

*"Al Chet Shechatanu L'Fanecha...
For the Sin that we have sinned before You."*

Consider the confessional:

*"We have been guilty of betrayal, gluttony, malice,
Evil, deceit...mockery, treachery, depravity..."*

The list continues, and that's just the short confession!

Year after year we admit to a whole host of sins we most likely did not commit...

Bribery, treachery, insolence...

Wrongs which make us out to be downright criminal!

Robbery, cheating, scorn...

And much as you might rightfully deny the majority,
there is one for which we all are guilty, present clergy included,
maybe even multiple times a day...

To a person, no matter how gracious and good,
We all lie...[we are all liars!]

As secular philosopher Sam Harris [known among the New Atheists]
spells it out in his new monograph: [[Lying](#), Four Elephants Press, pg 1-2]

"Nowhere do our injuries seem more casually self-inflicted
or the suffering we create more disproportionate than in the lies we tell..."

As Harris makes abundantly clear: "Lying is the royal road to chaos."

By simply being honest with everyone, by telling the truth without fail,
We commit to avoiding a whole host of long range problems
At the cost of some short-term discomfort.

Sounds like a good game-plan,

But telling the truth is not always so easy.

How many little white lies do we tell in the course of a day,
Harmless, innocuous, to save ourselves/another hurt or embarrassment?...

"Honey, do I look fat in this dress?"

I learned long ago, the answer is always "No."

And yet, if telling the truth with utmost sensitivity

Might move her to find a more flattering outfit, Why not?

As my wife would often respond to my reassurance, knowing me all too well:

"And why should I trust you?"

In fact, Sam Harris would claim,

"Lying is a failure of friendship..." [Harris, pg 16]

A false encouragement perpetuating a misguided reality

That can prove more costly than we might ever imagine...

Think Rachel Dolezol, the 37 year-old former President of the Spokane NAACP

Who abruptly fell from her highly effective civil rights activist role

After her biological white parents outed her...

With light brown skin and dark, curly, almost kinky hair,

She'd long presented herself as Black.

Dolezol graduated from Howard University,
Taught African American studies, and, married to a Black man,
Self-identified with the culture and the cause, making it central to her life.
And even though in my days at Mass College of Art, the standing rule was:
“Presentation is 90%,” there was one little problem: the woman was living a lie.

In the wake of Dolezol’s eventual resignation in June,
A few dozen rallied on behalf of the local chapter, holding signs that read:
“Integrity Matters.”

Yet remarkably, even with the racial divide accentuated by the year anniversary of
Ferguson, the horrific shooting of 9 at the AME Church in Charleston,
As if such human suffering was necessary for us to affirm ‘Black Lives Matter,’
Public opinion on the masquerading NAACP leader was divided.
A member of the Spokane chapter reaction: “It feels like the ultimate betrayal,”
Was tempered by Don Harris, the Phoenix chair who put cause before color:
“I care [more] that she was trying to make the world better every day.”

So if the narrative we create leads us to live a higher truth,
Even if it’s not true....is it still a lie?....

Or is our ‘To Tell the Truth’ tipping-point the kind of deception we saw carried out
by NBC nightly news anchor Brian Williams?...

Misremembering the events of 12 years ago, putting himself in the line of direct attack
during the network’s coverage of the US invasion of Iraq,
William’s fabrication was unfortunate, at the very least,
especially since the exemplar in his field remains Walter Cronkite,
During his tenure, the most trusted man in America.

In June, on a Today Show interview, looking remorseful, Williams said:

“I am sorry. I made a mistake in misrepresenting the events of 2003.

I let down my colleagues and our viewers, and I’m determined to earn back their trust.”

Here’s what Williams could not say: “I lied.”

For a man who parses words for a living, the “L” word was more than he could bear.

Still, old-time master of wordplay and late-night TV host Dick Cavett insisted:

“He had the manliness, the courage to say I am sorry...

And we’re a country that gives people second chances...”

This is the season of second chances, after all,

And most all of us have been there...

Strike that—We ARE there...

What are these days all about if not getting the chance to do a re-write of our life-script?

“Writing is the perfect metaphor for *Teshuvah*—for turning ourselves around.”

As Dr. Erica Brown [UJA-Federation’s D.C. Area Scholar] asserts:

“Words build worlds...And at this holy moment, we do more than walk beneath God’s quill
awaiting evaluation; we write our own destinies. We are co-authors, junior editors in
Life’s [big] Book.” [Unetaneh Tokef, ed. L. Hoffman, pages 90-91]

Sure, God may be the publisher, but having reviewed our entry from the past year, with plot revisions and character upgrades, maybe even a change of setting in mind, our objective is to craft a new narrative.

Yet if you are at all like me, seeing that your shortcomings this year,

The confessional [of sins] that actually has your name on it,

are pretty much identical to past year reviews,

how do you approach the writing process?...Just what are you supposed to do?

It's not simply about telling yesterday's truth,

but envisioning a revised storyline for tomorrow.

Which means that our rewrite is a work of fiction!...

As [Prof of English at Wake Forest] Eric Wilson suggests in his new book:

Keep It Fake—Inventing An Authentic Life. [Wilson, pgs 80-82]

"For we just might discover, strangely and paradoxically enough,

That some fictions are truer than facts: more revelatory and beautiful and good."

In all honesty, we are not news anchors but novelists,

and our new submission for this year's Executive Editor rests on our ability

to see an unfounded reality;

to tell ourselves a story that's not quite *yet* true...

Oscar Wilde, late 19th century wry Irish born playwright/poet/social critic, commenting a century ago on the problem with our country's common life-approach:

"The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit,

Its indifference to the poetical side of things, its lack of imagination,

are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who,

according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie. And it is not too

much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry tree has done

more harm...than any other moral tale in all of literature."

What Wilde is urging us to admit is that our lives,

when lived to their fullest potential, are works of fiction...

Kurt Vonnegut fans understand...

In Cat's Cradle, the rebel religion created around the main character is Bokononism, practiced illegally by everyone on the isle of San Lorenzo...

The aim of this fictional faith is to enable the natives, often struggling merely to survive, to overcome their unhappiness and misery...HOW?....

By following hopes that might be illusory—dreams that are surely unreachable...

by living within the comfort of lies...The frontpiece in his novel, taken from the sacred scripture, The Book of Bokonon reads:

"Live by the foma [the harmless untruths] that make you happy and healthy and kind..."

Vonnegut's brilliant satire of religion is meant to underscore how

In our world, real faith systems often fall short....

YET, at the core of his parody is the fuel that drives our faith:

Its not *Bayom hazeh* we pray but *Bayom HaHu—And on that Day...*

For over and above actuality, we live by aspiration.

For what we see is not all there is...
our struggles, our losses, our suffering...are not for naught...
Our story is an unfinished novel; a work of artistry whose plot peers beyond the horizon.

I hear the murmurings...

Does that mean that the rabbi is telling us to lie?...Well, not in the literal sense.

You are on the witness stand before the Heavenly Court...

Your life-tale to this point, your misdeeds and misgivings; all lies open.

Looking at your saga so far you cannot help but see the truth.

But in so doing,

picking up life's pen to carve out your destiny for tomorrow,

with our genre somewhere between romance and fantasy,

make your New Year memoir *more* than real.

For if "Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth."

If mid-20th century French philosopher Albert Camus is correct,

Then it is only through our imagining an altered reality,

Only through our envisioning an elevated existence,

That we can overcome the disappointments and failings,

The doubts and unfulfilled desires,

The loss of hope—the brokenness of heart,

that may yet inscribe us for life.

God forbid that we deceive the world, pretending to be some other color or contour or person.

Yet we all aspire to be more than we are, to become better versions of ourselves.

And in the re-visioning process, facing an unforgiving world,

convincing ourselves we can...we lie.

I've been working on next year's chapter in my novel entry for the **Big Book**,

based on lots of reflection, redaction & current year review,

And what comes to the surface

Are three lies that I keep telling myself,

So my life can be more true...

FICTION #1...I'm Happy...

What's the first thing people ask when they see me: "How ARE you?"

Naturally, I know what they're asking...without asking.

HOW are you coping? Are you holding up OK?

I will admit, losing the love of your life leaves a hole,

An ache, that I'm not sure ever completely goes away.

The one who brought me ultimate joy is gone...

But that does not mean happiness in this life is no longer possible.

There's no limit to the moments that still bring great delight.

Time with dearest friends...hanging out with my kids...

momentary chance encounters that continue to bring a sweetness

that is life-sustaining.

Even staring at the pictures that surround me at home,
A tear and a smile all at once...
Wonderful life snapshots of cherished moments together
Nantucket...Soph's Bat Mitzvah...a Berkshire bike-ride....
engulf me in an appreciation of love's timeless touch...
With loss so painful, we can shut out love, thinking it's died,
Becoming an island unto ourselves...
But happiness lives in the heart.

WHEN we are open to the possibility...
When we greet life's daily unfolding as a gift to be received
with open-hearted spirit, no matter if it's broken....
Then life can still fill you with happiness;
Not an uplifting heavenly joy,
But a deep gratitude at love's lingering,
the heart of life still beating though you....

[Cantor Sings: Don't talk of love...]

FICTION #2...**I Can Fix It...**

I'm not talking with real tools, Jewish inept handyman that I am,
For that would truly be an unadulterated fabrication.
BUT...whatever the emotional hurt, no matter the depth of the worry/wound...
IF an LT member comes in to share some family dysfunction or breakdown,
Or a professional disappointment, a personal despair or shame...
IF a confirmand comes to share a sense of self-doubt,
A feeling she doesn't fit in; a sense that he's not on the same page as his peers...
IF loss is so great a burden that living seems too hard to bear...
IF close relationships with the people around me are somehow in disrepair...
My general attitude always is: We'll fix it!

Now maybe it's life-maturity tempered with age,
But often, much as I am always still trying, truth is,
I can't fix it...
Pain persists; hurt lingers...
Not every kid fits in.
Not every family dynamic is meant to have a harmonious ending.
Some relationships aren't strong enough to weather life's storms.

[Cantor Sings: I've Built Walls...]

BUT...by being fully present...
By opening my heart—offering my hand, breaking down the barriers so many put up,
I fully believe that reaching out unconditionally
Brings a commitment of care that, even without the ability to fix it,
Helps the one in need know they are listened to, and more importantly, loved...
Sometimes that's as much "fixing" as any one of us can hope for...

FICTION #3...I'm Not Afraid

At every turn, life is filled with reason to fear...

As the world out there daily reminds us.

But the cause of greatest concern is our world in here.

[Our inner life is filled with fear]:

Fear of failure—fear of success...

Fear of growing beyond oneself—fear of staying the same size...

Fear of being singled out—fear of fitting in...

Fear of connecting—fear of being alone...

Fear of the dark—fear of the light...

Of course, as these days of Teshuvah's imperative bring to the fore,

Living with an awareness of our own mortality,

Fear of illness—fear of death, just come with the territory...

But the most formidable fears are those that are unformed;

Fears we cannot simply explain yet cannot explain away...

Some build walls, seek an armor of protection,

As if we can shield ourselves from the night...

As children, many of us, as I was, may have been afraid of the dark.

But my mother had a brilliant solution.

Not special books or magical tales.

Rather, putting a nightlight in my room, she reassured me:

"You see Jeffrey, now it's not dark anymore."

And even though it was, that little bit of light, the touch of her love was enough to make the fear subside...

[Cantor Sings: I have my books...]

SO in our lives, whatever the source of fear we face,

To keep the fiction in effect, we need to find the light...

Sometimes it's a reassuring word...a caring touch,

Often it's a hand to hold, even a memory which upholds you.

And now and again it is a light from a place you'd least expect it to shine...

At the end of the evening, the first night of Susan's Shivah back in Larchmont,

With that outpouring of comforters filling the Social Hall,

As the crowd dwindled, Randi Spatz approached me to offer a hug,

And something more. With her son Bryce alongside, she explained,

Knowing the road ahead would be hard, even fearful,

Her little boy, thinking of me, wanted me to have something of his.

As he'd related to her, "I think the rabbi needs this more than me."

Whereupon Randi handed me a little round, orange-toned gemstone.

"It's Bryce's special stone for keeping you safe when life gets scary."

Overwhelmed to the point of tears, I told her:

"I can't take your little boy's lucky rock!"

Smiling sweetly, Randi replied: "Don't worry; he's got a back-up."

In the 2009 radical comedy,
a film which not surprisingly went largely under the entertainment radar,
"The Invention of Lying,"

Ricky Gervais stars as Mark Bellison, a film writer/critic who lives in a world
where everyone can only, always tell nothing but the truth...
With the blunt reality of hurtful words and unvarnished veracity weighing heavy,
Gervais stumbles upon the liberating possibility that life can be more than it seems...
Playing out his romantic interest, Jennifer Garner, who has no interest in him,
Largely due to her primary concern about reproducing children who, like Gervais,
will undoubtedly be "short, fat kids with snub noses..."
Gervais, after finding that "unabashed truth" is not always all it's cracked up to be
Rushes to the hospital where he is told his mother,
Who suffered a heart attack, will in all likelihood die before the night is through.
By her bedside, with his mom expressing to him her deepest fear,
"That's it, and the next minute you're gone."

A light goes off in his head as Gervais begins to imagine a life beyond this world,
And so, with the doctors and nurses listening attentively, tearfully he tells her:

"Mum, it's not nothingness after you die...

I think you go to what looks like your favorite place in the whole world...

And you're young again...You can run and jump and dance; and there's no pain.

There's love and happiness...and it lasts for eternity."

His mother, smiles with her dying eyes, as Gervais adds:

"Say Hello to Dad for me. Tell him I love him..."

And with that, as she dies, hope in an afterlife is born.

For what was missing from the film's world of total truth,

With room for only the real, was faith...

In our very first week of our first year in rabbinic school, at HUC in Jerusalem,
My brilliant colleague and friend Rabbi Richard Baroff reminded us
just why we were entering the rabbinate:

Science teaches us about the way the world is,

but it can't teach us about the way the world ought to be:

that's what religion is for.

Among the great poets of the 20th century,

Wallace Stevens understood the power of our poetical souls, reflecting:

"The final belief is to believe in a fiction

Which you know to be a fiction, yet for you is an exquisite truth

And that you still believe in it willingly."

For Stevens, two forces contend in this life:

Reality, the truths that often try us, diminish us, limit us...and

Imagination, our ability to see beyond...to transform nonsense into meaning,

Suffering into wisdom, fear into hope... [Keep It Fake, Wilson, pages 154, 156]

Who can ever know the hopes we need hold onto so life will hold us up?.....
Who knows the life-fictions we need tell ourselves
so we can be more alive...?
What are the struggles, the fears, the unrealized dreams,
The missing pieces on your life-path,
The life-shadows that block out the light?...

 This night, as you begin to write,
 Know that you are not alone...
 Yes, we each author a chapter uniquely our own,
 But our stories merge in that Book of Books
 Where hope is reborn,
 Where all life finds its direction,
 And where happy endings are still possible...

That Book of LIFE
Where truth is transcendent;
[...With apologies to Paul Simon]
Where the *Rock* of our lives is *The Source* of our strength;
Bedrock of our belief in the power of the tale we tell...
Where wholeness lies just beyond the horizon,
And where the love we share helps us to know
life can yet be more.....

[And a Rock feels no pain...And an Island never cries.]