Alternative Facts: Thoughts for Parashat Bo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bo

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When confronted with a blatant falsehood uttered by a former 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 seems to have become "politically correct" to speak of narratives, rather than to focus on historical truth. This tendency is blatantly evident in some discussions about Israel and the Palestinian Arabs. We are told that each group has its own narrative, implying that each group clings to its own version of truth and should be respected for its views. This approach--seemingly objective and non-judgmental--actually leads to the distortion of facts and undermining of historic truth. It simply is not true to say--as some Palestinian spokespeople say in their narrative--that the land of Israel is the historic homeland of Palestinian Arabs. It isn't a "Jewish narrative" that Israel is the Jewish homeland; it is historically true. It has been true since biblical times; it was true during Temple days in antiquity; it was true through the nearly 2000 years of exile in which Jews prayed facing Jerusalem and yearned for the return to their holy land; it is true based on the ongoing presence of Jews in the land of Israel throughout the ages, based on archaeological evidence, based on archives, documents, photographs etc.

For there to be peace between Israel and its neighbors, it is essential to seek truth, not "narratives."

In a world where “alternative facts” and “alternative narratives” are pervasive, the moral fiber of society is seriously compromised. The only guarantee for human freedom and peace is a commitment to truth.