

Erev Rosh HaShanah
October 2, 2016 – 1 Tishre 5777

We long to answer life's deepest questions. And in his book, Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life, Rabbi Irwin Kula uses the lens of Jewish wisdom to help us make sense of our daily lives. This Erev Rosh HaShanah, I invite you to join me in an exploration of truth.

As world – and local – events seem to grow more confusing and, very often, more frightening, we look for a center that can hold life's conflicts and contradictions. We yearn for peace. We seek enduring truths. And we hope for comfort and guidance.

We have a human need to make sense out of chaos and discover what really matters in life. Our Jewish tradition is rich with methods and philosophies designed to support and guide us, to help us explore and deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. Our traditions are meant to be lived. They are not meant to become a means of claiming superiority.

And they are not meant to be the be-all and end-all.

They are meant to illuminate the human experience, to explore conflicts and dualities... not to dampen, dispel, or repress exploration.

Jewish wisdom encourages us to seek answers to our deepest questions... while knowing that we just might never get there. It's all about the discoveries that we will make along the way. It's about celebrating the inevitable messiness of life, of living with grace in uncertainty. It's about crossing boundaries and growing in the process.

We Jews have been “crossing boundaries” for quite some time. First Abraham and, then, the Israelites in Egypt were called “*Ivrim* – boundary crossers”; in essence, hearing: “Yer not from around these parts, are ya?” Our people's journeys have taken us to places between meaning and meaninglessness... and, to the borders of promised lands.

These are not the places of absolute truths, but rather they dance between dualities and contradictions: Life and Death, Hate and Love, Right and Wrong, Joy and Sorrow. We can search, but it is quite possible that we will not find a final answer. There is no set script. There is no fixed choreography to be followed in this dance of life.

Rather, as Rabbi Kula explains, "... it is in the searching that we come to understand that answers present themselves in intricate improvisation, complete with rhythms, melodies, and cues – and many dancing partners to accompany us, to teach us, and to support us."

Okay, so with this intricate dance in mind, how do we understand "Truth"? Rabbi Kula writes that "...the search for truth is not about letting go; it's about going deeper. The goal is not reaching a single realization, but living the process of realizing again and again."

"Living in the process of realizing again and again..." Actively experiencing what are called "Aha moments;" insights that move us forward on the path to deeper understanding.

We are encouraged to be "sacred skeptics." Skepticism doesn't stop us in our tracks; it inspires us to learn more. When we both hold and question our truths, we become lifelong learners... rather than absolute knowers.

Yet... don't we want to know the answers? Let's face it, we may pride ourselves in being open-minded, accepting, and flexible... but we all maintain beliefs that we consider self-evident: ideas and unquestioned presumptions that surface when the going gets tough, when we feel challenged or most vulnerable.

Today, we find that we are polarized by opposing, hard-held answers to controversial issues. We've forgotten that as mere mortals we are meant to search... as much as to find.

There is a wonderful midrash that imagines God waking up on the sixth day of Creation with what may be the most creative idea yet: humankind! Full of wonder and excitement, God can hardly wait to get to work. As so many of us do

before we set off on a new idea or a risky venture, God seeks advice from consultants... in this case, the angels. But the angels are undecided, and caught between Truth and Love. The angel of Truth argues against the idea of humanity, fearing that human beings will lie and kill in their pursuit of Truth. But the angel of Love knows that humanity will engage in great acts of loving kindness and self-sacrifice, and that God's desire for creating humanity is born out of God's powerful yearning for love.

God's decision is indeed informed by Love, and humanity is created. In the process, God realizes that Absolute Truth cannot exist for any human being. That Truth, with a capital "T", can exist only in Heaven; on earth there are truths (lower case "t"). As a result of this realization, so the story goes, God casts out capital-T Truth from Heaven and it falls to earth, shattering into pieces and fragments – too numerous to count. *Adam* – the first human being – is made from the dust of the earth, out of those very shards of Truth. From now on, there will be only partial, multiple, or even contradictory lower-case-t truths. And we humans will search forever for truths within ourselves and throughout the entire world. Each person, each culture, each religion has part of the truth – none has it all.

Through this story our sages teach us that this searching for truth, this mystery, leaves a space for us – where certainty does not. Mystery - and paradox - leaves a space for *each of us*; a space filled with hope of discovering a truth.

Rabbi Kula reminds us that: "When we are faced with truths different from our own, it is very helpful to take a step back and reframe our own perspective through the eyes of the other person... When two ideas conflict, it isn't because one is necessarily true and the other is necessarily false. It is quite possible that each represents a different perspective on reality. Physicist Neils Bohr taught: 'The opposite of a fact is a falsehood, but the opposite of a profound truth is very often another profound truth.'"

Some of us might just be too afraid of other points of view. It is quite possible that hearing another's perspective can really change you. That can be scary – but it can also be freeing; by allowing another's point of view – your

child's, your partner's, your boss', your perceived enemy's - to sit alongside your own, you and the situation have the potential to be transformed.

Of course, at the same time, we must be careful not to simply say: "Well, if everything is partially true, then nothing really matters" as if there aren't standards of right or wrong. In every view, there is a partial truth, but not every view is equally true. We should argue with and criticize those views we believe to be wrong. When we engage in serious dialogue, within ourselves and with each other – our worlds expand; our truths are refined and we can even incorporate the truths of others, finding new positions and even shared ethical visions.

And, finally, truth without humility can easily turn into arrogance or dominance, and inevitably leads to dead ends – both figuratively and literally. The Hebrew word for truth is "*Emet – alef, mem, tav.*" If you remove the first letter, you have the word – *met*, which is the Hebrew word for death. The mystics taught that if you only have one side of the story, you have begun a death spiral. When you think about leaders in history – and today – who think they have the only answer, that only they have access to the capital T Truth, it becomes clear how profoundly important humility is.

As we stand tonight at the edge of the new year, we ask that our search for truths be illuminated by the teachings of our tradition.

May we be open to the journey, not focused on the destination; that we appreciate the discoveries to be made along the way.

May we welcome and hold fast to the many partners who will accompany us, teach us and support us.

May we come to see "Aha moments" as integral parts of our journey, not endings in and of themselves, as we continue learning throughout our lives.

And may we be open to faith without fanaticism, and humble enough to seek a wider and more encompassing truth.

Wishes for a *Shanah Tovah u'metukah* – a good and sweet year.