

Temple Beth Zion, Brookline, MA

<http://www.tbzbrookline.org/prayer/high.php?id=5584&page=5584>

Miriam Margles, "Handling the Truth"

Miriam Margles assisted Reb Moshe in leading our 2005/5766 High Holy Days services. In her final year of rabbinic training at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Miriam integrated Jewish learning and creative exploration in music, writing and movement.

I don't know how many of you saw or remember the movie *A Few Good Men*, but it's a movie about extreme hazing in the military, to weed out the weak or make them strong, and in this particular case, hazing results in the death of a soldier. Behind the incident lies a world of abuse, power, and violence. Tom Cruise plays a lawyer, digging to get to the truth and Jack Nicholson is the commanding military figure of the unit, surrounded in secrecy. Nicholson is on the stand being cross-examined by Cruise, who badgers him, firing question after question at him, trying to get him to break, to speak what really happened, to reveal the truth. Finally the drama reaches its climax when Nicholson, with frothing mouth and crazed eyes, he finally yells out — "You can't handle the truth!"

Today we stand in a very different courtroom, under very different circumstances, but the interrogation is underway and the question is the same — can we handle the truth? And once we confront it, what do we do with it?

An allegory in *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* seems very clear that human beings can't handle the truth. In this allegory, God is about to create human beings and the ministering angels start to argue as to whether or not it's a good idea, some of them saying, "Let them be created," while others urged, "Do not create them."

Then, Chesed/Love stands up and says, "Let them be created, because they will do acts of *chesed/love*." Then Truth stands up and says, "Let them not be created because they will all be full of falsehood." Then Righteousness says, "Let them be created because they will do acts of righteousness/*tzedaka*." And finally Peace says, "Let them not be created, because they will be all strife."

What did the Holy One do? God took hold of Truth and threw it to the ground. The ministering angels dared to say to the Holy One, "Master of the Universe, why do you humiliate your seal? Let truth rise up from the earth." While the ministering angels continued to argue, the Holy One said, "What are you arguing about? The human being is already made."

The *midrash* seems clear that human beings can only come into existence if Truth is rendered largely powerless. Human beings will be able to act kindly and do righteous deed, but if truth is the yardstick and measure of human worth, human beings won't last very long. Better that Truth itself be compromised, God seems to be saying with that divine wrestling move, than that human existence be forfeited.

In a few moments, Reb Moshe will chant the *U'netaneh tokef* prayer. This prayer, its themes and images, are a microcosm of our entire day. I want to look closely at it, at one part of it in particular — God's seat. God does a lot of sitting in different chairs on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur — Earlier, today we announced God as "*hamelekh yoshev al kiseh ram venisah* — The KING seated upon a lofty and elevated throne. Here, in *U'netaneh tokef*, we have "*V'yechon b'chesed kisecha, v'teshev alav b'emet*. God sets the divine seat in *chesed* — compassion or lovingkindness, and sits upon it in *emet*, in truth.

Here sits the Judge, that most central image used for God on Yom Kippur, as each of us passes before God's discerning gaze — The Lofty One knows exactly who has been naughty and who has

been nice. The forgotten things are remembered by God, and the hidden things are seen by God. *Unetaneh tokef* opens the Book of Remembrances, *sefer hazichronot*, filled with all our deeds and thoughts. God knows, witnesses, writes, passes the verdict and seals it. The Divine Judge knows the full truth.

As we sit uncomfortably in the presence of this anthropomorphic, Big Brother sort of image, at the very same time, the prayer holds the book open for us, and guess what? Perhaps the hardest moment of all—we see “*hotam yad kol adam bo*” — it is all written in our own handwriting. Not some heavenly Father, but you yourself stand as your own damning attorney. And the truth of your life is exposed, splayed across its metaphorical pages.

I had a creative writing teacher once who said that ultimately, whether writing fiction or non-fiction, poetry or sci-fi — good writing entails telling the truth to yourself about yourself. On Yom Kippur, we read the Book of Remembrances written on the palms of our hands, written in the recesses of our minds and the caverns of our hearts, written across the faces of people in our lives, written upon the earth we inhabit, and we tell the truth about ourselves to ourselves.

How do we go about confronting the truth? We do so most explicitly, through the *vidui*, the confession of collective sins—tapping our hearts with each *al chet* and with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from *ashamnu* to *titanu*.

What I find fascinating is that at the moment of truth, at the moment of truth-telling, when it is time to look nakedly, honestly into our hearts, to acknowledge the specific ways that each of us have wronged, have distanced ourselves from God, from compassion, ways we have done anything less than running full force toward the good, that we are *not* called upon to each stand up and declare our individual and specific transgressions. We recite a formula and we speak in the plural — *we* have lied, *we* have been stiff-necked. When our Yom Kippur liturgy was being formulated, there was debate among the rabbis over exactly this question — should confession be individual or collective? Should we itemizing our specific wrongs or recite the same formula. It's a spiritual accountant's question — should we itemize or not.

Tradition has come down on the side of a formula. We all declare the same sins, regardless of how we have acted this year. It's an interesting choice that is both protective and more demanding. In a public confession, we are being protected from the shame that so often keeps our wrongs hidden. And we need help telling the truth, the whole truth. Here we all speak the same words, but they will strike each of us differently, those shared words will resonate into particular moments of our lives. As we tap our individual hearts, we tap our hearts awake, knocking at the protective walls of shame and defensiveness, that we are so good at building, until the walls fall down. Yes, *we* have wronged.

The collective *vidui* is also more demanding of each of us in lifting the veil off of denial. There are certain things that I have done that I am really good at feeling bad about. When we confess on our own, there are the things that we are more ready to admit, things that we are more conscious of, but when we are given a list and we speak these things together and in the plural, the question has to arise — not simply have I done this one or that one, but *how have I* participated in this sin, these wrongs, whether by commission or omission. This requires that the circles of responsibility stretch wide. You cannot drill a hole in your side of the boat and not have it affect others, and you cannot stand by and watch things being done around you, on your behalf, in your name and remain silent without being culpable. This is a difficult truth to swallow and so challenging to live by. But here is our liturgy and our imagery pushing to keep us honest.

So, can we handle the truth? It is uncomfortable and certainly not easy, but can we handle it? And more importantly, is it worthwhile?

In contrast to the *midrash*, the framework of Yom Kippur answers, yes. Yes we can handle it. Yes

it is worthwhile, worth our very lives to confront it, because God does not sit in cold and stern truth. Rather, God sits in truth upon the seat of compassion, mercy, love. Truth is not the highest value. It's a value, certainly. But it is a means to even higher ends. Yom Kippur is not an earthly courtroom where the truth is sought out, truth beyond the shadow of a doubt, in order to convict. In our spiritual lives, in the religious universe, the truth opens into compassion.

A tale is told of a man who desperately wanted to love and be loved. For years he yearned for friends and lovers to share his life with him. The problem was that he was that he knew he was very ugly. In fact he thought he may very well be the ugliest man in the world. One day he felt so utterly despairing that he wanted to die. He had heard about a wise healer who lived in the woods and thought that maybe, just maybe she would be able to help him. He journeyed to her small cabin, some three days' hike, and knocked on the door. She opened the door and greeted him warmly. She didn't even flinch at his hideous appearance. He explained to her his yearning and asked if she might be able to make him less ugly.

Ugly? She said. What's ugly about you? Hunched and ashamed, he rolled up his sleeve an inch and exposed a festering wound and then quickly covered it up. The healer looked at it and said "Yaaaaay. Show me again." The man lifted his sleeve, a little higher, revealing several wounds. Yaaaaay. She said. What else?" He looked at her, a little uncertain, and pulled back his cheek, revealing a gaping hole, surrounded by rotting teeth. "Yaaaaay! She exclaimed. Show me again how ugly it is." He pulled back his cheek again. And again she cried out, Yaaay! Is that the ugliest you've got?"

He looked into her eyes, took a deep breath, unzipped his chest and opened his ribs, revealing a swirling dark mass. The healer kissed her fingers and reached in to touch it. In an instant, the man's spine grew long, his skin turned to light and he walked out into the woods, out into love.

This, to me, is the image of "*Adonay adonay el rachum ve'chanun*" — God who is compassionate, tender, patient, and "*rav chesed v'emet*," full of lovingkindness and truth. Love and truth are not opposites here. They are doorways into one another. *Chesed* by definition is unilateral, unconditional and undeserved, yet truth-telling makes us worthy of that love, enables us to meet that profound generosity and receive it. And the experience of *chesed*, wide, non-judgmental, all-embracing love enables us to be fully truthful.

In fact, during Kol Nidrei, just as we begin this 25 hour period of fasting and confessing, before we've really begun to dig into the dark muck of our lives we read — *Vayomer Adonai Salachti kid'varekha* — and God said, I have forgiven you as you asked. Before we've fully repented, God throws open loving arms and says, I forgive you. Now, repent. Now, come clean, and draw close. How much easier it is to be fully honest, to handle the truth, when from the very outset you know that the one who sees you and loves you, forgives you. Earthly courtrooms are punitive. The divine seat of truth and love is redemptive.

Our question for this moment is can we touch the truth with compassion and love? Can this act enable us to respond fully to who we are? Can it free us to become more fully the person the world is waiting for us to become? And of equal urgency, and I do believe that it is urgent, is our question for tomorrow, for our regular lives--can we do this for others? Can we ourselves sit upon that divine throne of truth and love, *chesed v'emet*? Can we listen with profound kindness, listen to people we disagree with, to people who have difficult truths to share about themselves, about their experiences, especially people we might otherwise push away—touching truth across lines of race, gender, class and religion? Can we witness these truths and embrace them in a way that makes us all visible, beautiful, for all our full and complex humanity? Yes, we can.

Ken yehi ratzon, may it be so.