

Sermon for Yom Kippur  
October 12, 2024 – 10 Tishri, 5785  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

Tell The Truth

In 1954, a young psychologist named Leon Festinger infiltrated a small cult who believed the world would end on December 21 of that year. They wanted to know how the members of the group would respond when (God-willing) the world would continue to spin. The group's leader, whom they called Marian, had told her faithful that a flying saucer would come and pick them up and bring them to safety.

Many of her followers had quit their jobs, sold their homes, and had given away their money in anticipation of the end. By 4:45 a.m., when the spaceship had not arrived, Marian announced her new vision: the world had been spared - because of her small band's unwavering faith.

Instead of raging at Marian for destroying their lives, or losing faith in her for false prophecy, amazingly the members of her group became even more devoted, heading out to share the news of the miracle. Dr. Festinger discovered why – it was a powerful psychological force he called Cognitive Dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance is a state of tension that occurs when a person is forced to confront two conflicting ideas that are psychologically inconsistent with each other. For example, I like to think of myself as a pretty good guy, who cares about others and does the right thing. And then let's suppose I lose my temper and I yell at my wife. So now I have dissonance: I'm a good guy, but good guys don't yell at their spouses. So how do I resolve that inner conflict?

One option is to admit that maybe I'm not such a good guy after all - that I made a mistake and did a bad thing, and so I have to apologize and ask forgiveness. But facing that hard truth is really, really hard.

So instead, I settle that inner conflict by pretending it didn't happen. I mean I didn't really yell – I might have gotten a little passionate, but passionate isn't really yelling – so what are you so upset about?

Or I can resolve the tension by shifting the blame. Well, if she hadn't set me off, if she hadn't let me down, if she hadn't ignored me, then I wouldn't have ... gotten so passionate. Now I'm not the bad guy – it was really her fault.

Dissonance creates all kinds of challenges for us. We justify all kinds of bad behaviors. We remain loyal to people who are dishonest or hurt and abuse us. We cling to conspiracy theories and fall prey to prejudices. We lose our capacity to see the world as it really is, and instead construct all kinds of distorted perceptions so we see what we want to see.

And never have we seen cognitive dissonance play out in the world more than in the aftermath of the attacks of October 7.

On that black Shabbat, thousands of trained terrorist fighters from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad invaded Israel. Pouring over the border, they committed hundreds of cruel, murderous acts of pure viciousness. They murdered children in front of their parents, parents in front of their children, and slaughtered entire families. They committed the most wicked acts of sexual violence, not only brutal acts of rape but perverse desecration and mutilation of the people they violated and murdered. They recorded themselves committing wholesale murder in cold blood, laughing joyously as they slaughtered hundreds as they fled and hid, and broadcast their foul deeds in real time. They took more than 250 people as hostages, including infant children and the elderly.

The news of this terrorist massacre instantly produced a tsunami of cognitive dissonance. For decades, the cause of Palestinian liberation has garnered deep support in the academy and among those who see the Palestinian people as innocent victims of Israeli oppression and view the struggle for Palestinian freedom as intersecting with other campaigns to raise up marginalized and oppressed people. But now their supporters had to face the fact that the people they championed deliberately committed mass murder and gruesome atrocities on an almost incomprehensible scale.

How to resolve that dissonance? Well, one option was to acknowledge that perhaps they had misunderstood the Palestinian people. They might have looked to Palestinian public opinion polls from the previous June that showed that 70 percent of Gazans said they support or strongly support “armed attacks against Israeli civilians inside Israel,”<sup>1</sup> and that only 28% supported a two-state solution.

They might have thought to condemn the attacks, declaring what occurred to be immoral and evil – full stop.

But that would have required a measure of self-awareness and truth-telling that is hard for most people to muster. So some tried other ways to resolve their dissonance.

At first, some simply denied what had happened. Queen Rania of Jordan told CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour there was “no evidence” of Hamas atrocities. Denial drove others to tear down posters of captured hostages. And some blamed the IDF, claiming that it was not Hamas, but Israeli tanks and helicopters who killed their own people.<sup>2</sup>

Others responded with all kinds of versions of, “Yes, but...” justifications. Yes, but Israel is an illegitimate state. Yes, but Israel occupies Palestinian land, and so Hamas is entitled to resistance, ‘by any means necessary.’ And for others, their “yes, but” actually blamed Israel for the victimization they suffered.

In a Joint Statement from Palestine Solidarity Groups at Columbia University titled “Oppression Breeds Resistance”, published just two days after the attack, the students wrote in bold letters:

The weight of responsibility for the war and casualties undeniably lies with the Israeli extremist government and other Western governments, including the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Center for POLICY and SURVEY RESEARCH Public Opinion Poll No (88) – June 2023

<sup>2</sup> <https://prospect.org/world/2024-03-20-what-really-happened-on-october-7/>

government, which fund and staunchly support Israeli aggression, apartheid and settler-colonization.<sup>3</sup>

Faculty at Columbia backed them up with their own letter published a few weeks later, saying: “One could regard the events of October 7th as ... an occupied people exercising a right to resist violent and illegal occupation.”<sup>4</sup>

Still others said, “Yes, but what Israel does is much worse.” What could be worse than what Hamas perpetrated on October 7? Genocide. Brazilian President Lula da Silva compared Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza to the Holocaust, saying the only historical equivalent was “when Hitler decided to kill the Jews.” “What’s happening in the Gaza Strip isn’t a war, it’s a genocide,” he said. “... It’s not a war of soldiers against soldiers. It’s a war between a highly prepared army and women and children.”<sup>5</sup>

Never mind that Hamas’ explicit aim, as stated in their charter, is actual genocide – either the complete subjugation or erasure of Jews from the land. Their charter declares: “The hour of judgment shall not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them.”<sup>6</sup> For so many, the only way to reduce their dissonance is to accuse Israel of the crime those they champion actually committed.

Some dealt with their dissonance in silence, refusing to acknowledge the facts before them. In the weeks following October 7, as the sexual violence perpetrated that day came to light, feminist groups and those who advocate for victims of sexual violence were silent. Sheryl Sandberg, who helped produce the documentary “Screams Before Silence,” said: “If you believe that October 7 was resistance — and I want to be super clear, I don’t — all of a sudden when you hear there was rape, that does not fit into your model of resistance at all. You can say, “Wait a second, maybe I’m wrong or maybe it’s not this simple.” Or you can say, “This doesn’t fit into my narrative; therefore, it didn’t happen.” And that should scare all of us.”<sup>7</sup>

But by insisting that the world condemn the horrific sex crimes of October 7, Israel was accused in an open letter signed by more than 2000 women of “weaponizing the issue of rape.” The letter states: “We repudiate the attempts by the Israeli government, and its apologists, to delegitimize our work, ... accusations of sexual assault have also been wielded as a tool of war – and as an (often lethal) weapon of racism and colonialism. In its current war against the people of Gaza, the Israeli government has chosen to weaponize the issue of sexual violence for political outcome.”<sup>8</sup>

When the facts don’t fit our narrative, when the truth does not comport with what we want the truth to be, we lie to ourselves, and each other. We find any narrative, even a false narrative, that tells us the story we want to hear.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeHe5p0in9g4h9xURoTx6NPn-v2rb-m7k6ZIm4YNGqOPRVsFQ/viewform>

<sup>4</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vSxEIf0j1H6v3R4549yxfetSBy1ioc6VHyJa3vKfvgvVFX9TA1uk\\_11aTuSBKAyzqjF3hJT9EVw0P7a/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vSxEIf0j1H6v3R4549yxfetSBy1ioc6VHyJa3vKfvgvVFX9TA1uk_11aTuSBKAyzqjF3hJT9EVw0P7a/pub)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-livid-as-brazils-lula-says-israel-like-hitler-committing-genocide-in-gaza/>

<sup>6</sup> Hamas Charter – article 7 -

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thefp.com/p/sheryl-sandberg-i-was-wrong-about>

<sup>8</sup> <https://stopmanipulatingsexualassault.org/>

But lying to ourselves can bring severe consequences. We don't want to believe we need to change our lifestyle, and so we tell ourselves the doctors don't know what they're doing, the science isn't settled, and even if I change my lifestyle, it won't make a difference anyways. We justify our bad choices by shifting blame and responsibility – it's not that I'm underperforming at work, it's that they play favorites or judge me unfairly. When we're not able to face up to the truth of who we are and the truth of what we do, we can end up destroying our careers, our relationships, and our lives.

Dostoevsky wrote in his masterwork, *The Brothers Karamazov*, “The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to such a pass that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love, and in order to occupy and distract himself without love he gives way to passions and coarse pleasures, and sinks to bestiality in his vices, all from continual lying to other men and to himself.”

We have to stop lying to ourselves and allowing others to lie to us. We have to tell the truth, no matter how hard it is to hear.

We have to tell the truth that beginning with the rule of King Saul three thousand years ago, the Jewish people were a nation that claimed the land of Israel as their home. Over the centuries that followed, that has never, ever changed. Whether the land was controlled by the Jewish people or by invading colonial armies from afar – Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Arabia, European Crusaders, or the Ottoman Turks, it was and remains the homeland of the Jewish people, who have lived in greater or lesser numbers there throughout the millennia.

And as peoples throughout the world in the nineteenth century organized around their national identities, so too did the Jewish people.

We have to tell the truth that Zionism is not a dirty word, but that Zionism is the progressive movement of the Jewish people for liberation and national self-determination in our original indigenous homeland, the land of Israel.<sup>9</sup>

To claim that Zionism is a colonial enterprise is a ridiculous fallacy. In order for a nation to express colonial ambition, they must have a homeland from which they extend their reach. Arab colonialism began in Arabia and spread across the Middle East and North Africa. How else did the peoples of North Africa come to speak Arabic as their native language? French colonialism spread from France; thus, you have native French speakers in places as diverse as Vietnam and Haiti. We have to tell the truth that as Dara Horn writes: “Schools and universities lose their credibility and their ability to teach when educators let lies undermine learning.”<sup>10</sup>

We have to tell the truth that connection to the land and people of Israel is an inherent and inseparable part of what it means to be Jewish. We have to tell the truth that the State of Israel has the same right to exist as any other nation state on earth.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://zioness.org/what-is-zionism/>

<sup>10</sup> “October 7 Created a Permission Structure for Anti-Semitism,” by Dara Horn in *The Atlantic Magazine*, October 7, 2024.

We have to tell the truth that in spite of our dreamt of rebuilding a homeland where we would share the land in a state of collaboration and mutual respect, more than 75 years of unrelenting terrorism and warfare forced our people to build a truly formidable military and technical prowess so that we could protect and defend ourselves.

We have to tell the truth that the reason millions of people in Gaza live behind massive border walls and blockades at sea is because of the insistent threat to life and limb posed by the menace of Hamas fanaticism and that of their sponsors in Iran. We have to tell the truth that morality dictates that if someone is coming to kill you, you have to defend yourself, even if it means killing your pursuer.

But we also have to be willing to confront the truths that are hard to hear. We also have to tell the truth that as Israel fought for its independence, Palestinians suffered a catastrophe in 1948 that resulted in the mass displacement of more than 700,000 people, many uprooted from places they had called home for centuries. We also have to tell the truth that too often Israeli Arabs have suffered discrimination and inequality, too often treated with scorn and outright bigotry and persecution. We also have to tell the truth that Israel's settler movement has often robbed Palestinians of their lands and their dignity, committing gross acts of hate and wanton acts of aggression and terrorism with ever increasing frequency and impunity.

At the same time, we also have to tell the truth that Dr. Tal Becker told the ICJ, that " Hamas has systematically and unlawfully embedded its military operations, militants and assets throughout Gaza within and beneath densely populated civilian areas. It has built an extensive warren of underground tunnels for its leaders and fighters several hundred miles in length throughout the Strip, with thousands of access points and terrorist hubs located in homes, mosques, UN facilities, schools and perhaps most shockingly hospitals."<sup>11</sup> We have to tell the truth that Hamas built a strategy designed to maximize the deaths of the civilian population they are responsible to protect, that they steal the provisions and aid designated for the larger population, and that as a result of that strategy, thousands of innocent people have died, and millions are suffering from lack of food, clean water, and access to healthcare.

We have to tell the truth that this war could have ended months and months ago – had Hamas agreed to return every one of the hostages it abducted, and agreed to surrender and lay down its arms. We have to tell the truth that this war could have ended months and months ago had Hezbollah not launched nearly daily attacks on Israel with thousands of missiles, and instead had chosen to live in peace.

We have to tell the truth. We have to tell the truth no matter how difficult it is to hear or to face. We have to tell the truth to ourselves about ourselves, and we have to tell the truth to people who insist on living in delusion to resolve their cognitive dissonance, and who invent narratives that distort reality to satisfy their need for confirmation.

We cannot tolerate leaders who refuse to be truthful with us. We cannot tolerate our inclination to deceive ourselves. As psychologists Carol Tarvis and Elliot Aronson write: "mindless [self-deception], like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/opening-statement-by-tal-becker-to-icj-regarding-genocide-accusation>

getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits.”

As we begin to write the next chapter in the story of our lives, let us resolve this year to tell ourselves and each other the truth. May we muster the inner strength to face our dissonances with honesty and integrity while cultivating curiosity and humility. And may we lift up truth to its rightful divine place in our world and among our priorities and values – so that we build a real world of lovingkindness, hope, goodness and peace.