

**Rabbi Deborah A. Hirsch**  
**Trust and Truth**  
***Rosh HaShanah Morning 5777***

Abraham should have reeled with confusion, sadness, anger and fear when God commanded him, *“Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you.”* After all, Abraham was 137 years old when he set out on that perilous journey. Sixty-two years prior, God promised Abraham that he would become a mighty nation—his descendants—like the sands of the sea. Though 37 years old, Isaac was not married. If Abraham fulfilled God’s ludicrous call—God’s earlier promise to Abraham would have been a lie...Abraham would have been committing legacy suicide—he would have sacrificed his family’s future—the Jewish people’s future, after only two generations. What was God thinking? We know from the first verse of the text, that God decided to test Abraham’s faith. *Midrash* provides the needed commentary—God’s prosecuting attorney, Satan, goads God into submitting Abraham to an unimaginable ordeal just to test the limits of Abraham’s faith—to determine the extent of Abraham’s unflappable trust. Abraham, who argued unflinchingly with God, to save the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—how could the same Abraham

dutifully fulfill God's outrageous request without one word of protest?

Jewish tradition applauds Abraham's unyielding trust and faith in God. And what of Isaac? When Abraham began to bind his precious son to the wood, Isaac could easily have physically overcome his frail 137-year-old father and dashed down the mountain, fast-track-it back to the refuge of his mother's tent. Perhaps the answer rests in the fact that following their time atop Mount Moria, Abraham and Isaac never speak again. And poor Sarah—who knew nothing—who according to one *Midrash*, upon realizing what Abraham had set out to do, died of heartbreaking pain and profound sadness—her trust in Abraham —shattered—her life, devoid of meaning.

On this first day of the New Year 5777—as we recalibrate our souls—as we strive to turn course and begin anew, as we take stock of that which we hold most precious—let us examine our own levels of trust—how we, like Abraham, have been tested—how our trust engines have stalled-out, as we are tested repeatedly to discern fact from fiction, to decipher truth, and to trust the words and actions of those in authority, to struggle with our exasperation when those whom we admire betray our trust.

Trust is defined as, the 'firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something' is indeed the cornerstone of human

relationships. Without it, we teeter in a state of imbalance. From the moment we are born we begin to hone our trust cravings. An infant, before she learns to speak, begins to develop trust in a parent. According to psychologist Erik Ericson, “the trust versus mistrust stage is the most important period in a person’s life.” An infant must learn to trust that his parent will be there to offer comfort and ensure that his needs are met. University of Minnesota psychology professor, Jeffrey A. Simpson, wrote: “Trust involves the juxtaposition of people’s loftiest hopes and aspirations with their deepest worries and fears.” Let me share a small secret-- I hate to fly—I’m scared to fly--and yet I have Million Miler status on American Airlines—having crisscrossed this country and beyond numerous times. Despite my fear—my apprehension every time hear, ‘buckle your seat belt’- - I have enough trust that the pilot and crew are trained, the ground team is competent, and that I will arrive safely at my destination. My trust keeps my fear in check. My trust, coupled with the desired outcome of the trip, trumps, my apprehension.

There is a strong link between the trust we develop and the truth we are told. My trust in an airline nose-dives when airline spokespersons cover-up, and lie about the plane’s maintenance records or captain’s

health. Or, when government officials insisted that the air near Ground Zero was safe to breathe, or toxic water is not contaminated, or new new nutritional finding that counters previous assured facts—caffeine, chocolate, pasta, eggs, sugar or red meat—in favor one decade and out of favor the next—just to mention a few. For those of us who have grown up in relatively stable homes, where parents did meet our most primary needs... we often experience truth and trust thrust into a mid-air collision course. And too often, like Abraham, we remain silent and accept the revolving door of fact vs. fiction often, without a word of protest.

Each of us here knows our feelings of disappointment and rage when those whom we admired, even loved, betrayed our trust. Marriages that ended...friendships dissolved...parents and children estranged from one another due to lack of trust. If lucky, and after much soul-searching, hard work and truth telling, some, just a fraction of those ruptured relationships are restored—healed. Perhaps, those bonds will never be the same, but individuals can grow from hardship and emotional setbacks—often with therapeutic assistance. Trust can be rebuilt; but it is often a slow and arduous path. I have no doubt many sitting in this sanctuary will agree.

It is difficult to enter these High Holy Days without two external forces weighing heavily on many: Major League Baseball Post-Season and the National Elections just over a month away. As a devout Cub Fan—I will see how my trust and faith are tested in the weeks ahead...the same I am sure goes for Mets fans here today.

There used to be a time when sports heroes unequivocally, were admired—trusted by youth and adults alike. Today, we too often are disappointed by one-time heroes: Pete Rose, Daryl Strawberry, A-Rod, Lance Armstrong and Barry Bonds—and then there are those whose actions and lies caused irreparable damage: Oscar Pistorius, Joe Peterno, Aaron Hernandez. It's no wonder New Yorkers were so emotional when Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera retired—we actually got to applaud—*kvell* over two sports heroes—with untainted records--role models that didn't disappoint. The same can be said of golf legend, Arnold Palmer, who died this past week.

Sports figures are not the only ones who let us down. If one Googled the 10 least trusted jobs—one survey lists separately as three of the top 10 spots--senators, congressman and governors. Why am I not shocked!

In a November 2015 Pew Study, only 19% of those polled said that they can trust the government, always or most of the time—the lowest number in 50 years. 55% stated that ‘ordinary Americans’ would do a better job of solving national problems. Sadly, no surprise, 74% believed that politicians put their own interests before that of the country. April 24 of this year, 60 Minutes ran an interview with Florida Representative David Jolly who exposed his Party’s requirement of members of Congress to raise their own campaign dollars. For Jolly that sum was \$18,000 a day—requiring hours each day taken from doing the work of a Congressman—of serving his constituents. In the interview he stated, “Your first responsibility as Congressman is to make sure you hit \$18,000 a day—to accomplish the larger goal of 2 million dollars in the next six months. His interviewer, Norah O’Donnell challenged him, “Your first responsibility.” He replied, ‘my first responsibility as a Congressman.’ How can we trust that elected officials don’t make self-preservation their primary goal?

It pains me that the Era of the ‘Statesman’ is dead: those stalwart men and women of stature of previous decades who have been superseded by politicians, whether in America, in Israel—or across the globe. Whether or not one agreed with David Ben Gurion’s or Menachem Begin’s politics—

each the sworn enemy of the other—it would be difficult to say that these very different Prime Ministers didn't put country first. Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, remains a larger-than-life hero—who worked tirelessly to birth and secure a nation. And, Menachem Begin, founder of the Likud party, a conservative—Begin, the same person who blew up the King David Hotel during Israel's fight for Independence—whose name was never uttered by Ben Gurion-- was the Prime Minister who, in 1978, secured a peace with Egypt that now has lasted nearly 38 years—despite the recent Arab Spring that unleashed instability and violence throughout the Middle East. And this past Wednesday, when Shimon Peres died, we witnessed the death of Israel's last founding father. Though often ridiculed for his positions, Peres was a visionary, who championed the cause of peace in the Middle East. Israel's link to its humble beginning was severed with his death. As Vice President Biden lamented, “ Peres was the ‘soul of Israel’ the ‘world now a little darker.’”

Politicians, who repeatedly fuel people's fears to ensure their own success, have replaced the era of statesmen. Politicians tend to say and do anything to ‘get the vote.’ There isn't a day that goes by in recent weeks that there isn't a headline that reads, “Which candidate—which politician

can you trust?” And when trust erodes, suspicion, like molten lava, spews across racial, religious and ethnic borders.

For nearly a year, we have watched as politicians, especially those aspiring for the highest office in our land, have lied, or minimally, manipulated the truth, attempting to dodge accusatory fingers. No political party or candidate is immune from positing falsehoods as truth. This year, the American pulse is beating faster—as an unprecedented number of Americans are fed up with politics as usual. Perhaps the seeds of the Arab Spring 5 years ago, has taken root on our soil, as we witness an America divided. Surely, a wide net of distrust, xenophobia beyond hatred, has been cast, spreading inciting animosity and suspicion of ‘the other.’ It is true, that many Americans have lost faith in government.

When we find ourselves enmeshed in societal fracture—when suspicion of ‘the other’ is emerging as an American value, we need politicians to inspire and unite—to be realistic and optimistic at the same time. How sad, that following last week’s presidential debate, commentators didn’t focus on lofty words or visionary statements, rather, every network and media agency jumped on the fact-finding-team bandwagon to determine the veracity of what was said during the 90-minute

debate. I'm certain we all checked the papers Tuesday morning to see who lied more—whom we could trust less.

Indeed, there are those in America who feel disenfranchised, who believe America no longer has a place for them. We must have compassion for those who struggle each day to make ends-meet, who scratch their heads, wondering, like deer in the headlights, what happened to the America they once knew. Indeed, a divisive chasm has been created. There was no lower point in our country's history, no era of greater divide, than The Civil War, when our nation was physically and emotionally decimated. The Civil War was America's bloodiest war—pitting brother against brother—destroying family ties. 620,000 lives were snuffed out during the Civil War—nearly half of the deaths of all of our country's wars combined. Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address took place in March of 1861—just weeks after Jefferson Davis became president of the Confederacy as a divided America stood on the brink of Civil War. Our country was on the verge of despair. Lincoln could have rallied the North through hateful speech against the South. He could have pointed the finger at those either less or more willing to go to war. And yet, in the closing paragraph of that Inauguration address he eloquently stated:

*“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”*

Would that we could hear such inspirational and aspiration words in this year’s election. There is a dis-ease in America—people fed up with politicians who don’t hear their cries of discontent. Forty years ago, Howard Beale in the movie *Network* declared in his famous rant, “I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad. It's a depression. Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job. The dollar buys a nickel's worth, banks are going bust; shop keepers keep a gun under the counter. Punks are running wild in the street and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it. We know the air is unfit to breathe and our food is unfit to eat, and we sit watching our TV's while some local newscaster tells us that today we had fifteen homicides and sixty-three violent crimes, as if that's the way it's

supposed to be. We know things are bad - worse than bad.” He challenged the people to declare his now, memorialized quote, “I am as mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” Throughout the past forty years, Howard Beale’s admonishment still strikes a chord with many Americans—for some our predicament has only worsened over time.

I fear this dis-ease running rampant in our country is giving way to a disease of hate and suspicion—targeting minorities in our country—immigrant groups who have sought refuge from persecution—a vast majority of men and women who want nothing more than a better chance for their families.. Who here in this sanctuary did not have immigrant ancestors? I was uplifted by the TV story of the Malibu Diner in Chelsea, following the pressure cooker explosion 2 weeks ago—how the manager instructed the restaurant staff to cook round-the-clock meals for police, first responders and residents of the Associated Blind Housing, I smiled at such an outpouring of humanity. When I heard the manager’s name was Roberto Huerta, I called the restaurant a few days later, and they confirmed what I already knew in my heart, Mr. Huerta is a Mexican immigrant.

Torah teaches that we are to love the stranger for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. More than love for parents or even God—we are

commanded to love and care for the stranger. Rabbi Reuven Firestone, HUC professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam wrote the following: *“God works in mysterious ways. On rare occasions oppression is relieved by the direct and miraculous power of the Creator. More often, oppression is relieved in other ways: through the grace of God's likeness in the faces of helping neighbors — or helping strangers. God's miracles in Egypt are a metaphor for the miracles of human kindness that can happen anywhere and at any time. In times of great stress, the miracle is greater than at times of ease.”*

I started writing this sermon 36 hours after the pressure cooker blast rocked Chelsea and spewed forth its metal venom. I wrote as I watched the capture of Achmad Khan Rachami. As I left my building that Sunday morning, a woman who walked besides me lamented about the sad and scary events of night before. She then commented—‘and we know what the common denominator is’. Playing dumb I inquired what she meant, knowing full well the answer. Muslims, she uttered. I looked at her and said and what of Columbine, Aurora, Oklahoma City, Ted Kaczynski, Newtown, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston— and we can add now this past week’s attack on a South Carolina

playground. I realize it didn't matter, as her short-term memory and that of too many Americans, only recall the most recent terrorist attacks perpetrated by adherents of Al-Qadea.

Playing the fear card of security—too many in our country are willing to trust hateful rhetoric and propaganda rather than the truth —The issue is less about American security and more about targeting of minorities, minorities accused posing a threat to American values and democracy. The following statement describes the intent of propaganda: *“The function of propaganda is... not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right which it has set out to argue for. Its task is not to make an objective study of the truth...its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly.”*

If statesmen belong to a by-gone era, and politicians will use whatever tactics necessary to get elected—fear being a potent elixir—then the above statement rings true. The most frightening part of the quote I just read lays not in the words themselves—rather their author—for this quote was taken from Chapter Six of Adolph Hitler's *Main Kampf*: Hitler a mastermind of propaganda.

Germany, following its embarrassing defeat in World War I looked for its savior and scapegoat. Adolph Hitler nourished that ravenous hunger and created the perfect recipe to feed the people: Eliminate Jews and the undesirables of German society and you create a master race. Lies were hurled against the Jews—false accusations ignited a nationalistic pride anchored in prejudice, hatred and merciless annihilation. Jews, throughout history, have been looked upon with suspicion and distrust. The *Kol Nidre*, held precious by many of us here, historically was an accelerant for hatred and mistrust of Jews. Kol Nidre, after all, is a legal formula releasing us from vows we will make. Those who hated Jews repeatedly accused Jews of not being trustworthy in their business dealings. Although the Kol Nidre formula applied only between God and Jews—demagogues twisted its intent to provide sufficient propaganda to fan the infernos of antisemitism.

Unfortunately today, there appears to be a short distance between suspicion of minorities and the erosion of religious freedom. Throughout the centuries religions have been fraught with distrust for the other's beliefs. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his 1966 essay, *No religion is an Island*, wrote: "We are heirs to a long history of mutual contempt among religions and religious denominations, or religious coercion, strife and

persecutions. Even in periods of peace, the relationship that obtains between representatives of different religions is not just reciprocity of ignorance; it is an abyss, a source of detraction and distrust, casting suspicion and undoing efforts of many an honest and noble expression of good will.”

Historically, Jews are too acquainted with what happens when suspicion of religious belief rears its ugly head. Two years ago I delivered a *Kol Nidre* sermon on antisemitism, waving a cautionary flag as incidents of antisemitism increased overseas. This summer, during a Small Cities Federation tour in Israel, Ariele Di-Porto, director of *Aliyah* at the Jewish agency, indicated that in the next 20-25 years French Jewry in France will be nearly extinct. Truth or propaganda re: impact of Radical Islam’s influence in France? Only history will write the truth. And American Jews are not immune from a growing groundswell of suspicion, and that suspicion grows more ominous when, at political rallies, religious minorities are identified as other and potentially deemed not welcomed. I have always made a distinction between anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment. That boundary is becoming blurred. College campuses—from Brandeis to Harvard to Berkley and every university in between—are witnessing a fierce

antisemitic uprising couched in pro-Palestinian rhetoric. An article last November by Daniel Greenfield was entitled: “The fight against Students for Justice in Palestine; Anti-Semitism Comes to Brandeis: How a university named after an American Jewish icon became a home for Jew haters and terrorist propagandists.” And...and university faculty and administration, committed teachers, dedicated to showing students paths to truth, too often are doing nothing to help students discern truth from fiction.

Trust is defined as the ‘firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.’ So what can we trust—what Jewish wellsprings can we drink from to quench our thirst for truth. How do we find our equilibrium?

Each time we take the *Torah* from the *Aron HaKodesh* on these *Noraim*, we recite the verse from *Torah* describing the Divine Attributes we are to emulate in our lives. The verse, a part of the second set of Ten Commandments, comes in the same *Torah* portion containing the Golden Calf incident. The Golden Calf—a time when the Israelites fell dramatically short of fulfilling the destiny promised to Abraham. The people rejected their God, their leader Moses and nearly denied themselves their future. What are these Divine Attributes that stand the test of time: compassion,

mercy, patience, forgiveness, kindness, graciousness and truth. These are the values we must trust –that must be our blue print for our treatment of the other. These Divine Attributes—God’s gift to us-- stand boldly against human attempts to derail our humanity. Perhaps Abraham, almost to a fault, trusted God’s compassion and mercy to prevail—to revoke the command that would have destroyed Abraham. Perhaps that is why he was called ‘a man of ultimate faith.’

Let me conclude with another quote of our 16<sup>th</sup> President, Abraham Lincoln; words delivered right here in this Great Hall of Cooper Union in 1860: *“Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us, nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.”*

And let us say, *Amen.*

