

Truth

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“What is truth?” is the question Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, asked two thousand years ago. Possibly the most famous question of all time!

Truth is what you think to be the truth. That is the best answer modern philosophy has to offer. What does the Torah say?

The Biblical word for what we call truth is *Emet*. It is first used by Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, while on his mission to find a wife for Isaac. While explaining his mission to Rebecca’s family after he finds her, he says, “God has bestowed his kindness and truth (*chasdo ve’emeto*) for and to Abraham.” Then, to Laban, he says, “God who has led me in the true (*emet*) path”. And, again, he says “Now if you will do the kind and true (*emet*) thing for my master” let me take Rebecca with me (Genesis 24).

The term is next used to describe good and honest judges. “True (*emet*) men who hate bribes.” It is used by Jacob asking Joseph to do the kind and true thing (*chesed ve’emet*) and bury him in Hebron. Moses in describing the qualities of the Divine after the Golden Calf says that God is “Slow to anger, full of kindness and truth (*emet*).” And, finally, in Deuteronomy, when trying to clarify if a crime took place, the Torah twice says: “Is it true (*emet*) that these things were done?”

Thereafter, the word is used generously throughout the later books. But, in the Torah itself, it has nothing to do with belief or theology. It is a word used either empirically, to clarify if something physically happened, or as an expression of deep concern for doing the right thing. Or a commitment – which may vary from case to case and situation to situation.

Post Biblically, *emet* came to mean a sort of theological confirmation of God’s presence. For example, nowadays, when we say the *Shema* (which consists of quotes from the Torah), we add the word *emet* at the end. This implies, in theological terms, that this is all true. But is truth as we moderns use it, the right word?

I speculate that the idea of truth as an absolute philosophical word is the

product of Greek philosophy. The Greeks were scientists as well as philosophers (in those days, it was believed they were the same thing). They sought to verify the facts of our universe. If something could be verified, it was "true." This was their ultimate aim. To prove either using arguments or experiments. To discover the one and only truth. But once Christianity developed, with its idea that it alone was the ultimate truth and that there was only one path to salvation through their deity, the word took on the different meaning that we are familiar with today. Today, the word "truth" has very different usages and meanings. And therefore, according to the philosopher Wittgenstein, we must check the way we use a word if we are to have any meaningful conversations.

A sister word of *emet* is *amen* – literally, "I agree". *Amen* is also Biblical. It was adopted by Christian liturgy and is used to this very day. If you look it up in a Concordance of the Biblical Hebrew Language, it means "I agree." When the Bible asks someone to agree to a trial by ordeal, the person concerned says "*Amen, Amen*" – "I agree". This is also what is meant by the word *emunah*. Not to believe in theory but to be convinced in practice. Two words, *emet* and *amen* or *emunah*, are immediate neighbors.

The root "Aleph Mem Nun" means to trust, be firm, strong or reliable. It is used to describe Moses while he is keeping his arms up in the air until the battles against Amalek were won. But it is also used in the sense of trust. Abraham trusted in God. Whereas Jacob did not trust his sons when they said Joseph was still alive. God uses it to describe Moses as the most trusted person. Joseph uses it with his brothers when he asks them if he can trust them. God is described as "the God who can be trusted". And the Children of Israel at the Red Sea trusted God and Moses, too. A nursemaid is called an *Omenet* – someone we would trust with our children. As with the word *Emet*, these words are used sparingly in the Five Books of Moses but much more frequently, and in many different ways, later on in the Bible.

We now use words *emet* or *amen* to talk about belief. Even though neither of them really means "belief" in the theoretical sense. These words are more commonly used to mean having conviction. Am I convinced or persuaded of something? There is a difference for example in "believing in" something in contrast to believing that something might be the case or might happen tomorrow.

There is a difference in believing **in** God in contrast to believing **that** there is a God. One is hot. The other is cold. The First of the 10 Commandments does not say "You must believe in God". It is not stating whether God is "true" or not. It simply says, " I am God." Something you must come to terms with in your own way. To be convinced. In effect *Amen*, *Emuna*, *Emet* simply mean "I agree."

Maimonides, being a philosopher, said that the only way to be convinced about God was through rational arguments. But what if none of the arguments are convincing? And what of my relationship with God, if for example it is based on a mystical experience rather than a rational argument? I cannot prove that God exists. Does that mean there is no such thing? Of course not.

I wasn't at Mount Sinai. I do not rationally know if God gave the Torah to Moses. But I certainly am committed to living my life according to Torah as if God were communicating directly to me. That doesn't mean I hear voices. There are many ways of transmission. I cannot think of any rational arguments to explain lots of things. Love often doesn't make sense. But it's a powerful motivator in life.

So why am I going into all this? Because one of the biggest problems facing religion, in general, is whether we are to take everything that is said in holy texts in a literal sense or not. Every religion has its core ideas and narratives. And when we read the Bible, we are bound to wonder if everything happened the way it was written or whether the whole idea is to use the text, its laws, and its narratives as a guide for life. Or as a specific answer to the question of how we should live as good and spiritual beings.

Each one of us does this in his or her own way. We decide how much or how little to do. What matters and what does not. In my opinion, this is why the Bible offers us three founding fathers – each with a different character, a different approach and a different relationship with God. We have different paradigms just as we have different sects, denominations, and interpretations.

Our task in life is to be proactive in deciding what matters. Of course, it helps if we actually know something about what we are rejecting or accepting – which is why to study is so important.

Pontius Pilate got an answer that was a Christian truth. But his answer was not, and is not our truth. What works for one does not necessarily work for another. The question remains. What is truth? There is no single answer. I am not asking you to believe in me. I just hope you agree.