

EMBRACING LOVE AND TRUTH
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In the midst of global turmoil, distasteful racial politics, the threat of nuclear conflict, and devastating natural catastrophes, there was a ray of light and hope this summer in the release of the film, "Wonder Woman."

The captivating actress, Gal Gadot, a veteran of the Israel Defense Forces, may well be the most popular and influential ambassador for the State of Israel today. In Hebrew, her name "Gal" means "wave." As she graciously and valiantly undulates through the screen, she is making waves.

I am not a comic book or Super Hero fan, yet I found the movie not only entertaining, but a pertinent commentary on our times and on the human condition.

The film is inspired by themes culled from the imagination of its 1941 creator, William Moulton Marston. It draws from Greek and Roman mythology. But it is also informed by Jewish and Christian religious motifs that lend to the movie spiritual depth and resonance.

Whether you have seen Wonder Woman, or not, allow me to tell you some of her story and how it mirrors and challenges our beliefs.

Wonder Woman, Princess Diana, was born in an island paradise, where lived the Amazonian sisterhood. She was made from clay by her mother and breathed into life by Zeus. Diana grows up to become the finest of warriors, with superhuman traits, a demi-goddess with a heart of goodness, always ready to help those in need. She lives in a world of simplicity, peace and beauty.

The serenity of the paradise setting begins to change when Captain Steve Trevor of the British secret service breaks through the veil of myth and crash lands onto the island, connecting the Amazons to history during the First World War. Diana rescues the handsome officer. The Germans in pursuit of Capt. Trevor, breach the shores of paradise and a battle ensues between them and the Amazons. For the first time, Diana becomes aware of the power of evil and is determined to pursue and destroy the entity she perceives to be its source, the God of War, Ares.

In the course of the movie, Princess Diana becomes a very human warrior for good whose moral compass and heroic prowess will rescue the embattled, and challenge political and military leaders to assume responsibility for defeating the forces of evil.

Aside from her own physical prowess, among the supernatural weapons that Diana uses in combat is, her Lasso of Truth. Diana uses it as a weapon to subdue evil and to extract information from her antagonists. The theme of Truth becomes crucial as the climax of the movie unfolds.

Sir Patrick Morgan, who had appeared earlier as a level-headed British diplomat intent on negotiating a peace armistice with the Germans, reenters the scene. He emerges as the evil Ares whom Diana must combat to the death.

Diana lassos Ares and says to him: "I compel you to tell me the Truth". He responds quite biblically: "I AM" – revealing that he is not the god of War, but of TRUTH.

He says to Diana, "Mankind stole this world from us (the gods). THEY start wars on their own." Ares, the god of Truth, believes that humanity is not worth saving; that humans are inherently evil and will eventually destroy themselves.

Is he telling the truth? Are we bent on self-destruction?

I was immediately reminded of an ancient rabbinic story, a midrash on the creation of the world and a reflection on Truth. Remember that in the story of Genesis, in the process of creating the world, God says: "Let US make the human (Adam) in our image"? Who is God speaking to? Who is US? What does OUR image mean?

In the midrash, Rabbi Simon taught: "When the Holy blessed One decided to create Adam, God consulted with the Angels. The ministering angels divided themselves into groups, some of them saying, "Let the human be created" while others said, "Let him not be created." LOVE said, let him be created, because he will perform acts of loving kindness; TRUTH said, let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood." JUSTICE said, "Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds;" PEACE said, "Let him not be created, because he will be full of strife."

What did God do? The vote was two to two. To get a majority in favor of the creation of humans, God took TRUTH and cast it to the ground (GR 8:5).

The US in the story of Genesis according to the rabbinic interpretation, represents the angels with whom God consulted, arguing for and against the creation of the human being. But God is committed to bringing humans into life, so God casts TRUTH to the ground and proceeds with the creation.

Is the rabbinic tradition suggesting that Truth is irrelevant and unimportant?

Each year, the Oxford English Dictionary chooses a Word of the Year. Last year (2016) it was "Post-truth". The definition – "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Post-truth implies that we have reached a time when truth has become totally subjective, unimportant or irrelevant.

The Founding Fathers believed that civic virtue was built on education and knowledge. James Madison reminded us: "A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher and Jew who escaped Hitler's Germany, also argued that democratic society requires that we agree on two things. One, that there

are such things as facts. Second, that we strive to present those facts as accurately as we can. In other words, we should try to know and tell the truth.

Are the rabbis suggesting something different in the story?

To the contrary. By casting truth to the ground, God is not saying that truth doesn't matter, but that it does not come from heaven. "Truth," *EMET* in Hebrew, is a word made from the first, last and middle letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is referred to as the "Seal of God." Truth is the "Seal of God" but not the "Writ of God." We must write it, we must arrive at the truth within ourselves, in our relationships. Only then will God "Seal the truth" which has been forged and written into the human heart. The danger is when we begin to think that our truth is divine, from heaven, immutable, despite science, despite facts, despite reason.

Absolute, inflexible TRUTH, "our truth," blinds us to the humanity of others. It denies the possibility of peace, of love. Peace requires that we bind ourselves to others, that we give up a piece of our long held truths. Love is the means by which we accomplish that, for love is the letting go of ego, the making of room for another in our lives. (You know what happens when to egotists meet – you get an I for an I!)

A verse from the book of Psalms inspires our Midrash: "Love (*Hesed*) and Truth (*Emet*) shall meet; Justice (*Tzedek*) and Peace (*Shalom*) will kiss." Then, "Truth will spring up from ground and Justice will look down from the heavens" (85:10-11). Truth and Justice can only flourish in a context of Love and and Peace.

The 19th Century Hassidic Kotzker Rebbe posed the question: "Why was PEACE not cast aside as well Truth, since it also opposed the creation of the human?" He answers that in casting TRUTH aside, PEACE is ensured, since the root of most conflict, antagonism and enmity is everyone battling for his or her own version of the TRUTH, his or her interests, prejudices and ego. The Kotzker Rebbe, is not proposing casting reason aside, but rather rejecting absolute, dogmatic truth.

And so the midrash continues:

The angels said to God, "Why do you despise your Angel of Truth? Let Truth rise out of the earth, as it is said in the Psalms: "Truth springs out the earth" (85:11). The question we must ask as we enter a new year is – does it, can it? In a world where scientific data is denied, when statements require no evidence and facts are just made up, are we doomed?

Conspiracy theorists, creationists, vaccine opponents and climate change deniers proliferate. Of course, we like to count ourselves among the rationalists, immune to such fantasies. But we all, at one time or another, twist the facts to fit our preconceived beliefs, our prejudice, pre-judgements and ideologies.

What can we do to change this? How can we talk to those with whom we vehemently disagree? One way would be to avoid controversial subjects altogether. In other words, when you break the fast, just talk about the air conditioning in the sanctuary!

A recent scientific study suggests that by confrontational argumentation and countering with corrective facts, we only make things worse. If your side shouts, the other side will shout louder. The sounds we hear today are deafening.

What makes things better? Dialogue; don't attack. Stay calm; do not get emotional; don't shout. Listen and try to articulate the others' position correctly. Show respect, acknowledge that you understand that someone might hold a different opinion. Try to show how changing facts do not necessarily mean changing world views. It would be naive to think that this will totally solve our current divide. But it would also be foolish not to try.

Yet, this does not mean that we ignore objectivity and facts. Respect of other's opinions does not mean that each side, regardless of its merits, is given equal time on the public stage. For example, when Holocaust deniers and historians of the Holocaust are given equal time and credence in the name of balanced reporting, we create false and dangerous equivalencies. As fundamentalist religion mixes with politics, we begin to treat science as we did sex in the '50's, degrading or banning evolutionary theories and cutting funds for research into life-saving fields, such as stem-cell and climate change.

In a soliloquy at the beginning of the movie "Wonder Woman," Diana ponders the lessons she will have learned by the end of the film, preparing us toward the denouement of the adventure: "I used to want to save the world [she says], but I knew so little then. The world seems so beautiful [from a distance], but if you look closer you will see the ... darkness of mankind. What to do when faced with the Truth, is more difficult than you think..."

Truth is difficult, but it is not unattainable. We have overcome superstitions, authoritarianisms and false beliefs in the past, and we can again. Recall the words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (people) are created equal." Many nations did not and still do not hold these truths. These truths arose historically, out of pain and struggle, out of prosperity and joy. They came from human beings who dreamed and established the America in which we live and love.

This is Diana's message at the end of the film: "Inside everyone there are always both, good and evil, a choice we must make. There is no hero, only love will ... save the world."

At this time of year, we are repeatedly reminded that before us are always blessing and curse, good and evil, life or death of the spirit. The High Holy Days call us to engage that choice: to choose to cultivate truth, to labor for a world where strife and enmity will be overcome by love, that Truth might "spring from the ground" and justice and peace "smile upon us."

May the New Year find us smiling in a wonder-world of joys and healing, justice and peace.