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Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
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A Place Called Truth

The rabbi of Lelov taught: “A person cannot be redeemed until he recognizes the flaws in his soul and tries to mend them. A nation cannot be redeemed until it recognizes the flaws in its soul and tries to mend them. Whoever permits no recognition of his flaws, whether individual or nation, permits no redemption. We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.”¹

Rosh Hashanah is our moment of self-recognition, of *cheshbon hanefesh*, “moral accounting.” As we gather at the start of this New Year, we are, each of us, individuals seeking greater awareness of our own weaknesses and shortcomings that we might grow closer to our best selves. But we are also citizens of a nation, gravely concerned for that nation’s wellbeing at a difficult and upsetting moment in its history.

The fourth century Talmudic sage known as Rava told the poignant tale of a town called Kushta² – a place, according to one version of the story, where no one ever aged, no one ever died, and no one knew exactly why.

A corrupt king learned of the town, and enticed by the prospect of eternal life, dispatched his wisest counselor to discover Kushta’s secret. So the counselor made the journey to the far-off place. There he noticed the trees, their branches bent low with apricots, and that everywhere people were eating them. “I found the secret,” he said to himself. Collecting a basket-full of the golden fruit he returned to his king who promptly imprisoned him, not wanting anyone else to share in Kushta’s gift. Then the king began to eat the apricots and ran to the nearest mirror to watch himself grow younger. But instead his hair turned gray. Furious, he had his counselor executed.

The king sent another messenger to Kushta to learn the town’s secret. This messenger noted that the inhabitants drank water only from a particular stream. “I know their secret,” he thought, and filled a flask with the magic waters. When he returned home and presented the bottle to the king, the king had him locked up. Then, standing before his mirror, the king drank...and watched himself grow older still. This messenger, too, was put to death.

At last the king decided, “I will go to Kushta myself.” And so he departed in his royal chariot bringing with him a bag of gold.

When the carriage passed through Kushta’s gates, the town’s inhabitants gathered around it with great bewilderment. The king emerged. And lifting up his bag of gold so all could see, he announced, “I will reward anyone who can tell me why none of you ever grow old.” The inhabitants turned to one another in astonishment. None of them knew. Again the king declared, “I promise you I will reward you if you tell me what makes this town so different from any other.”

At that, one citizen stepped forward and answered, “In our tongue, Kushta means truth. And in Kushta we speak only the truth. This is what makes us different.”

¹ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, pp.187-88.

² *BT Sanhedrin* 97a.

Having revealed Kushta's secret, the individual approached the king for the promised reward. But the corrupt king, seeing no value in this information, shoved the man away. The townsfolk cried out, "We told you our secret. We want our gold." The king brushed them aside, climbed back into his carriage and headed home.

Strangely, by the time he reached his own realm, the king was dead. But what happened in Kushta was stranger still: the citizens, who had never aged before, suddenly began to. For when the king had broken his word in the town called "truth," the trust of the entire community was shattered. And today, anyone who visits Kushta will find it no different from any place else.³

Commenting on the story, Rabbi Fred Reiner writes: "We [too] live in a time of broken trust... a time of secret truths and public falsehoods... when we suspect even the words of our leaders... A time when truth is dispensable... when... truth is manipulated and massaged and masked... leaked... packaged... and... spun."

And make no mistake – just like the people of Kushta, we too are diminished. What happens in the halls of government, sets the tone for our national discourse. As David Brooks put it, we grow tolerant of corruption and wind up "morally numb to everything." When truthfulness and accountability can no longer be assumed, it rips the fabric of society.

In the matter of impeachment, we do not yet know the full truth. We do know that hunger for control can lead those who seek it to level politically motivated allegations against those who have it. But we also know, because we have seen it before, that the thirst for power and the desire to maintain it can drive leaders to unconscionable acts. And that to defend those acts leaders even claim exemption from moral and legal canons.

These Holy Days proclaim to us a set of universal ethics by which all are bound, rooted in the belief in one God. On Rosh Hashanah we stand before that God, and before the Ark asking God's blessing in the New Year.

The synagogue Ark recalls the Ark of the Covenant in the Israelite's desert tabernacle. When the Israelites constructed their Ark, they overlaid it with pure gold, inside and out. We understand why they covered the outside with gold. That's the part everyone saw. But why the inside, too. Who would have known the difference?

And the rabbis answer that the Ark teaches us integrity – that our innermost beliefs ought to be reflected in our outward actions, that our public deeds ought to bear witness to our personal ethics, and that all ought to be pure as gold.

That may seem a lot to hope for these days. But I'm not lowering my standards. Don't you lower yours.

At this season of moral accounting, the shofar summons us back to the path of honesty and integrity, of self-recognition and redemption. May each of us hearken to its call. May our beloved country hear it, too.

³ Molly Cone in Rabbi Steven M. Rosman, *Sidrah Stories*, pp.141-44; Rabbi Fred N. Reiner, *Standing at Sinai: Sermons and Writings*, pp.163-64.