

## The Year of Truth or Consequences Kol Nidre Taos 2023

There is an old joke by Woody Allen ( a Jew currently in disrepute) that says:  
“The earth is at a crossroads. On one hand there is global starvation, endless plague and war. On the other, we face existential annihilation. I hope we make the right decision.

Many have called 2023, or 5783, the Year of Consequences. For fifty years we have been warned about irrevocable damage of carbon emissions and the inevitable consequences of climate change. The warning became so much background noise as we sanctimoniously recycled some plastic and perhaps ate organic vegetables if the price differential wasn't too great. Then came July and August 2023, the two hottest months on record for planet earth.

Even here in Northern New Mexico, we saw three weeks of sweltering temperatures reaching well over 100 degrees. The rest of the country was in much worse shape. Arizona and Texas sustained temperatures of nearly 120 degrees for weeks, and America was not alone. The secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Gutierrez called 2023 the year that we transitioned from Global Warming to Global Boiling. And now, we know that these temperatures are pretty much baked in, even if we can finally begin to address the crisis. On this Yom Kippur, we know that not only our lives, but the life of the planet hangs in balance. There is no option but global teshuva, an admission of our mistakes and a commitment to change, with deep apologies to the generations to come.

We heard the warnings, but we did not listen.

It turns out that the warnings have been issued repeatedly since biblical times, but we are hard of hearing. *Sheket! Silence! Listen Up!* Moses proclaims to the gathered Israelites, just as they are about to end their forty year journey and enter the promised land. “Listen to the Lord your God and observe His commandments and His laws which I enjoin upon you today.”

Already, I'm not listening. I hate being told what to do. This is probably something about not ripping toilet paper on shabbat. But no, God has foreseen the stress that His people will put on the land and each other, and even *before* the Israelites enter their new home. Every seven years, the Israelites are commanded to let the land lie fallow, allowing the poor to come and glean, but planting no crops so the land may regain its strength. Now, three millennia later, climate scientists speak of “regenerative agriculture” planting grass and trees that renew the soil, bringing rain and lowering temperatures as carbon is stored back into the earth. Or, to avoid a

permanent underclass plagued by injustice, debts were to be forgiven every seven years. Tell that to the millions with student loans. “You shall not subvert the rights of the widow, the orphan and the stranger” is the most repeated line in Torah. We should have been listening.

And if we don't listen? The sign that I see on New Mexico's highways-CAUTION, DAMAGED GUARDRAILS flashes before my eyes. Moses is very clear about the consequences of damaged guardrails:

If you will listen to the Lord Your God to observe faithfully that which I enjoin you this day,

Blessed shall you be in the city and the country.

Blessed shall be the issue of your womb, the produce of your soil

Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

Blessed shall be your comings, and blessed shall be your goings.

But if you do not listen...

It is a Jewish tradition to read the curses listen in the torah portion of Ki Tavo in a whisper. I usually just skip it-these dire warnings have always seemed a great exaggeration, over the top. But this year, as I read the section from Deuteronomy, I was stunned by how closely the curses, the result of not following God's clear guidance, parallel our times:

*The Lord will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises that you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out. The Lord will make pestilence cling to you..strike you with consumption and fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, they shall hound you until you perish. The skies above your head shall be cooper, and the earth under your feet iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out. (Deuteronomy 28: 20-24) The Lord will give you an anguished heart and eyes that pine, and a despondent spirit. In the morning you shall say” If only it were evening, and in the evening you shall say ”If only it were morning, because of what your heart shall dread and your eyes shall see”(ibid 28:65-67)*

Welcome to the evening news.

I reach for the remote, and “My heart dreads what my eye can not see”. Half the island of Maui underwater? That was only a warmup. A 6.8 earthquake in Morocco

that destroyed the ancient medina of Marrakesh and left thousands without shelter? That disaster pales beside the images of the entire city of Derna, where up to ten thousand people are swept out to sea when two dams break in a torrential storm because corrupt Libyan officials ignored the warnings. Calamity, panic, frustration- and it's only the middle of September! Of course, on my PBS station there is the "softer" news- mass starvation in Afghanistan as international agencies withdraw aid, endless carnage in Ukraine, water temperatures of the Florida Keys reaching 101degrees and floating islands of plastic garbage chocking innocent seals.

But even as I lay sweating on the living room couch last July, the ambient temperature in the room reading 90 degrees (because hey, who needs air conditioning in Northern New Mexico ),I still did not internalize the perils of this current moment. It took a Sunday morning news program with Fareed Zakaria about advances in AI to bring me to my knees. Geoffrey Hinton and Eric Schmit, two former CEO's of Google , had come with a warning: Artificial intelligence was already smarter than the human brain. I had paid little attention to the kerfuffle over CHATBOT and its ability to pass the bar exam. I smiled at the thought that CHATBOT could actually write this sermon. It all seemed amusing and fun. But now, these experts were telling us that computers can communicate with each other throughout the world instantaneously, and have the power to affect our biological systems, our medical systems and even our military operations making decisions *without human guidance once the systems have been launched.* Geoffrey Hinton, who has been regarded as the Godfather of AI, was clear: This could lead to the extinction of all humanity. In his view, human beings can reverse climate change, we just need the commitment worldwide to do so. But without a "Ten Commandments of AI", without "Moral Guardrails" embedded into artificial intelligence, we have unleashed a power that is beyond human control.

Hinton had come to tell us the truth: that despite the potential of AI to usher in a new era of medical breakthroughs and personal comfort, much like nuclear energy it now has the power to destroy us all. It is not only amoral, but now can self - correct and problem solve faster than the human brain. If the drones in Ukraine, for example, are programmed to make decisions to kill indiscriminately, that knowledge can be shared throughout the world's computer systems instantaneously, one "bad actor" or a computer glitch can bring disaster that humans cannot restrain.

I could not help but think of the parallel to Robert Oppenheimer and the development of the atomic bomb. Oppenheimer, as we were reminded in a movie

this summer, was completely obsessed with the scientific development of atomic energy, but at the same time was well aware of its potential to destroy human life. Perhaps through political pressure, perhaps through personal pride, he did nothing to contain the potential of atomic power, and very little to warn the rest of the warring world of the danger faced by releasing an energy that in the wrong hands could literally bring about the destruction of the world. Only when Hiroshima and Nagasaki lay in ruins did he share his tortured misgivings, his Jewish guilt.

Unlike atomic energy, AI was not originally developed as a weapon of war but is the outgrowth of a centuries- long trajectory of human beings seeking machines, to do humanity's drudge work. Remember how excited we were about the robot that could clean your floors? The Jews are no strangers to the ideal of a robot that can both defend and clean up. It's called THE GOLEM.

In the Middle Ages, the great Hebrew poet Solomon ibn Gabirol was said to have created a female golem to help with household chores. There is a tradition that in the in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Eliyahu of Chelm "made a creature out of matter, a golem, and it performed hard work for him". The story most familiar to us however, is the story of the golem created Rabbi Loew, also known as The Maharal of Prague.

The situation of the Jews in Prague in 1574 was desperate. Jews were being accused of killing of innocent Christian children and draining their blood to make matzah for Passover-a conspiracy theory of its time bearing absolutely no resemblance to the truth. The Jews were under constant attack and could not defend themselves. According to the legend, Rabbi Loew therefore decided to create a hero with superhuman strength to hold back the rampage. He turned to the Sefer Yetzirah, an ancient Kabbalistic text, to decipher the secrets of creation. It is said that following the book's instructions, he fasted and meditated for many nights, combining the letters of God's name, until the correct combination revealed itself. Writing the combination on a scrap of parchment, he crept out to the Vltava River by night, and gathered seven buckets of mud. Circling the mud pile seven times, he called for his assistants, and together, they fashioned a huge figure of clay-an ADOBE GOLEM. The Rabbi then etched the letters Aleph, Mem, Tav-which spells truth, on the clay figure's chest-or some say his forehead. "Save the Jews" Rabbi Loew ordered as he placed the paper containing God's name into the dormant adobe hulk. Slowly, the clay figure rose to its full ten foot height and lumbered out into the night air. The Jews of Prague now had a protector, a superman devoted to their defense. It was the ultimate Jewish fantasy.

The golem summoned by Rabbi Loew was more powerful than twenty men but had no intelligence of his own. Unlike God, who creates Adam from clay as a “speaking spirit”, with the ability to choose between right and wrong, the creature fashioned by Rabbi Loew lacked not only speech but any power of reasoning. He dressed the golem in peasant clothing, passing him off as a very large deaf mute named Yussele. During the day Yussele sat quietly in the corner of the shul, an odd figure who remained immobile unless ordered by the rabbi to lift heavy objects or clean floors, but at night, he became the Jewish Superman, tossing marauding peasants back over the ghetto walls, and saving Jewish girls from roving bands of drunken youth.

But-beware of a man- made servant without moral reasoning, whose strength may exceed human restraint. In some versions of the story, the golem became a wild man, destroying everything in his wake. In others, he fell in love with the rabbi’s daughter, and smashed everything around him when he could not gain her affections. After a rampage that almost destroyed the ghetto, the Rabbi knew that he needed to return the golem to dust. Aleph-Mem-Tav, the letters he had engraved on the golem’s forehead spell EMET- TRUTH. The Rabbi removed the Aleph, leaving only the Mem and the Tav- the Hebrew word for Dead. Instantly, the golem returned to clay.

Beware of a man- made servant without moral reasoning whose strength may exceed human restraint. In our age, we see that the creation of artificial intelligence without moral reasoning has led not to the death of the robot, but to the death of truth. The aleph has been removed from the robot that was meant to serve us, but instead of returning to a tangle of chips and wires, the unleashed artificial intelligence has led to the death of *emet*, of truth itself.

A tsunami of “Fake News” is spewed out over the internet daily with terrifying speed. Lies are compounded through the artificial echo chamber. Attempts to verify fake news are futile, as the computer just feeds itself and rolls on. If last year was called the Year of Consequences, this year is the Year of Truth or Consequences.

It appears that truth has completely vanished from the American political arena. The truth of 62 court decisions concerning the lack of voter fraud in the 2020 election have done nothing to convince the majority of the Republican party that Joe Biden won the presidential election. On the contrary, fueled by an indefatigable AI, the lie that the election was stolen continues to reinforce itself

throughout the internet. “Do not believe what your eyes can see” appears to be the mantra. A democracy without TRUTH, crumbles.

The same is true for the State of Israel. To their credit, over 100,000 citizens have protested weekly the attempt of Netanyahu’s ultra-right wing government to dismantle the Israeli judicial system. In this case, it is not AI and the media as much as a denial of reality that could lead to the demise of the Jewish state. The majority of Israeli protesters took to the streets to defend the courts, but not the Arab population, whose only protection is the Supreme Court. But the excesses of the settlers, as well as attempted repression of the protesters, has led many to see a truth that is rarely voiced aloud. The West Bank has been under occupation for 54 years, and Israel has become an Apartheid state. That is the truth, and no amount of social media spin can undo that reality.

Denial and the death of truth go hand in hand. Fueled by social media and the AI engine, Holocaust denial is alive and well. Antisemitism has seen a surge in these last years, exacerbated by the media bots. This has led to an increase in antisemitic incidents as once again, lies motivate violence against the Jews. The blood libel conspiracy of Prague reinvents itself- “Jews own all the media and want to take over the world” – but this time the Golem runs loose, and is not on our side.

Yom Kippur is all about the truth. The Aleph of Adonai, of Echad, of the One, must be returned to its place, or we are dead. This is the night that we must tell the truth to ourselves. We ask for mercy. We ask for forgiveness. We ask to be restored to our highest selves, in truth.

Now is the moment for Global Teshuva, of repentance for an entire planet gone astray. On this night of Kol Nidre, we acknowledge that as failing stewards of our planet, we must do everything in our power to reverse the consequences of our denial, our lies and our inaction. This is the moment for truth.

When Moses is about to bid farewell to the gathered Israelites ready to cross into their promised land, he encourages them to make a choice:

*When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you, and you take them to heart ... Then the Lord your God will open up your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, in order that you may live. (Deut. 30:1-6)* Loving God, means loving the

amazing earth that we have been faulty stewards of, and loving our fellow human beings, taking care for their survival before it is too late.

*“Surely, Moses continues, this instruction which I enjoin on you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heaven, that you should say “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us, and impart it to us, that we may observe it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and impart it to us, that we may observe it? No, the thing is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart . (Deut 30: 11-14)*

In other words, you know the answers already. Don't let the truth be concealed by lies and fake news. Do not lie to yourself but rather face the task in front of you. The Time of Truth or Consequences has arrived.

And then, Moses concludes before turning and facing the mountain of his death:

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you and your offspring may live.*

U'VACHARTA B'CHAIM- CHOOSE LIFE.

May we all be inscribed, in truth, for another year in the Book of Life.

