THESE TRUTHS WE HOLD

• • •

JUDAISM IN AN AGE OF TRUTHINESS



Joshua Garroway AND Wendy Zierler

EDITORS

These Truths We Hold

JUDAISM IN AN AGE OF TRUTHINESS

These Truths We Hold

JUDAISM IN AN AGE OF TRUTHINESS

Wendy Zierler and Joshua Garroway, editors

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS
© 2022 Hebrew Union College Press

Cover Design by Paul Neff Design LLC
Set in Arno Pro by Raphaël Freeman MISTD, Renana Typesetting

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zierler, Wendy, editor. | Garroway, Joshua D., editor.

Title: These truths we hold: Judasim in an age of truthiness / Joshua Garroway and Wendy Zierler, editors.

Description: Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, [2022] | Includes index. | Summary: "The authors of this collection, comprising leading scholars, journalists, entertainers, and religious leaders, were asked to examine the idea of truth from a variety of Jewish textual and disciplinary perspectives-biblical, rabbinic, liturgical, scientific, and artistic. The volume's intention is to hold out the hope that deep, thoughtful teaching from some of the world's leading Jewish voices might lead not to deeper understanding not just of Jewish texts, but of the nature and accessibility of truth itself" – Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022007501 (print) | LCCN 2022007502 (ebook) | ISBN 9780878201983 (paperback) | ISBN 9780878202287 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Truth – Religious aspects – Judaism. | Truthfulness and falsehood. | Truth – Biblical teaching. | Jewish ethics. | Truth in literature.

Classification: LCC BJ1286.T7 T44 2022 (print) | LCC BJ1286.T7 (ebook) |

DDC 177/.3 – dc23/eng/20220302

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007501

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022007502

Dedicated to the memory of Aaron Panken, z"l



אתה תחזה מכל־העם
אנשי־חיל יראי אלהים, אנשי אמת שנאי בצע

And you shall select from the nation,
valiant God-fearers, people of truth who hate dishonesty.

— EXODUS 18:21

Contents

Preface ix
Andrew Rehfeld

Introduction xiii
Wendy Zierler and Joshua Garroway

SECTION 1. TORAT EMET: THE TORAH OF TRUTH

"The False Pen of the Scribes Has Made It into a Lie." (Jeremiah 8:8): The Truthiness of Scripture 3
Marc Brettler

Truth, Goodness, and the Rabbis 35
Christine Hayes

Can the Torah Still Be a Source of Truth? 51
Benjamin Sommer

The Torah, Our Ḥavruta*: (Re)Constructing Truth in Sacred Text* 77
Rachel Adler

SECTION 2: TEFILAT EMET: LITURGICAL TRUTH

Truth in Liturgy: When Prayer Doesn't Quite Capture Our Intent 93
Dalia Marx

How Liturgy Tells the Truth 109
Lawrence Hoffman

SECTION 3: SEFAT EMET: TELLING THE TRUTH

A Jewish Ethic of Truth Based on the Responsa of Rabbi Haim David Halevi 129
David Ellenson

SECTION 4: EMET UMADAʿ: JUDAISM, SCIENCE, AND PHILOSOPHY

Science and Truth 145
Geoffrey A. Mitelman

Reason, History, and Politics: Modern Jewish Thought on Truth 159
Leora Batnitzky

SECTION 5: EILU VEʾEILU: PLURALISM AND TRUTH

In Our Time: Jesuits, Jews, and "Nones" in Ḥavruta 177
Mark Diamond

Diagonal Pluralism: A Short Essay on Truth 195
Michael Marmur

SECTION 6: LO YEʾUMAN KI YESUPPAR: TRUTH, FICTION AND SATIRE

Truth and Satire in the Bible, Yesterday and Today: Reflections on Hayehudim Baʾim (*The Jews Are Coming*) 215
Wendy Zierler (with Asaf Beiser and Natalie Marcus)

God's Honest Truth: Some Final Literary Thoughts on Truth, Death, and Eternity 231
Wendy Zierler

Index to Bible and Rabbinic Works 249

General Index 255

Preface

"These Truths We Hold," the 2018 Symposium on Truth that gave rise to this volume, was first envisioned in 2016 by my predecessor, former HUC-JIR President, Rabbi Aaron Panken (z"l), two years prior to his tragic death in May of 2018. It was the result of an effort by President Panken to elevate HUC-JIR's role in developing ideas that would shape our world. The presentations at that Symposium and the essays that emerged were part of his more perspicacious vision of the Reform Movement's role in addressing the broader truth crisis that had fully arisen within Western democracies.

In the years since President Panken initiated this project, the truth crisis has grown, becoming a threat to the foundation of our democratic civil society, dependent as it is on citizen deliberation, public education, and confidence that we can agree at least upon a set of facts, if not the best solutions, when debating public policy and law.

As I write this in February of 2022, the issue of truth has become an issue of life and death. Even in the third year of a global pandemic many still question the proven safety and effectiveness of vaccines. And more than one year after a presidential election showed no evidence of fraud, it continues to be contested by those in the highest echelons of power who cynically argue that it was "stolen."

What can Judaism teach us about this crisis? How has this crisis affected Judaism? The essays in this volume explore these questions by providing interpretive, analytical, and historical answers by some of the world's leading scholars of religion and science.

One way to understand today's crisis of truth is to see it as a battle

between faith and reason. Those who reject the effectiveness of vaccines or the validity of the 2020 presidential election sometimes claim that both lack evidence. In fact, the evidence for both is clear and compelling. Thus, rejecting either claim requires an assertion of faith. The truth crisis of democratic society might thus be seen as a question of whether our faith (in party, ideology, or tribal association) should trump what reason and science indicate to be true.

It is thus worth explaining why a religious approach to these questions might be helpful.

The tension between faith and reason has been a common theme of Jewish debate for a long time. Though some of the more fundamentalist Jewish communities today prioritize faith over reason, modern Judaism has more often viewed the two in dialogue. Our greatest scholars and teachers have often sought to revise and accommodate our faith to what reason and science discovered. Even prior to the Enlightenment, Maimonides was an exemplar of this approach. Spinoza, later, pushed it to its limits (or in the views of some of his contemporaries, well beyond them).

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion is not just an institution of Jewish higher education that seeks to advance the highest caliber academic scholarship; it is the center for professional leadership development of Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism recognizes both faith and science as paths to Truth. However, celebrating reason as that which distinguishes humans as created *b'tzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God, we generally view faith as being limited by reason. We thus must give up ideas based on faith, when they conflict with what reason and science reveal about our world. Religious life gives meaning to what we come to know through science. Religious ideas provide a framework for engaging eternal questions on a speculative basis that extends beyond what can be known through the methods of science alone.

Because Reform Judaism, and other liberal approaches to religious life, demand that our faith be bounded by reason, it elevates the process of discovery. Our beliefs are tied inextricably to the process of revision in the light of evidence. As Reform Jews, we are committed to a process of reasoned, systematic exploration of the world, embracing

experimentation and evidence to learn what is true. Revisability in the face of new information becomes a religious commitment.

Seen in this light, the crisis of truth in the United States today may be thought of as a battle about whether we make truth or discover it. The argument that "if you believe it, it is true for you!" reflects a narcissistic approach to the world, as if each of us is a god capable of making the world in our image. Humility before God might inspire instead the idea that perhaps, just perhaps, we are not actually able to make or change reality simply through the beliefs we hold. Acceptance of a religious view that acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge should lead to a position of curiosity, humility, and openness, as we strive to learn what really is true, no matter what we may believe.

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion was founded in 1875 to raise up rabbis for a new American Judaism based on the principle of a faith bounded and limited by reason. We now operate educational programs in Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York, and Jerusalem, raising up hundreds of students each year to be rabbis, cantors, non-profit professionals, teachers, and scholars. We maintain unparalleled research collections in Cincinnati that are used by thousands of international scholars to discover truth about the history and ideas of Jewish civilization and the American Jewish experience. Throughout that history we have insisted on incorporating the most contemporary knowledge of the social and physical sciences into the education of our students. We have demanded that our faculty's scholarship be held to the highest standards of academic evaluation.

In 2017, under President Panken's leadership, the HUC-JIR board reaffirmed our commitment to truth-seeking in its mission statement, identifying one of our institution's three core activities to be, "Advancing the critical study of Judaism and Jewish culture in accordance with the highest standards of modern academic scholarship."

We are not gods. We do not make the world through our beliefs. We seek instead to understand the world that God created through the process of discovery, standing ready to revise our understanding in the face of new evidence.

There is after all no amount of "believing" that will change the

events of May 5, 2018 and bring back Aaron Panken, our beloved former President. But perhaps your engagement with the thoughtful essays in this volume will help you discover a bit more about the commitments of the person, the parent, the sibling, the spouse, the teacher and the rabbi that this world, in truth, lost much too soon.

Andrew Rehfeld
President, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Introduction

Joshua Garroway and Wendy Zierler

"What is truth? Said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer."[1]

"I was a boy who told lies. This came from reading."[2]

Two stories separated by nineteen centuries: one from the Gospel of John in the Christian scriptures; another by the Russian-Jewish writer, Isaac Babel (1894–1940). Two stories not likely to be juxtaposed except in a volume edited by scholars with expertise in vastly different fields. And yet, two stories that combine to invite reflection on the subject treated in the present volume, namely, the truth.

The first story features the famous question, *Quid est veritas*? posed to Jesus of Nazareth by the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Brought before Pilate to answer for the allegation that he proclaimed himself the king of the Jews, the playfully evasive Jesus eventually declares his real purpose: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Then comes Pilate's notoriously curt response: "What is truth?"[3]

1. Francis Bacon, *The Essays, or Councils, Civil and Moral, of Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Alban. With a Table of the Colours of Good and Evil. And a Discourse on the Wisdom of the Ancients* (London, 1701), 1.
2. Isaac Babel, *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 635.
3. John 18:37–38 (NRSV).

As Francis Bacon later quipped, Pilate does not stay for an answer. He returns abruptly to the Jewish officials with his offer to release either Jesus or Barabbas. His question – three words in both Latin and English (as well as in the original Greek) – just hangs there, bald and dangling, awaiting a reply. No shortage of philosophers and theologians have taken a stab at it. Most have answered descriptively, arguing for this or that understanding of the truth. Others, however, such as the ancient sophists or contemporary postmodernists, seem rather to share the cynicism of jesting Pilate: truth is an illusion, a perspective, or merely a word.

Perhaps the simplest answer one might offer Pilate is that truth is the opposite of falsehood or deception, but even this modest proposal is belied by the insights of one of Isaac Babel's most memorable stories. "In the Basement" is about a young boy who invents outlandish tales about his family in order to impress Borgman, an affluent, intellectually gifted peer. The relationship between truth and storytelling is one of the central issues of this coming-of-age story. None of what Babel's narrator tells Borgman about his own family and background existed in reality. What did exist, however, "was far more extraordinary than anything I had invented, but at the age of twelve I had no idea how to grapple with the truth of my world."[4]

Writers and literature professors love "In the Basement" because, in addition to being a literary masterpiece, it shows how the art of lying – in other words, fiction – can serve to uncover deep human truths. Babel (1894–1940), who fell victim to Stalin's Great Purge and for decades was "erased" from Soviet memory, produced fiction that is taut, complex, and ambiguous, yielding rich meanings and interpretations that grow and develop over time with different readers. The idea that stories, though fictitious, convey complex truths and give rise to multiple interpretations is central to our understanding not just of great literature but also of Jewish tradition.

Generative as this blurred distinction between truth and fiction may be, however, it comes at a cost. Sometimes we wish to assert an incontrovertible truth. Certainly, we Jews sometimes do. But often there is another side, a countervailing truth that cannot be reconciled with

4. Babel, *The Complete Works*, 638.

our own. A case in point: a trip to Babel's childhood Odessa neighborhood of Moldavanka, where many of his stories were set, reveals that Babel has been rehabilitated and acknowledged by a sidewalk star in a Ukraine's version of the Hollywood Walk of Fame. At the same time, one readily witnesses the ubiquitous Ukrainian celebration of Bogdan Khmelnytzky, the Cossack leader who presided over the uprising against Poland in 1648, during which thousands of Jews were massacred. He is so revered that he appears on the 5 hryvnia bill. The same man whom Jews consider an arch villain is held up by Ukrainians as a national hero! Adding to this confusion in early 2022 is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has seen the state-sponsored Russian media deliberately misrepresent facts on the ground. And the fact that Ukranian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is a Jew! Can truth really be so utterly subjective and contingent?

Or consider the passion narratives in the Christian scriptures. What Christians might call "gospel truth," an accurate accout of the misguided Jews who dragooned Pilate into carrying out their murderous plot, Jews might see as ancient "fake news," a fictitious account drawn up by a Christian apologist to curry favor with Rome by pinning the blame for an allegedly innocent man's execution on the fractious Jews. And these different truth claims have mattered very much. Untold generations of Jews have suffered at Christian hands on account of the passion narratives and the deicide charge – indeed, they contributed to the hatred of Jews that motivated the Cossacks under Khmelnytzky!

Recent developments in American culture have made it even harder to tolerate falsehood as a possible vehicle for expressing truth. Simply put, brazen lying and deception have become routine in public life. Nowadays it is challenging to read the line, "I was a boy who told lies. This came from reading," with the same delight and abandon in a society where public officials – indeed, the highest of public officials – look straight into a camera and lie, and lie, and lie over and again; where social media abound with fake descriptions of events designed intentionally to deceive; where professional media aim more to craft narratives to entertain their self-selecting partisan audiences than to "get down to the facts," as they used to say. And all this in a country whose founding document begins with the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

With all these considerations, and with a deep desire to delve into the wisdom that Jewish tradition might offer on the subject of truth, we and our colleagues at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion embarked on HUC-JIR's Symposium 2, entitled "These Truths We Hold: Judaism in an Age of Truthiness," a two-day conference, which took place at Steven Wise Temple in Los Angeles in November, 2018. The title made reference to the Declaration of Independence as well as to a familiar expression in American popular culture made famous by comedian Stephen Colbert. Way back in 2005, Colbert – a liberal fictitiously masquerading as a conservative in order reveal deeper truths, ironically enough – famously offered up the term "truthiness" to satirically expose attempts, especially by politicians, to pass off assertions as true despite their patent falseness. "Who is Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914?" the conservative persona declared. "If I want to say it happened in 1941, that's my right!" At the time, Colbert was targeting unsubstantiated claims about the war in Iraq, but the "truthiness" term spoke to a broader anxiety among American viewers about the status of truth in contemporary society. It speaks even louder today. What was emerging as a problem in 2005 has in recent years become a full-blown epistemological crisis.

Our invited speakers, comprising leading scholars, journalists, entertainers, and religious leaders, were asked to examine the idea of truth from a variety of Jewish textual and disciplinary perspectives – biblical, rabbinic, liturgical, scientific, and artistic. If Babel's child narrator warned of the lies that can result from reading, we held out the hope that deep, thoughtful teaching from some of the world's leading Jewish voices might lead not to lies but to deeper understanding. We took hold of that premise and set out with our assembled attendees to learn what we could.

To be sure, our desire to uncover the nature of truth in Jewish terms is not unprecedented. In publishing this book, we join the company of many august scholars. To name just a few notable predecessors in this endeavor, Abraham Joshua Heschel made the subject of truth and its relation to such values as love and the good the subject of his comparative study of the religious thought of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, Menahem

Mendel of Kotzk, and Soren Kierkegaard.[5] Louis Jacobs dedicated a number of essays to the subject of truth in classical and medieval Jewish thought, often emphasizing, as Marc Brettler and Christine Hayes[6] argue in their contributions to this book, that "[t]he main thrust in the appeals for Jews to be truthful is in the direction of moral truth and integrity."[7] David Weiss Halivni, Moshe Halbertal, and others grappled with what appears to a be two-tiered approach to truth in Jewish classical sources: a notion of heavenly truth, on the one hand, and a practical, worldly sense of truth based on majority rule.[8] More recently, Chaya Halberstam published a book-length study exploring "two different modes juridical rhetoric: the Hebrew Bible, which deploys an authoritative discourse of knowledge, certainty, and divine truth; and tannaitic literature, which assumes a stance of perpetual uncertainty despite the biblical tradition, and demands the authoritative construction of legal truth."[9] This book joins those important, discipline- or period-specific voices and, as it were, brings them into conversation with one another, assembling work by scholars across the disciplines of Jewish Studies, readers of ancient, medieval, and modern texts alike, in the hope of creating a broad, honest,

---

5. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1973).

6. In addition to her contribution here, see Christine Hayes, *What's Divine About Divine Law?: Early Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

7. Louis Jacobs, "Truth," in *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 568. See also Louis Jacobs, "Truth," in *Jewish Values* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 145–54.

8. See David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991) 101–5; Moshe Halbertal, "Authority, Controversy and Tradition," in *The People and the Book* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 45–89. See also Daniel R. Schwartz, "Law and Truth: On Qumran-Sadducean and Rabbinic Views of Law," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, ed. Devorah Dimant and Uriel Rappaport (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 229–40, and Jeffrey Rubenstein's critique of Schwartz's approach in Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Nominalism and Realism in Qumranic and Rabbinic Law: A Reassessment," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6.2 (1999): 157–83.

9. Chaya Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3.

multi-valent, and relevant contemporary discussion of Jewish notions of truth.

Despite the array of disciplines and perspectives represented here, one theme in particular surfaces again and again. While Jews and Judaisms across time routinely affirm the existence of absolute truth and its importance, as well as the virtue of truth-telling, they acknowledge at the same time that the fraught, fleshly reality of human existence renders impossible a perfect recognition of the truth, or an unadulterated commitment to it. Sometimes the limits of the human ken prevent us from ascertaining the truth as it really is. Sometimes ethical considerations, like the need to promote compassion, peace, and humility, supersede total steadfastness to the truth. Sometimes liturgical considerations, like the need to create communities of meaning, do the same. Likewise, there is the need to maintain social order, establish systems of justice, and cultivate relationships with non-Jews, all of which, at times, require one to compromise the truth. It was Clarence Darrow who said, "Chase after the truth like all hell and you'll free yourself, even though you never touch its coat tails." It seems Jewish tradition would agree: the truth is real, and warrants our admiration and aspiration, even as we recognize that absolute adherence is ultimately beyond our grasp.

Following the organization of the symposium, the chapters in this book are divided into textual or disciplinary sections. The first section, entitled "*Torat Emet*" – or, "the Torah of Truth," an expression familiar to many Jews from the Torah-reading service in synagogues – examines what Judaism has traditionally identified as the foundation of all truth, the revelation of God to Israel recorded in the Torah. As each of the contributions demonstrates, a Jewish answer to the question "Is the Torah true?" is invariably both yes and no.

Marc Zvi Brettler opens the discussion with the trenchant, if provocative, observation that the authors of the Hebrew Bible, or at least two of them, might well be considered liars. He asks whether the phrase of Jeremiah 8:8, "the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie," might be used justifiably to describe the authors of Deuteronomy and Chronicles. Overwhelming evidence indicates that these works engage in the sort of deceptive reportage that would hardly pass muster in contemporary historical writing. They manipulate or even fabricate

sources and recast events in ways that cohere with their political or theological interests. The author of Deuteronomy even goes so far as to claim Mosaic authorship in the process! These observations force readers to decide whether Deuteronomy and Chronicles are, as some scholars have asserted, outright forgeries that deserve the negative valence accorded forgeries in the present day, or, as other scholars claim, creative and positive revisions that reformulate sources so as to articulate better what was originally meant.

Whereas Brettler deals with the so-called written Torah, Christine Hayes addresses the Oral Torah and its ancient advocates, the rabbis. Hayes contends that the impact of Hellenism, introduced to Jewish communities in Egypt, the land of Israel, and elsewhere following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BCE, had a substantial impact on Jewish thinking about the truth. The notion of a single, objective truth accessible by reason, as propounded by Philo, the Stoics, and other philosophers, led many Jews to claim that the Torah, although not philosophical in its appearance, was nonetheless an expression of rational, universal truth. The rabbis, Hayes argues, went in a different direction. Sometimes they challenged the idea of an absolute truth by proposing the existence of multiple truths. At other times, they acknowledged the existence of an objective truth but determined that the right course of action, as determined by the Torah, is not in accord with the truth. The Torah, in other words, which is distinct from the truth, occasionally commands behavior at odds with the truth! When determining the calendar, for example, Rabban Gamliel is reported in the Mishnah to have demanded adherence to the decisions of the rabbinic court even when they are patently at odds with astronomical reality. Elsewhere the rabbis encourage judges to resist enforcing strict, or true, justice on account of the need for mercy, compassion, or peace. Pursuing the truth is a value for the rabbis, but not an absolute one.

The next two essays concern peculiarly modern problems. It goes without saying that the Enlightenment and its reverberations have introduced Jews to questions that their ancient and medieval forbears could never have imagined. Since the nineteenth century, for example, the Torah has been treated as a historical document rather than a divine revelation in academic settings, with the result that most university-trained

rabbis and Jewish scholars now view the Torah as a composite work of human hands. If that is so, must the Torah lose its stature as a repository of truly divine revelation?

Benjamin D. Sommer says no. Rather than disputing the findings of biblical criticism, Sommer reinterprets them. The Torah represents different authors expressing different views at different times – that is indisputable – but the motley product that resulted is precisely what one might expect in the wake of a divine revelation. Drawing on what he calls "a participatory theology of revelation," Sommer contends that Torah is not a stenographic recording of the revelation at Sinai, but a patchwork, an anthology reflecting various perceptions, memories, and interpretations of revelation. Because God reveals truth in ways that people can neither understand perfectly nor express precisely, the collaged character of the Torah is exactly what we might expect from ancient Israelites attempting to convey their experience of the numinous within the limits of human mind and language. The Torah is true, in this sense, even as it features contradictions and variations in perspective.

Rachel Adler builds on this notion of participatory revelation with its collage of truths and supplies an additional metaphor, namely of the Torah as our *ḥavruta* partner. Adler arrives at this metaphor after a series of observations about the role of interpretation, relationship, and of changing values and ethics in our understanding of truth. "The *viability* of revelation," she writes, "depends on dialogue, on *maḥloket*, on old words and obligations re-encountered in new contexts. This dual Torah is not an authority that dictates from beyond time. If Torah is our *ḥavruta*, then, just as we must be accountable to our *ḥavruta*, our *ḥavruta* must be accountable to us." We participate with the Torah, as it were, in hashing out its new meanings, and in its continual re-writing, engaging with it, in relationship and dialogue, in the same way that we engage with a study partner in a *beit midrash*.

The next section, *Tefilat Emet*, moves us from the study hall to the synagogue, and explores the problem of Jewish truth-telling specifically in liturgical contexts, a concern that has become especially acute in modern times as many Jews question whether they believe what is said in traditional prayers to be true, and whether it is permissible or desirable to change prayers to match changing convictions. As Dalia

Marx observes, we moderns are hardly the first to ask such questions. She examines a rich passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 69b) in which illustrious sages disagree: one group claiming that statements uttered in prayer must be true, and therefore the words of a prayer may be revised to accord with the truth; another that the prayer's words may not be revised, even if they seem to be untrue. Marx then goes on to consider several examples in which statements in the traditional liturgy appear false, contradictory, or deceptive, and the different approaches taken by Orthodox and Reform Jews to resolve these problems.

Whereas Marx examines liturgy from the standpoint of a so-called correspondence theory of truth, in which a statement is judged to be true if it corresponds to reality, Lawrence A. Hoffman suggests that an alternative solution to understanding liturgy might be achieved if we approach the notion of truth differently. Correspondence theory might work well in a discipline like science, Hoffman says, because science aims to describe accurately objects in the physical world. Prayer, on the other hand, expresses emotions, commitments, and aspirations, and the world it seeks to describe is more so the metaphysical world of God, Creation, Israel, and the like. Drawing on insights from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hoffman argues that the truth value of religious utterances should be assessed against the constellation of images, ideas, and experiences that a religious community uses to make sense of the human condition. As such, liturgical statements that seem untrue or even nonsensical from a scientific point of view might seem patently true for a Jew.

Moving beyond liturgical settings, the next section examines the ethics of truth-telling in general. If *Sefat Emet*, or truthful language, is a Jewish virtue, is it ever acceptable for a Jew to lie? David Ellenson considers the question as it arises in the responsa of Rabbi Haim David Halevi, the late Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Yafo. First, Ellenson shows that Halevi was willing to take a hard stand against lying and deception. In a responsum dealing with students who cheated on exams, Halevi invokes Psalm 119:29–30 ("the way of falsehood remove from me…") among other passages to indict the sin of both the cheaters and the peers who allowed them to copy from their papers. Halevi nonetheless believed that deception was at times acceptable, even desirable. As

Ellenson demonstrates, Halevi recognized that an absolutist approach to truth-telling proves incompatible with our imperfect world. Truth-telling is a virtue, but so is peace, for example, and in extreme cases the quest for peace might supersede the expectation of honesty. Thus, the sons of Jacob lied to their brother, Joseph, and even God reported Sarah's words deceptively to Abraham (Gen 18:13) to forestall a domestic dispute.

The next two sections extend the conversation beyond the bounds of Judaism. Since antiquity, but especially in modern times, two intellectual disciplines have aspired to discern the truth about the world as it really is: philosophy and science. The pair of essays in *Emet Umada'* ("Truth and Knowledge") explores the extent to which truths proclaimed in Judaism can be reconciled with foundational tenets of Enlightenment philosophy, on one hand, and the contemporary natural sciences on the other. Leora Batnitzky considers the emergence in the nineteenth century of "Jewish philosophy," an enterprise that she views as a response to the new political reality in which Jews could so easily choose to abandon Judaism. What special truth did Judaism offer to justify the continued adherence of the recently emancipated European Jew? The first thinker to take up this uniquely modern dilemma was Moses Mendelssohn, who famously proposed that Judaism constitutes a revealed legislation for a particular people, and that since it has no dogmas it can neither confirm nor contradict any universal truth claims uncovered through philosophy. While the successors of the so-called Socrates of Berlin widely criticized his project, Batnitzky shows that, nonetheless, the three most dominant trends in modern Jewish philosophy – the rational model (exemplified by Hermann Cohen), the historicist model (associated with Franz Rosenzweig), and the political model (represented by Leo Strauss) – are indebted to insights expressed originally by Mendelssohn.

Whereas philosophy is still widely considered the bailiwick of intellectual elites in the ivory tower, modernity has witnessed the emergence of science as a routine subject in popular discourse. Especially in recent years, as climate change, coronavirus, gender identity, and other issues have made their way to center stage, the media abound with tweets and articles about scientific claims. The very word "science" has become a rhetorical stand-in for truth: "I follow the science," for example, is

often a standard declaration when proclaiming the correctness of one's perspective. Here, Geoffrey A. Mitelman challenges what he sees as the overly facile popular linkage of science with truth. In fact, he argues, scientists themselves tend to be humbler about the fruits of their labor. Yes, scientists devote themselves to methodological rigor in the hope of distinguishing correct from incorrect descriptions of the world and how it works, but their findings, on their own reckoning, are invariably tentative and provisional. Scientific truths are not exact, universal, and eternal, but the best available solutions to a problem at the given moment. Truth is not certainty. As such, Mitelman proposes, scientific truth resembles Jewish truth, a point he makes in connection with the rabbis' insistence on preserving minority opinions. Just as the rabbis anticipated that their own verdicts might one day be overturned by a court with greater wisdom, so scientists record their procedures and findings with the expectation that subsequent exploration will revise, refine, or perhaps even refute what they understand to be true at present.

In addition to the encounter with philosophy and science, one of the hallmarks of the modern Jewish experience has been the pervasive contact with non-Jewish people and ideas, especially in the diaspora. While the consequences of this encounter have at times been grim, it has also brought about the rich interaction of well-intentioned people of different faiths sharing the truths of their traditions. Mark Diamond writes of his struggles and achievements in such a multicultural setting. A rabbi who teaches Judaism and religious studies at a Jesuit university, Diamond contends that interreligious dialogue succeeds best when interlocutors are able to overcome the inclination to view the conversation as a competition, my view of the truth versus yours, in which only one view can emerge as the victor. Dialogue succeeds rather when participants endeavor to correct misconceptions they may have about the religion of another, to refine their own beliefs, and to appreciate better the theological and practical consequences of their own exclusivist or inclusivist claims about the truth.

Whereas Diamond focuses on his personal experience as a leader in interreligious dialogue, Michael Marmur examines the problem of truth in pluralistic settings from a theoretical perspective. He considers three different, but related, metaphors that have been deployed to account

for disagreement about what is true among reasonable and well-intentioned people: (1) the "language as lens" theory, which holds that truth, however universal and absolute it might be, is expressed differently by different languages; (2) specular theories, which hold that truth, again possibly universal, is nonetheless seen differently by different eyes; and (3) horizontal versus vertical pluralism. Horizontal pluralism holds that people utilizing different modes of description – a poet as opposed to a scientist, for example – might offer different, but equally valid, descriptions of an event. Vertical pluralism goes further, suggesting that different, but equally valid, descriptions of an event might be offered even by people in the same mode. Marmur takes the last insight in an exciting new direction by proposing a "diagonal pluralism" that aspires to recognize truth from multiple points of view within Judaism (vertical) and multiple points of view generally (horizontal).

And what good is a Jewish book about truth without a treatment of the truth-telling power of comedy? The connection between humor and truth-telling is one the Symposium took seriously, going so far as to tap the comedic stylings of Stephen Colbert for its title. Indeed, Colbert mused recently about the connection between truth and laughter in an interview on National Public Radio. Observing that overt government deception can produce crippling anxiety in its constituents, Colbert finds an antidote in humor: "When you laugh, you can't be afraid at the same time. So if you can laugh, you can think."[10] In other words, the disarming power of laughter allows viewers, for the moment at least, to overcome their fear and find the truth amidst the dishonesty.

The essay on laughter in the present volume deals not with American political satire, but with a work of Israeli television. In "Truth and Satire in the Bible, Yesterday and Today: Reflections on *Hayehudim Ba'im* (*The Jews are Coming*)," Wendy Zierler (with contributions by Asaf Beiser and Natalie Marcus) considers the truth-telling capacities of satire in relation the award-winning Israeli comedy/satire show, *Hayehudim Ba'im*, a show that mines the entire textual and cultural history of the

10. https://www.npr.org/2021/04/27/991149701/stephen-colbert-on-missing-his-audience-and-making-comedy-a-family-business.

Jewish people since biblical times for laughs as well as hard-hitting truths about issues of religious and contemporary political significance. The various skits surveyed and analyzed demonstrate the role of comedy and satire in exposing vice as well as virtue, and in fostering intellectual as well as moral excellence. Finally, Wendy Zierler's concluding essay considers the relationship between truth and death in a selection of modern Jewish literary sources. Ultimately, she finds, death or the threat thereof does not so much simplify the Jewish quest for truth as lend it a sense of moral and historical urgency. Even so, in almost every case, the quest for absolute truth is countered in these texts, as in biblical and rabbinic sources, by other virtues: pluralism, ethical consideration, and changing social norms.

A couple of provisos before turning to the essays. First, any volume that endeavors to treat a subject so vast and variegated as Jewish tradition is bound to have gaps. So, too, here. The make-up of our Symposium, limitations on space, the expertise of available scholars, and other factors have meant that some aspects of Judaism are left unexplored. Medieval Jewish thinkers are largely absent, for example, as are sources from the Second Temple period. The contributions nonetheless span a wide range of eras and perspectives, and there is tremendous breadth within many of the essays themselves, such that Jewish tradition can be said to have been treated fairly, if not comprehensively.

Second, the observation made here in the introduction and in many of the contributions, namely that Jewish sources demonstrate tolerance, flexibility, and openness to change with respect to truth and its interpretation, does not mean that truth should be seen as an instrumental construct, invoked merely for expedience rather than principle. This exact point comes to the fore at the end of Franz Kafka's famous novel, *The Trial*, when the Priest offers his recitation and commentary on the parable, "Before the Law." Joseph K. rejects the Priest's riddling interpretation of the parable, saying that in order to accept it, one would need to need to accept that "everything said by the doorkeeper [who guards the Law and prevents the man from the country from entering until finally he dies] is true . . . "No," said the priest, "you don't need to accept everything as true. You only have to accept it as necessary." "Depressing view,"

said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world."[11] K.'s rejection of the Priest's commentary thus becomes a rejection of the rule of lying, itself an important truth, and an assertion of principle against the backdrop of a world filled with inscrutable laws and inaccessible judges. With COVID fear and confusion, widespread distrust of government institutions, and (justified) paranoia surrounding the workings of police and our justice system, our own world has taken on a nightmarish, absurd, Kafkaesque aspect: K.'s singular refusal to accept the rule of lying, however, is one of the few unriddled, unambiguous messages of the novel – a resonant message, indeed, for our current moment.

11. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Edwin and Willa Muir, (New York, NY: Schocken, 1992), 119.

Section 1

Torat Emet: The Torah of Truth