate the Yom Kippur debate project.

I hope you have a stimulating debate, an engaging communal experience and a meaningful Yom Kippur!

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Eli Levin



NOTES FOR MODERATOR

Yom Kippur is a day of introspection, prayer, forgiveness and positive resolutions – 25 hours during which we reflect on the past to help us live a better future.

Part of the process towards achieving meaningful change, which is the essence of ***Teshuvah*** (repentance), involves considering the salient features of the backdrop against which our lives are played out.

Reviewing the past year, one of the hottest topics at home and abroad has been **truth, or the lack of it in our times - dubbed the age of 'post-truth'** - so much so that 'Post-truth' was last year designated Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries.

In tandem alongside 'post-truth' is its running partner 'fake news' which has become a label fiercely debated on our TV screens, in newspaper headlines and social media feeds.

With these disturbing phenomena now permeating our world in a myriad of ways, is it our duty to uphold truth as a non-negotiable sacrosanct value without which meaningful life and *Teshuva* are impossible? Or is truth expendable? If so, when, who decides – and at what cost?

These are just some of the questions in our Yom Kippur debate 5778 on the motion:

This House believes that truth can be sacrificed for the greater good.

A primary Jewish source for our discussion is the tale of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Bereishit (Genesis). A central issue in this dramatic narrative is the role of truths and untruths – by both commission and omission - expressed by several of the key characters in one of the most compelling stories in Tanach (the Hebrew Bible).

We then address manipulations of truth in contemporary political campaigns and media coverage, asking whether these can be justifiable 'in the public interest'.

Finally, we explore whether airing the truth should override the protection of individual and communal reputations and feelings, such as: divulging a person's private history to safeguard another; publicly decrying Israeli policy outside the Jewish community; and withholding sensitive material truth from a loved one.

Whilst we have identified the above-mentioned topics as the main ones for debate and discussion, please feel free to discuss and debate other issues around the motion too.

Let the debate begin!

Introducing Joseph and his brothers

The story of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Bereishit is one of the most dramatic and popular Tanach narratives.

Perhaps its very popularity is to some extent rooted in recognition of our vulnerability to deception - including our own self-deception:

Despised and envied by his brothers for paternal favouritism and the dreams he tells, Joseph is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery, with his fate reported back to their grief-stricken father by the brothers as death by wild animal - complete with provision of his distinctive tunic dipped in blood as 'evidence'.

This famous reconstruction of the truth is the first of numerous 'alternative facts' to propel the story through its trajectory.

Is it an untruth told to soften a bitter blow by offering closure (however brutal) in place of the uncertainty of imagining a beloved son's plight sold into slavery in a foreign land? Or is it a lie designed by the brothers to dissemble for their self-preservation?

Potiphar's wife tells alternate versions of her falsehood to her different listeners. Joseph tells the truth and pays the price, then conceals the truth of his identity from Pharaoh and the truth of his fate from his father. He launches a false allegation against his brothers and later asks them to be economical with the truth to Pharaoh; they desist.

The dramatic twists and turns of these verses, and the commentaries of the rabbis and scholars studying them, repeatedly swirl around the essence of truth - whether it be in relation to Joseph, his brothers, Potiphar's wife, or the baker and the butler.

Many approaches to this subject feature within the traditional commentaries on Joseph's story but these age-old issues continue to challenge us acutely today in a broad range of situations, both publicly and privately - now intensified by the reach and speed of our 21st century technology spreading the news - whether true or false.

Does the story of Joseph and his brothers demonstrate truth as an essential core value which when sacrificed or economised on inevitably leads to harm and the loss of integrity?

Or can truth be manipulated and dispensed with in the interests of self or others if done so for the sake of a higher purpose?

Overleaf are questions and arguments on both sides of the equation to help you define and drive the debate.

Arguments from Joseph for the Motion

First Speaker

Truth telling does damage:

Joseph represents a perfect example of how and why telling the truth can and should be avoided for the sake of the greater good.

Joseph aged 17 reports to his brothers that he has dreamed unusual dreams and then goes on to recount their contents in detail. The dreams' symbolism of his impending leadership and his family's submission to him is clear - yet rather than omitting to mention them, Joseph does the opposite and engages in fulsome unprovoked and total truth-telling - intensifying his brothers' hatred of him and eventually leading to his sale into slavery.

It is only when Joseph falls silent, during the next period of his life, and then displays a new, nuanced relationship with truth, editing his words with great care - and also attributing any of his successes to God rather than himself - that his fortunes begin to turn. His very control over truth and how much of it to divulge, when, to whom and where, rather than exposing it unfettered, becomes a blessing rather than a route to misery.

Second Speaker

Omission of truth can be essential to evaluate and elicit change.

On seeing his brothers again after so many years, how could Joseph test their sincerity and give them the chance to repent for their early actions against him?

Now that he was a leader in Egypt, niceness towards him could have been understood just as currying favour.

By concealing his identity and the truth of the situation, Joseph engineered the sole scenario that enabled the brothers to show their true colours - by recreating the same situation with which they had once been confronted and giving them the opportunity to act differently, better, this time - the definition of *Teshuva* (repentance) [Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuva 2,1].

Despite Joseph's insistence, the brothers refused to return to Jacob without his beloved youngest son Benjamin, knowing that to do so would have caused their father unbearable grief - for a second time.

Through this re-enactment of the past, and his concealment of truth to that end, Joseph witnessed his brothers' heartfelt remorse. Only then could the ultimate revelation of his identity take place and the family dysfunction that had brought about so much pain could finally be healed. The essential resolution necessary to bring about the next stage of the family and national journey was brought about by a concealment of truth.

Arguments from Joseph opposing the Motion

First Speaker

When truthfulness is compromised we enter dangerous territory and approach a slippery slope...eventually truth disappears not just on that occasion but loses its traction and becomes expendable:

When Joseph's brothers plot to dispose of him and throw him in the pit, they sit down to eat. The rabbinic commentators on the verses in the Torah question this unusual detail. One particular answer given is revealing: so intent on but at another level so uncomfortable about their plan are the brothers that they engage in remarkable mental acrobatics to justify their actions – concluding that in fact it is not *they* who wish to kill *Joseph* but *he* who wishes to get rid of *them*, so as a *rodef* (one who is pursuing them to the death) he can legitimately be killed by them. They succeed in projecting their *own* motive onto Joseph to justify their actions. They then swallow their own internal PR to the point of self-delusion – totally inverting truth. So complete is the inversion that they calmly sit down to eat. (Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra 12th Century, Spain).

Abandoning truth with others is dangerous; jettisoning it with oneself can be lethal because the consequences become invisible, second nature - and eventually all reality is lost.

Second Speaker

Being truthful conveys a comfort with oneself that is perceptible and respected by the world at large. It has its own unique, palpable power:

The brothers' low point is when they deal in 'alternative facts' (see above). Their road to *Teshuva* (repentance) by contrast, is characterised by embracing truth: towards the end of our story Joseph tells his brothers not to reveal that they are sheep farmers (one of the animals worshipped in Egypt). They tell the truth. All is well.

Early on in the story, when Joseph is in prison, we learn that the royal butler knew that Joseph's interpretation of his dream was true: "he had interpreted well". How did the butler know that? Rashbam (Rashi's grandson and a renowned scholar) answers that the butler was convinced by the truth just because it *was* the truth. The clarity and power of truth can be immense: 'The truth speaks for itself'.

Similarly, when Judah later shows deep remorse for the way the brothers had treated Joseph and confesses to him from a place of humility and truth, his moving and powerful words are met with understanding, evoke tears and constitute a catalyst for fundamental change.

Introducing Politics and Media

Over the past year, high profile domestic and international political campaigns with far-reaching global impacts, and powerful media stories across platforms from mainstream press to Twitter, have laid bare the phenomena of 'post-truth', 'alternative facts', 'fake news' and unsubstantiated but fast-moving clickbait – to name a few.

All these present the challenge of defining where truth ends and bias, spin, hype and vested interest begins.

In the case of the United States' presidential campaigns, lavish claims were made on both sides, perhaps the most quoted of which was that of the current President Donald Trump: "I will build a great, great wall on our southern border and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words."

Post-election, President Trump appeared to describe his proposed border wall as a political tool and admitted he knew Mexico would not fund it, in a January call with Mexico's president, according to a transcript of the call obtained by The Washington Post. (@jacobpramuk 3 Aug 2017 CNBC.com). Similar post-election promise reversals happen across the political spectrum and international borders.

In the UK's EU referendum campaigning, the Leave campaign was widely criticised for its battlebus slogan reading: 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead.' The Remain campaign argued that the figure was grossly misleading for not taking into account money by the UK from the EU in the form of a rebate, as well as payments made to the public sector. Equally strong criticism was directed at sloganeering issued by the Remain side.

Public relations company Bell Pottinger was this month stripped of its trade membership for stoking divisive 'racial tensions' in South Africa with a controversial and fabricated campaign designed to distract attention away from their client.

Back in Britain, a reporter for the Times defended his fostering story of a Christian child's placement within a Muslim family as being "in the public interest", while the local authority mayor criticised the 'sensationalist' claims 'not based in fact'.

Can it be justified to peddle fabrication and sacrifice truth in the service of political ends - however laudable they might sometimes be?

Is it acceptable to manipulate facts in order to strengthen or highlight a media story judged to be "in the public interest"?

These are some of the questions raised below.

Arguments from Politics and Media for the Motion

First Speaker

Economic, social and legal complexities at the heart of sophisticated political campaigns and associated media stories today often mean that the details and facts are too obscure or numerous for the average voter, reader or viewer to grasp.

It is essential therefore to simplify mandates, arguments and stories to enable the main issues to be discussed – even if that means dispensing with exact truths where necessary.

The power of the electorate can only be harnessed if it has the necessary information at its disposal – albeit simplified for mass comprehension.

Understanding primary campaign features - in the interests of protecting democracy - has to supersede achieving perfection of information. In other words, absolute truth can and must sometimes be abandoned for the greater social and political good.

Second Speaker

Previously, writing and distributing news, facts and truth – whether written or photographic – was in the hands of trained professional journalists bound by an ethical code of conduct.

But the world has moved on and today everyone with a smart phone can become a journalist via Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram within milliseconds – and equally, they themselves become the focus of the story.

With this speed of news travel it is not feasible to scrutinise all sources at length: anything posted “in the public interest” should be released at the earliest opportunity, even if the truth of the facts have not yet been verified to the highest standard.

This is essential for the national interest and a vital strategy to ensure that malevolent forces already exploiting cyberspace do not gain the upper hand with the opportunity to hijack the Web.

We must be willing to post, print and publish “in the public interest” even at the expense of authenticated truth – for the good of mankind.

Arguments from Politics and Media opposing the Motion

First Speaker

Manipulating economic, social and legal truths at the heart of political campaigns and media stories is counterproductive.

To argue that the true facts are too difficult for the average voter, reader or viewer to grasp is patronising.

By simplifying arguments, policies and stories into misleading slogans, voters and the public at large will lose faith in leaders and in the whole political machine.

If decisions are taken and votes cast on the basis of false information, further down the line "truth will out" (Launcelot, The Merchant of Venice, 1596) and electorates and readerships will feel cheated - leading to demands for replays - which are impractical, a waste of time and an erosion of the system.

Only full and frank disclosure of facts can lead to fulfilment of the greatest good.

Sacrificing truth for the sake of simplicity, in the interests of achieving a clear outcome for democracy - however cherished a value - will always be a short cut and false economy, backfiring in the long term.

Second Speaker

With a multiplicity of different languages, faiths and cultures now brought ever more closely into contact in our shrinking world, truth is the one vital language we all have in common across the globe and is essential for collaboration.

Maintaining the integrity of this shared value is especially crucial in fighting fundamentalism and terrorism, managing international conflict and addressing environmental threats. All these challenges require multi-national cooperation based on mutual trust rooted in commitment to truth.

There simply exists no greater good for which truth can or should be sacrificed: without it there is no consistent basis for anything, the rug is pulled from under our feet, forever.

Trust must not be eroded: it is an essential pre-requisite for communication and harmony and to dispense with it, even with the best of intentions in protecting the free world against radical terror, for example, is to destroy common ground for collaboration and ultimately to risk the safety of humanity into the next millennium.

Introducing Tribe Social Engagement Programmes

Tribe brings together Jewish students of school and university age to engage with different aspects of Jewish contemporary life as well as our past experiences as a people.

The photo shows Year 10 pupils in Jerusalem on Tribe's Learn2Lead scheme. The Poland trip explores Jewish history, and through our social action project, students visit Ghana and other developing countries to strengthen their sense of social responsibility.

The tours are popular, new friendships and relationships are formed. What truths, if any, about fellow participants should be sacrificed – by way of concealment or being divulged for a greater good – maybe especially when away from the anchor of home?

If a tour participant once struggled with an alcohol problem - now consigned to the past – is that a truth that should be selectively shared in the interests of their own protection and that of others? Or is it nobody else's business?

If you know that a fellow participant has recently changed schools after previously being excluded for bullying and is now set on a new course of successful resolution, should the truth be relegated to their past to safeguard their privacy? Or in the event of you seeing that person connecting with a particularly vulnerable friend of yours once a victim of bullying, should you speak out to avoid them potentially coming to harm?

Does truth need to be concealed to preserve personal confidentiality? Or can it be exposed because preservation of another's mental, psychological and physical wellbeing represents a higher value?

Must I sacrifice the truth of my views if they are critical of Israel, by covering them up outside the community so as not to bolster external anti-Israel sentiments - for the sake of solidarity? Or can solidarity be sacrificed to uphold the ultimate value of truth?

Having volunteered for IDF military service, should I hide from my mother my draft to a danger zone combat unit so as to protect her from anxiety? Or does concealing that truth deny her the opportunity to prepare mentally for and address all eventualities?

Some of these questions are addressed overleaf.



Arguments from Tribe Social Engagement Programmes for the Motion

First Speaker

When it comes to young Jews meeting and forming relationships, marrying and going on to build Jewish families and communities, a potentially difficult truth about an individual does not need to be something aired at this early stage – it should be edited.

First impressions are crucial – and early perceptions are often those that determine whether or not we'll bond with and even go on to form a life-long relationship with an individual.

To elevate truth, therefore, at this juncture, and potentially ruin a relationship in its earliest fledgling stages by introducing a piece of unfavourable information for the sake of truth and honesty is overdoing it.

It is potentially to destroy a whole life together before it even starts.

The likelihood is that once a relationship evolves, it can withstand the announcement of a past misdemeanour, a former alcohol problem in bygone years or a childhood tendency towards bullying because of difficulties at home – but announce the truth too early and you may destroy the chance of a wonderful relationship even forming.

Second Speaker

When it comes to Israel, anti-Israel bias is so widespread that to add to it even for the sake of truth is naïve and misguided. Any contribution of criticism, albeit for the sake of truth, will be seized upon and exploited; what's so terrible about keeping it to yourself or discussing it internally.

What value is there in telling a mother about the danger zone combat unit whereabouts of her child? First she'll be plagued by anxiety; second her child will be weakened and therefore possibly more vulnerable, less robust, troubled by vicarious feelings of anxiety about their mother's concern, and third the telling of that truth still leaves the mother feeling impotent about her child's whereabouts – she cannot actually do anything about it – so why tell the truth?

In some situations, truth becomes a casualty in the fight for the greater good at hand - rightly so.

Arguments from Tribe Social Engagement Programmes opposing the Motion

First Speaker

A rabbinic saying (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 55a) states that: "Truth is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He." Rashi, the renowned medieval Torah commentator explains this to mean that God is found wherever there is truth, His absence wherever there is fabrication.

"The Lord God is truth," says Jeremiah the prophet (Jeremiah 10, 10).

We are social creatures designed to meet, form friendships, marry and form families. But we are also created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God, *Imitatio Dei*. In view of the strength of the above proclamations, we too are therefore clearly duty bound to prioritise and epitomise truth.

Each time we do so, whether in a public or private setting, even if that truth initially seems to fly in the face of immediate social interests, we nonetheless perform a public *kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying of God's Name), also enhancing how our people is perceived in the world.

Truth, as the sacrosanct value so closely associated in our sources with the Divine, must come above other, lower, considerations, whether they be individuals' interests, privacy and reputations; solidarity with our national homeland; loyalty to our community; or sheltering loved ones from uncomfortable realities.

Second Speaker

Within our cherished but often fragile relationships, if truth is dispensed with, faith and trust soon begin to unravel, and take with them the very foundations of any shared dialogue and system of understanding.

People are more resilient than we think. Social engagement can withstand and recover from most infringements – except collateral damage of truth:

So:

Individuals get over the initial resentment of having a past weakness divulged to deliver necessary truthfulness, which ultimately protects rather than destroys relationships;

Israel can stand up for itself without us having to agree with it in all circumstances;

The concerned mother will welcome the truth and honesty - however unwelcome the news - reassured that she knows all there is to know, nothing is being kept from her, she can pray for a good outcome and be in possession of the true facts. She is also strengthened by the realisation that she's been treated as a strong individual, rather than molly-coddled in a misguided attempt to shield her from reality.

CONCLUDING NOTES FOR MODERATOR

Over the previous pages we have explored different approaches to the complex relationship between truth and other core values, examining whether truth can be sacrificed to any of them or whether it should be upheld unedited, always.

From Joseph we learnt about the relationship between truth telling and its potential perils; the counter-perils of deception and self-delusion; the power and transparency of pure truth; and the truth as a tool of *Teshuva* (repentance).

From Politics and Media we learnt about the relationship between truth, claims of 'public interest' and the destruction of trust.

And from Social Engagement we learnt about truth in relation to individuals in social settings, the Jewish community, the world at large and close loved ones.

In each instance we explored arguments in support of or against the motion that:

This House believes that truth can be sacrificed for the greater good.

Though different conclusions will be drawn from this debate, it would be remiss not to highlight that, in the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (Covenant and Conversation, Freedom and Truth):

In Judaism truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings.... Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning and "argument for the sake of heaven" – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things.

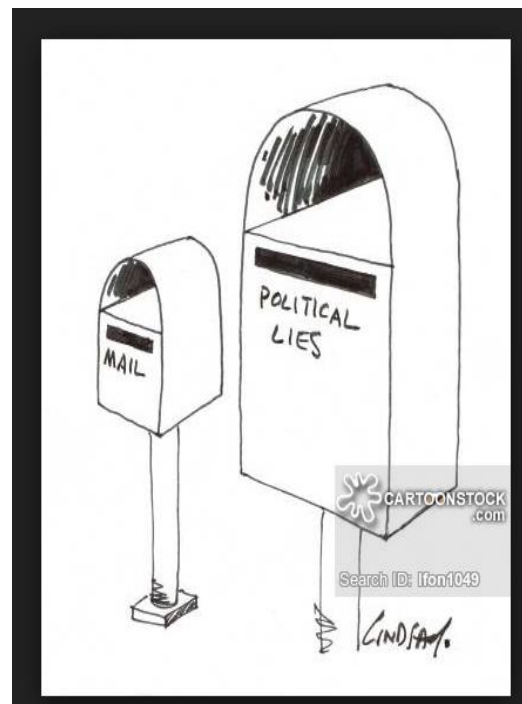
Studying and engaging with the messages of our classical Jewish sources as we've done here is a route to accessing the essence of that 'moral truthfulness' since, as explained (The Home We Build Together, Rabbi Sacks, p. 117):

"Philosophy teaches truth-as-system, the Bible teaches truth-as-story."

In conclusion, as Rabbi Sacks reminds us (Covenant and Conversation, Freedom and Truth):

Every Amidah prayer ends with the words, "My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech."

Some useful images...



The hardest thing about any political campaign is how to win without proving that you are unworthy of winning.

(Adlai Stevenson)

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