"Alternative Facts:" Thoughts for Parashat Bo

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By

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When confronted with a blatant falsehood uttered by the President, his spokesperson said that the President was not lying but was presenting "alternative facts." Apparently, "alternative facts" are not lies; they are to be considered as legitimate ways of describing things the way we wish to see them, regardless of whether or not they are true.

George Orwell, in his classic book "1984", was far ahead of the President's apologist. He envisioned a world that embraced three slogans: War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength. If those in power enforce "alternative facts," then these lies become normative truths that govern society. Woe unto the world where lies are presented as truth, where people have no courage to stand up against "alternative facts."

Ancient Egypt enslaved the Israelites. Moses told Pharaoh to free the slaves from their servitude. Moses would have stated the obvious truths: no one has the right to enslave another human being; no nation has the moral justification for ruthless exploitation of another nation. But Pharaoh would have replied with "alternative facts." Egypt is doing a great favor to the Israelites, providing them with full employment, giving them food and shelter. Their work is not "slavery," but productive effort for the benefit of the entire nation.

Moses told Pharaoh that God would unleash terrible plagues on Egypt if the Israelites were not freed. Pharaoh saw with his own eyes the devastation unleashed by the plagues. His advisers were frightened, and told him to spare Egypt further suffering by letting the slaves go free. But Pharaoh had "alternative facts." These plagues are temporary discomforts, but not really so bad as some people say. All countries have natural disasters from time to time; there's nothing to get excited about here; this will soon pass and life will return to normal. Believe me.

No matter what Moses said, and no matter how severe were the plagues, Pharaoh had "alternative facts." He would not let truth or real facts get in the way. The consequences for him and his people were devastating. A society or institution

devoted to “alternative facts” cannot stand. Truth will ultimately prevail.

The sin of “alternative facts” is not confined to Pharaoh or other such tyrants. It is evident in all strata of society. Too many people are ready to believe only what they want to believe or only what they are told to believe—without taking the time and effort to determine what is actually true. If real facts are unpleasant, then why not rely on “alternative facts?”

It is especially disheartening when supposedly religious individuals or institutions sacrifice commitment to truth, and instead rely upon “alternative facts.” Dr. Marc Shapiro, in his book “Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History”, deals with censorship within the Orthodox world. He has cited many examples of how historic texts have been altered to conform to the current "religiously correct" views, especially those held in the right wing Hareidi community. Books by rabbis of previous generations are reprinted, but are made "kosher" by today's religious thought police. They purge texts that have positive attitudes toward secular education or to Zionism. They eliminate passages, eliminate reference to people whose names are not clearly identified with right wing Orthodoxy, they misrepresent personalities.

Synagogues and organizations are influenced by the tendency to present “alternative facts.” Instead of admitting serious problems with the daily minyanim, they issue p.r. pieces that state that all congregants participate in the daily services. Instead of facing genuine spiritual and financial crises, they offer the illusion that all is well. Smile, keep quiet, don’t rock the boat, don’t complain. We have everything under control.

Truth is a troublesome thing. It shatters illusions. It can be abrupt and unpleasant. But once one realizes the truth, one should accept it and act accordingly. Instead, so many—like Pharaoh—continue as though they never heard the truth. They have too much invested in their illusions and falsehoods. It costs too much emotionally to give up on mistakes or to admit errors in judgment.

Spin doctors do their best to make falsehood appear to be truth. P.R. specialists promote the illusions and make “alternative facts” dominate the conversation.

Ladies and Gentlemen: “alternative facts” are lies. They are the antithesis of truth. Unless we understand this very clearly and unless we insist on genuine truth, we will find ourselves on an increasingly slippery slope leading to societal and spiritual oblivion.

Angel for Shabbat