

Alternative Facts
Yom Kippur 2017/5778
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I have been doing what I do for a long time. And over the years beginning in late August, people start asking me what I plan to talk about on the High Holy Days. I usually give the same glib answer, “Oh, I’ll be talking about...fifteen minutes.”

Some well-meaning congregants, intending to be helpful even offer suggestions, and truthfully given the state of affairs, this *has* been a year rich with possibilities: a notable increase in political theater; there have been significant changes in policy and politics, and we have experienced a tectonic shift in the way we communicate.

One of the biggest changes is the spirit and tone of rhetoric coming from Washington. In fact, this year we have even added a new phrase to our American lexicon: my favorite new expression: *alternative facts*.

You may remember its origin. The weekend after the inauguration, Kelly Anne Conway, Counselor to the president, defended then press secretary Sean Spicer’s easily disproven exaggeration of the number of people who attended the ceremonies. Ms. Conway confidently supported Mr. Spicer and the president, claiming the press-secretary had in fact been truthful; his account was simply a statement of “*alternative facts*.”

The expression sounds slightly Orwellian. In fact, sales of George Orwell’s dystopian novel, *1984* rose by nine thousand percent in the days after Ms. Conway’s interview. In this classic that most of us read in High School, Orwell describes how the government invented facts to control the people. War is peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength.

This Yom Kippur I decided to share with you my own list of this year’s **alternative facts**. Here are just a few:

Temple dues are down, Friday night attendance is up.

Weight Watchers announced they are doubling the number of points you’re allowed to consume each day.

North Andover Country Club announced it is going Kosher.

Le Chen will now be broadcasting our “live streamed” Friday night Shabbat services on the big screen over the bar.

Following the increasingly bitter exchanges between the president and Kim Jung-un, it was reported that in an attempt to thaw relations, President Trump is sending over his personal barber. “The man would be less belligerent if he had a better haircut,” the president tweeted.

Joe Friday, in the famous 1960s police drama, “Dragnet,” later made into a 1980’s film, was best known for his restrained, slightly annoyed directive when questioning a witness to a crime, “All we want are the facts, ma’am.”

There is no holiday on the Jewish calendar that is more authentic, more based on verifiable proof than Yom Kippur. In fact, the rabbis point out an interesting word play between our boisterous late-winter celebration of Purim, and ***Yom haki-PURRIM.***

Purim, which some describe as a Jewish Halloween is when we put masks on.

Yom Kippur is when we take the masks off.

It is the one day a year when free from the distractions of work and school, we abandon our routines, climb off the treadmill we call life, peel away the pretense, and exposed and vulnerable, stare face to face with the undeniable and irrefutable facts of our lives.

Today I would like to discuss three facts of life...not the kind that fly and sting, the birds and the bees, I trust most of you are ok in that department. I want to talk about three truths that are certain and unassailable.

In their book, “*A General Theory of Love...*” three University of California professors of psychiatry wrote: “From birth to death, love is not just the focus of human experience but also the life force of the mind, determining our moods, stabilizing our bodily rhythms, and changing the structure of our brains. Love makes us who we are, and who we can become.”

Human beings need love, that’s a fact, and it is also an irrefutable fact of life that the way we love is sometimes imperfect.

One of the most beautiful love stories in the Bible is between Isaac and his twin sons Esau and Jacob. Esau because of birth order was destined to inherit the birthright, but Jacob his twin brother ultimately received the mantle of leadership, the result of some rather devious trickery. You probably remember how Esau sold his right of inheritance for a pot of stew.

Jacob is portrayed as the more gifted of the twins. In fact, through the centuries, the rabbis embellished his qualities. Uncomfortable with the unsavory manner in which he won his father's blessing, the sages invented virtues that while not exactly in the text, reflect traits most parents would want in their children. Jacob is studious, sober, and measured, the rabbis claimed. Esau on the other hand is a hunter, impetuous and impulsive, brash and confident.

The truth is, Isaac their father was far more like his son Jacob, but as is often the case in many families, he envied the qualities in Esau—traits that he would have liked to have had himself. Isaac loved his son Esau deeply. His affection was unconditional, his pride boundless. He was not ashamed of the son who did not quite fit the mold of our patriarchs.

Though Abraham, Isaac's own father, and the twins' grandfather, was willing to offer him as a sacrifice to God—we read the story on Rosh Hashanah—Isaac would not make the same mistake with his sons. He would never withhold his love, nor hesitate to express his affection, and in fact though Esau did not receive the birthright, Esau never doubted that his father loved him unconditionally.

Isaac accepted both of his sons, twins, but different as the day is to the night. His love was deep, pure, and enduring. Though the sons had a relationship with each other that was at times strained, they were not consumed by hate. And in a beautiful scene many years later, the two brothers stood together at their father Isaac's grave, bound by blood, joined by a deep love that could never be shattered.

We all need love; a parent and a child, our partners, our siblings. It doesn't need to be perfect, and because we are human beings, it is never going to be, and that's ok.

To paraphrase a prayer so beautifully written in *Mishkan ha Lev* :

“You shall love the ones who are close with all your heart: love them when they struggle, when they sadden and disappoint you; love them when they fail. See the good within them, even when they can't. Love them when they give you joy, and love

them when they don't. Praise them for their deeds. Open the gates of your heart, the doorway of your soul — and let them know you. So shall the ones you cherish feel your love, your presence, and your care.”

Second undeniable, irrefutable fact of life: For love to succeed you've got to show up, pay attention and be present.

Have you seen the most recent Xfinity commercial on TV? It shows a typical American family sitting around the dinner table. Quite contemporary: the father and two kids each with their heads down, their eyes firmly affixed to their I-Phones, their fingers flying over the keys. The mother walks into the dining room, sees everyone completely distracted, she clicks some app on her phone, jams the internet and suddenly they all look up and realize they might actually have to talk to each other.

Marianne Jacobbi in a “Connections Essay” in the Boston Globe Magazine last November, lamented how for her “the golden days of parenting ended when [she] was replaced by Google and Wikipedia. “It happened gradually,” she writes, “like your hair going gray or your child falling in love and subtly shifting family allegiances.”

“I used to cherish those out-of-the-blue calls from my kids, which came day or night. ‘Mom, how do you get gum off of jeans? Do I have to wear black to a wake?’ And then I remember standing in my daughter’s kitchen not long ago as she was frantically Googling ‘how to get rid of fruit flies.’ I was invisible. Do you ask people for directions or is Waze your only compass? I savor those human connections; that’s the connection I miss that the Web has stolen from me.” Those moments fleeting and over so quickly are now gone forever.

Love needs nourishment in the form of our attention, our watchfulness, our presence.

And that leads to the third and perhaps most significant undeniable fact of life. As the prophet Isaiah declared:

A voice says: Cry out!
And I say: What shall I cry?
All flesh is grass, its goodness like the flowers in the field.
But grass withers, and flowers fade, when from Beyond, the wind blows.
We are grass.
We wither, and life, like flowers fades...

Life is not endless. It is finite, and therefore we must live fully, with meaning and purpose.

Last Chanukah, writer Elicia Brown penned a beautiful essay about her family's ritual of lighting the *menorah*, particularly during the darkest days of winter.

"It is the 'witching hour,' around 4:30pm," she writes, "when darkness descends swiftly on the streets of New York. My son Joel, now 12, full of good cheer, keeps a steady bounce in his step... 'The Chanukah lights will be coming on soon.'"

She continues, "For a parent it's a sweet moment. My adolescent boy, prone to irony still delights in the simplest pleasures of the world...and we share the same feeling about Chanukah that it punctuates and brightens what would otherwise be December's darkest, shortest days. For a cancer patient like me," she writes, "the moment means even more. If there's any blessing to sickness, it's the greater awareness one brings to the bright moments in life, which can be as mundane as listening to the sound of wind whistling through a tree's bare branches or as profound as witnessing your daughter's graduation from middle school."

"I have a deeper appreciation of the present moment and a stronger grasp of how one's world can flip upside down without warning...while I plod through the darkness of sickness I am still illuminated by the expected and unexpected marvels of everyday...I am still bogged down by irritations and insecurities, but I also celebrate. I rejoice over the thought of wrapping myself in the warmth of family and friends, and so I celebrate the many small graces of life which loom larger and brighter every day."

Elicia Brown died in late summer. She is survived by her husband and two children...and she leaves behind a message with a special urgency—for all of us. Life is more than a thread of mundane inconspicuous experiences strung together by highpoints of drama. Our lives, whether we recognize it or not are finite, but our days are also filled with countless ordinary miracles, which so often pass us by misunderstood, unrecognized and unappreciated. That is a fact, undeniable and true.

And so it is: We cannot live without love, and love no matter how imperfect or challenging, cannot be neglected, it needs to be nourished by our presence, our sincerity, our attention. And because we know that life is finite, we must open our eyes to the miracles, grand and ordinary, that surround us every day.

As Senator John McCain one of our nation's greatest heroes, when asked about his fears as his disease begins its relentless progression admitted, "Yes, I sometimes have feelings of fear about what will happen...I am mostly grateful for having lived a good life." And then he concluded with this bit of simple wisdom, "It's not that you're leaving, it's that you stayed."

We cannot know what the next days and months will bring, what tests and trials may find their way into our lives. Life does not come with guarantees.

But of these facts I am certain: without love, however we may define it, life would be empty, colorless.

If we are not present for those we love, life would be hollow, aimless, without purpose. And if we squander our days, misuse the blessing of life itself, then our presence today will have been for naught and all of our prayers will have fallen on deaf ears.

On this day of days we come here to seek wholeness and harmony. May we find the will to shape our lives into something that is authentic and enduring, filled with meaning and love? May we find redemption from the wilderness of sorrow? And may we be delivered—on angels' wings—to an oasis of hope, happiness and peace.

Amen

Could there be any more meaningful way to honor those whose memories we turn to now?