Truth, the Whole Truth

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va-et-hanan

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

An old joke tells of a Rebbe addressing his loyal Hasidim. He began: “Today I will explain why the word va-et-hanan is spelled with a khaf.” One of the Hasidim rose respectfully and objected: “But Rebbe, va-et-hanan isn’t spelled with a khaf. It’s spelled with a het.” Without hesitation, the Rebbe replied: “That’s ONE explanation.”

The Rebbe had prepared his talk on a mistaken premise…but that didn’t stop him from proceeding. He dismissed the true fact as being ONE explanation, even though it was actually the only true explanation. To build a learned dissertation on a false premise is a joke.

Basing theories on mistaken foundations is not merely comical; it can be dangerous, even tragic. Unfortunately, many people subscribe to conspiracy theories, even when the theories are based on historical distortions, scientific errors and outright lies. They adopt erroneous ideas and discard objective facts.

It’s not only followers of conspiracy theories who subscribe to falsehoods. Many others internalize “truths” because they submit uncritically to ideas promulgated by parents, teachers, or various other authority figures. Even if those ideas are based on error, people continue to believe them, promote them, and denigrate those who reject them.

In this week’s Torah reading, Moses refers to the Israelites “who cleave unto the Lord your God” (Devarim 4:4). Yet, how does anyone “cling” to the Lord, when God is eternal, non-corporeal, unseen? Some have suggested that we cling to the Lord by clinging to the Torah sages who teach the word of the Lord.

But there is another way of understanding this.

The prophet Jeremiah taught (10:10): “The Lord God is Truth (Emet), a living God and King of the universe.” Jewish tradition identifies God with ultimate Truth (with a capital T). In our daily prayers,

we merge the last words of the Shema paragraphs with the word Truth, so that we say: “Hashem Elokeikhem Emet,” the Lord God is Truth. When the Torah refers to clinging to God, it may be interpreted to mean—clinging to Truth. The late Rabbi David Hartman entitled one of his books about Judaism “God Who Hates Lies.” He underscored the basic teaching that God is Truth; Truth (with a capital T) is pure and unequivocal. Clinging to God means pursuing Truth and despising falsehood.

Although our goal must be to cling to God and to Truth, human reality demonstrates that many are satisfied to accept and promote falsehoods. How are we to be sure that we are on the right track in our search for Truth? How can we sift through the many falsehoods and keep clinging to the Lord of Truth?

As odd as it seems, the key to genuine faith in God is a healthy skepticism! We must think critically. We must be relentless in our commitment to Truth…and this entails the ability to evaluate the foundations of theories and to correct or reject mistaken notions. To seek the living God, our minds must be alive and alert, patient and humble.

No, Rebbe, va-et-hanan is not spelled with a khaf. No matter how ingenious your “hiddush” is, it is wrong because it is based on a false premise. Even if you are a great and learned sage, your interpretation is mistaken. Instead of bringing us closer to God, it pushes us further away.

The Lord our God is Truth…and we are bidden to cling to the Lord of Truth.