

TRUTH DOES MEAN SOMETHING

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Joseph dreamt a dream, and he told it to his brothers, and they hated him even more." [37:5]

Rav Zalman Ze'ev Wolf was known as the Maggid of Vilna. A Maggid might be described as a teller of stories and parables, but his mission was much greater. A Maggid would go from synagogue to synagogue, telling enjoyable sermons which also delivered a powerful message. His goal was to inspire his listeners to improve themselves, to build on their strengths and recognize their faults. The Maggid would not merely entertain; he would bring his audience closer to G-d.

If every Maggid was thus obligated to be a man of learning and piety, we can only imagine what sort of man was the Maggid of Vilna, a city where the tailor and butcher were men of learning and piety. This was, after all, the city where the Vilna Gaon, the Genius of Vilna, Rav Eliyahu Kramer, had lived just a few generations earlier. The Maggid was no mere storyteller, but one of the luminaries of his generation.

Once, "Reb Velvele," as the Maggid of Vilna was known, was invited to a conference in the city of Volozhin. The purpose of the meeting was to resolve a dispute which had arisen between two other Torah leaders. When he was invited, he made the following observation (paraphrased from the account of Rabbi Boruch HaLevi Epstein, the Torah Temimah):

"This invitation reminds me of a problem which I encounter at the same time every year. I know that this problem will remain with me my entire life, and that it plagues every person who has chosen to be a Maggid.

"My problem is this. You know, as the official Maggid of Vilna, it is my obligation to deliver a sermon on the parsha every Shabbos. One of the secrets of being a good Maggid is to highlight the conflicting sides in every story. I line up the hero against the villain, emphasizing all the positives of the good side, and all the evil of the bad. I compare Adam to the Snake, Avraham to Avimelech and the citizens of S'dom, Rivkah to Lavan, Yaakov to Esav and Lavan, Yaakov's children to the men of Shechem...

"But then I come to VaYeishev and Miketz (next week's parsha), and I have a real problem. How do I choose between Yosef and his brothers? I love both of them so dearly. They are both holy, both righteous. All of them are our forefathers, children of Yaakov. How can I follow my usual method of praising one side and denigrating the other?"

For the same reason, the Maggid found it very difficult to mediate this dispute -- because instead of dealing with two people who represented right and wrong, he was facing right and right, good and good. And that was a real challenge.

In my opinion, with all due respect, the Maggid of Vilna had it easy. He only had trouble for two weeks. In our day, it often seems as if we are overwhelmed by the opposite attitude -- "there are two sides to every story," they say. It's a nice saying, but it would be even better if we realized that sometimes the two sides are known as "right" and "wrong"! Today, writing a D'var Torah about Yosef and the brothers is no longer a problem. Everyone wants to read about the intrigue, the positives and negatives on both sides, and come away with a feeling that nothing is black and white in the world. But if you try to write about Yaakov and Esav, "hey, wait a minute, Rabbi! Yaakov was a liar! He was deceitful, and poor innocent Esav was cheated! How can you say Yaakov was right, and Esav was wrong?" Name a case of good vs. evil in the Torah, and someone will turn it on its head.

Something similar happened to me recently, when someone forwarded to me and a group of others an essay by a "Jewish leader." This is a wonderful era, in which all you need is an office and a secretary, or better yet, an Internet account, and you're a Jewish leader. I'd prefer not to name names, but on a number of previous occasions I had seen this person's writings, and he had, well, rewritten Jewish history to fit his own notions, and it was pretty obvious. You didn't need to be a rocket scientist to catch the falsehoods, though you did need to know how to open the Talmud and read the page.

Being the good citizen that I am, I replied to the sender of the original message, and suggested that he might refrain from forwarding around these writings until he had done some research. Actually, I just asked him to please not forward me material from this fellow any more. It's not as if I don't receive enough email! And I honestly thought I was being helpful. I really and truly was not (for once) looking for an argument. His response? Gee, knowing that two "Jewish leaders" (which I'm not any more than the other one) were arguing would only turn the others in his group off to Judaism.

Besides the fact that he misunderstood me (I just said that I didn't want the mail, not that he should tell all the other recipients of the original that I didn't agree), this is troubling. First of all, as the Maggid realized so painfully, there are disputes between good and good in this world, and that's something we need to know. But even more so, there are indeed disputes between right and wrong, which a little individual research can uncover. To my mind, I'd much prefer to know that there is an argument going on, rather than take something at face value and realize later that I've been sold a bill of goods!

It's not just moral relativism that is taking over -- it's that "truth" and "falsehood" no longer have meaning. We need to recognize that it's simply not true, by which I mean that the word "true" does mean something. Like a true/false binary on the computer, there's often enough no grey area for those who care to look. If we care, we'll look, and we won't be afraid to disagree when we must,

because agreement or acquiescence would be, well, wrong.