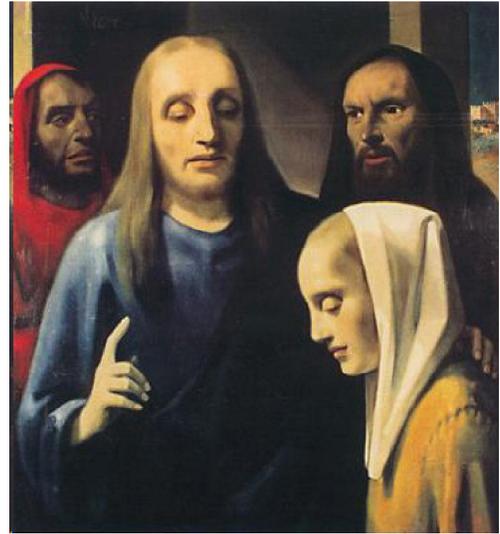


In a recent TED Talk¹, Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom relates the tale of a famous case of art looting in Nazi Germany. He tells of the collecting drive of Hitler's number two, Hermann Goering, whose passion for amassing paintings of the masters was rivaled only by his bosses' similar obsession with collecting great art. Goering desired nothing more than to own a painting by the Dutch master, Vermeer. Hitler already owned two. In 1942, Goering arranges to purchase a Vermeer from a Dutch art dealer, Han Van Meegeren - for an astonishing sum of 1.65 million guilders, equivalent to approximately 7 million dollars today. The painting, *Christ with the Adulteress* (pretty sure that is the first time you hear Christ in the 4th sentence of a Rosh HaShannah sermon - but that's the name of the painting!), the painting becomes the center of Goering's legendary art collection, and Van Meegeren becomes an even wealthier art dealer.



In the aftermath of the war, U.S. troops discovered the Austrian salt mine where Goering, now standing trial at Nuremberg for his war crimes, had hidden his extensive art collection. Efforts were made to return looted art to its rightful owners, and also to hold accountable those who had sold it to the Nazis. The painting was traced back to Van Meegeren, who was arrested by the Dutch authorities and charged with Nazi collaboration, looting and treason - crimes that could have meant the death penalty for the art dealer. After three days in prison, he confessed. But not to Nazi collaboration. Rather, he confessed to forgery. "The painting I sold to that Nazi, I painted it myself," he said. It was an incredible claim, and the authorities were unwilling to believe him until, in the presence of expert observers, he painted another perfect Vermeer forgery. It turned out that he had spent his considerable talent and passion for the works of the Dutch masters by painting and passing off forgeries for decades! Van Meegeren was convicted instead of forgery and sentenced to a one year jail term, which he died before serving, and left behind a footnote to history.



Bloom tells of the story a lovely post-script. When the authorities informed Hermann Goering of the fact that his prized Vermeer was nothing but a forgery, "according to his biographer, 'he looked as if for the first time he had discovered there was evil in the world.'" If that is not the very definition of *schadenfreude*, joy at the suffering of one's enemies, I don't know what is. We'll return to the story of Goering's forged Vermeer in a little while, but for right now, I'll bring it much closer to home.

As I prepared to begin my time as the rabbi of Temple Isaiah just over a year ago, I embarked on

1. http://www.ted.com/talks/paul_bloom_the_origins_of_pleasure.html

a mission to learn as much as I could about the congregation before showing up for “day one.” I talked to many of you on the phone, read past issues of the Prophet, and - of course in the 21st century - Googled as many different keyword combinations as I could for Temple + Isaiah + Fulton + Maryland, etc.! It was in the last category of empirical research that I first learned the story of Temple Isaiah’s very special and unique Iraqi Torah Scroll.

I learned that Temple Isaiah had acquired an amazing scroll with an incredible story. Discovered by members of the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne unit, who ducked into a random building in Mosul, Iraq that turned out to be a long-abandoned synagogue. The scroll had been wrapped in tissue paper and hidden under the floorboards by the Jews who had fled from that city decades before. Ultimately it was disassembled panel by panel, and smuggled out of Iraq by Rabbi Menachem Youlus, the “Indiana Jones” of rabbis - who brought the scroll to the attention of Rabbi Panoff and the membership of Temple Isaiah. In an incredible show of generosity, a very significant sum of money was quickly raised to restore and purchase this 400-plus year old gazelle-skin Torah and encase it in a new wooden “tik,” the traditional Sephardic-style Torah case that sits in the center of our ark.

I, of course, learned all of this by reading several excellent articles that were cached online from newspapers who picked up this fantastic and incredible story at the time. Now, many of you are thinking in your heads, “Rabbi Axler - why exactly are you retelling this story?” And others are hearing the compelling tale for the very first time. For the benefit of those who are newer to our community, I will let you in on what I discovered once I arrived at Temple Isaiah.



Yes, this Torah has an incredible and unbelievable story - in that, quite literally, the story is not-credible and not to be believed. Coinciding with my first months on the job here, Rabbi Menachem Youlus’ trial was entering the sentencing phase (two weeks after Yom Kippur) wherein he had pled guilty to fabricating this story and dozens of others connected to his “non-profit,” Save a Torah Foundation, defrauding individuals and organizations of well over a million dollars through fantastical stories of Torahs found hidden at Auschwitz, buried in mass graves in the Southern Ukraine, and - yes - beneath the floorboards of an abandoned synagogue in Mosul, Iraq.²

In the list of public “shandas,” this is one that ranks high up there in recent years. Rabbi Youlus is currently serving his four-year federal prison term on the mail- and wire-fraud charges he pled guilty to. In his admission of guilt, he made clear that he had never travelled to rescue the amazing Torah scrolls he claimed to have brought back from Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, all over the world, but rather procured the scrolls from U.S.-based Torah dealers and then wove a tale to explain each. The tales of rescue and restoration were designed to pull at the hearts of donors and communities, who would galvanize to raise the funds necessary to redeem the scroll.

2. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/nyregion/rabbi-called-jewish-indiana-jones-is-sentenced-in-torah-plot.html?_r=0

So, it was just a few weeks before the High Holy Days last year, and I was asking about specific traditions here at Temple Isaiah, wanting to make sure that important aspects of TI's history would be present at a time of tremendous transition. One of the customs, I was told, was that the Iraqi Torah Scroll was to be read on Yom Kippur morning - and that this was really the only time that the scroll was officially read from. The person telling me this then said, "well, I guess we can't really call it our 'Iraqi Torah Scroll' anymore - because we know that none of the story that Rabbi Youlus told us was true."

There was a note of sadness in their voice, and I heard that tone repeated in conversations with others over the next few weeks on the topic, particularly as the trial was in the sentencing phase, and making some news again. Honestly, I had not yet opened up the Sephardic *tik* before I was getting ready for the High Holy Days. So much controversy was associated with this scroll, but - more so - there was a lot to focus on in my first months here!

I was alone in the sanctuary on a late Thursday afternoon, and figured I should take a closer look at this scroll. I have to admit, it was the first time I had physically come in contact with a Sephardic style *tik*, and I somewhat clumsily removed it from the ark and placed it on the reader's table. I wasn't quite sure what to do next. Do you lay it down? How exactly do you open it up? When I did unclasp the latch and open the box, I was struck by the foreign and mystical nature of the hundreds-of-years-old gazelle skin Torah, radiating that characteristic orange, red and brown glow, the earthy smell of a very old scroll awoke my senses.

My first thought was "What a special and sacred scroll we have here." I squinted to discern the unfamiliar characters of a scribe's hand who, hundreds of years ago, lovingly formed the letters of this Torah scroll somewhere in North Africa or the Middle East before the first Jew ever set foot on what would become North America! The style of writing is significantly different from that which is used in an Ashkenazi scroll, and the lining up of the columns do not conform to the standards that were initiated with European, Israeli and American scrolls over the last century or more. You can see the places where the scroll was repaired again and again over the years, and where the edges of the parchment fray and crack. It is a very special and sacred scroll. Just the very sensory experience of the gazelle skin Torah is enough to point out the difference. Most Ashkenazi scrolls are written on calf skin, and tend to have a pale cream or yellow tone to them. This scroll is very different in color alone! Interestingly, in doing a Google search for "gazelle skin Torah" (with or without quotes), the first entry of the over 600,000 hits is a beautiful and extensive story in the Baltimore Sun about our scroll finding its home here in Fulton!



On Yom Kippur last year, Joshua Newman-Sunshine and I both read from the scroll, and it was a shechecheyanu moment. I had looked on You Tube to see how to do the traditional raising of the scroll, hagbaha, with this Sephardic *tik*. I was, frankly, simply happy it did not come crashing down to

the table as I lifted it after the reading!

Since then, I somewhat deliberately broke with tradition and used this scroll as Cantor Droller and I led a musical *Shabbat Shira* and responsively read the “Song of the Sea” with the congregation back in January, taking it out at some other points along the year as well. There is something very sacred about reading from this scroll - a holiness that does not emanate from the fantastic story Rabbi Youlus imagined in order to sell the scroll to this congregation.

Rather, the holiness and sacredness comes from the hands and voices of untold numbers of generations of Jews who crowded around this beloved scroll in synagogues somewhere in North Africa or the Middle East over the last four centuries. What did their synagogues look like? Years ago, Pam, my parents and I travelled to Morocco and visited synagogues around the country. In a small Berber village of Taroudant, there is a tiny adobe synagogue with the prayers and directions painted on the walls.³ There have been no Jews in this village since the 1960s, yet the site is preserved and even restored by an elderly Berber man, who showed us the ark of the synagogue, the *heichal*, which is a cutout in the wall with painted wooden doors, perfectly in the shape of a Sephardic style *tik*. Was this beloved scroll their singular prized possession?



How did this scroll survive the centuries? Had it, indeed, been hidden at one time - or maybe even lost and then restored? Who was the *sofer* who lovingly scribed the text originally, carefully ensuring that every single letter of the Torah was legible and perfect? And who were the scribes who restored it again and again over the hundreds of years? What has become of the communities that rallied around this scroll on Shabbat and holidays, who lifted it up into the air each year on *Simchat Torah* celebrating yet another cycle of reading the complete Torah and returning to the beginning?

It is this imaginative wondering that gives this scroll its sacredness and holiness.

And it is one other thing. I was not present during the year of celebration that followed Temple Isaiah's acquisition of this scroll, but many of you were. It was an opportunity to examine the many cultural expressions of Judaism from around the world, to expand our vision of Jewish life and history. It was an occasion to celebrate a scroll finding its new home in the synagogue - a ritual that is modelled on the Jewish wedding, with congregation and Torah playing the roles of bride and groom. It was also a moment when a very old and experienced scroll came together with a nearly-brand-new building, as this congregation had just moved to our present home three years earlier.

3. See a whole tour of the synagogue at Taurodant here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siAWE9uLAIk>

Now, I know and recognize that there are myriad complicated feelings about our Iraqi Torah scroll. There are those who rightfully felt betrayed by a trusted friend, as Rabbi Youlus was no stranger to the congregation, an open orthodox rabbi who had visited the congregation in earlier years, operated a respected Hebrew bookstore and was seen as a friend to the Jewish community at large. There is a measure of shame and embarrassment - “How could we have been so taken in by this charlatan? What does that say about us? Are we really that guillable?” This is understandable, as anyone who has ever been taken advantage of knows the feeling of violation. And I don’t really know anyone who hasn’t experienced that on some level. And, of course there is anger at having not only been duped by a false story, but also having been cheated out of a large sum of money.

But, I’ll return to the image of this scroll whose sacredness and holiness do not adhere as a result of the false story told about it initially, but rather out of the ways in which it was loved and revered in the imagined past, and the ways in which we hold it up for a vision of holiness in our own lives. On Yom Kippur, we will read from this scroll the following:

“You stand here this day, all of you, before your Eternal God - the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every one in Israel, men, women, and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water - to enter into the sworn covenant which your Eternal God makes with you this day... And it is not with you alone that I make this sworn covenant; I make it with those who are standing here with us today before our God, and equally with all who are not here with us today.” (Deuteronomy 29:9-14)



This text recognizes that there is an aspect of truth that crosses the generations, that is somehow always true in all generations. The accepted interpretation of that last part is that every Jew who ever lived before the giving of Torah was present at the moment of Mount Sinai, back to Abraham and Sarah. Additionally, every Jew who would ever be in the future was there as well, including my (God-willing) great-great-great-great-grandchildren (and theirs as well!). A voice from the gallery calls out “how about those who would choose to become Jews, who would convert over the millennia?” Yup, them too! They were there! Not only that, the “strangers in your camp” - those who would cast their lot with the Jewish people through family and proximity, they are included in the list of “who was there” as well! In short, it was a really, REALLY big gathering!

I love this aspect of Jewish tradition, in part because it is so comically imaginative. Just picture in your mind’s eye a gathering of every Jew who ever was, would be, as well as all those who would stand beside the Jewish community over all time. Can you only imagine the catering for this event? The need for rented chairs - the High Holy Days is nothing in comparison!!! The line for the restrooms?!?

Not to be too ridiculous, but it is impossible to believe in the actual gathering that is being imagined here. Which makes it no less True. In fact, it makes it even more True for me. Let me explain.

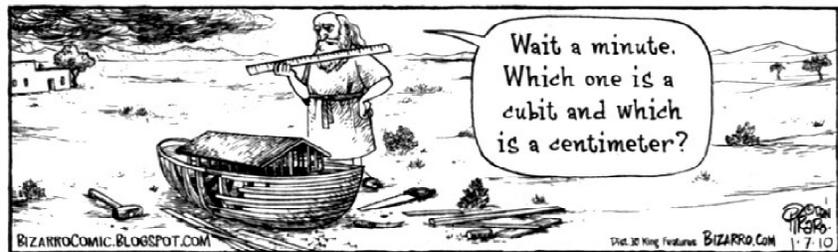
I have been asked again and again by students, b'nei mitzvah, members and prospective members of the synagogue, fellow Jews of every stripe and non-Jews whose earnestness was matched by their honesty, if I believe the Torah to be Truth - that is, did all of this happen the way it says it happened? It is one of my favorite questions, because it allows me to share what I think is an essential lesson of Reform Judaism.

Was the world created in six days by a God who rested on the seventh and established everything that is present in nature during those first six?

Was there a snake who convinced the original couple to eat some kind of fruit, which they were not supposed to eat, and therefore they were thrown out of their original home, and that's why women experience pain in childbirth?

Was there a massive storm that did away with all human and animal life with the exception of a guy named Noah, his wife, sons and sons wives in addition to the animals that "came on by twosies, twosies?"

BIZARRO



Did a group of people decide to build a tower so high that it would reach up to the heavens so they could spy on God, until God dashed their plans by crashing the tower down, which is why people all over the world speak different languages?

I could keep going, but right now I am only selectively eleven chapters into the book of Genesis. I think you get the point. It would be very hard to believe in the veracity of those stories and so many others. Which says nothing about whether they are True or not.

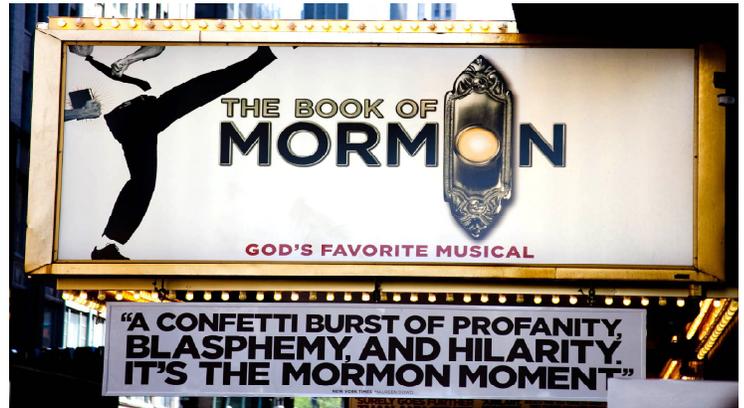
For me, every story that teaches us a lesson about how to make this world the place that it is meant to be; how to live with our fellow human beings in happiness and harmony; how to exist in balance with nature; every story that serves as the basis for a good life is on the deepest level True; ... and some are even factual!

Every story that offers a lesson of this sort is True.

It is not always important that the details are far fetched, or that the metaphor needs to be re-kindled in every successive generation, sometimes with the essential meaning shifting over time. The deepest, most fundamental levels of Truth are what is to be found in these stories. A Truth that calls us to act in this world in a certain way; to value particular behaviors; to aspire towards goodness and holiness; to bless others through our existence; to bless God through our

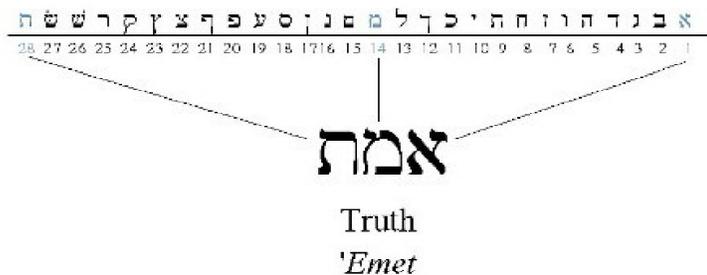
lives. Stories that lead us to these goals are fundamentally Truth, whether or not they are factual.

Last month, Pam and I were fortunate enough to accompany many of you on the bus trip to the Kennedy Center to see an amazing performance of the Broadway musical, Book of Mormon. It was really, really funny. And really, really crass. And maybe just a teensy little bit offensive, and not just to Mormons, but to so many other groups. As we were milling around after the show, several people asked me, jokingly, if I would be using material from musical in one of my sermons. For those who have seen the show, this will be funny. For those haven't, it is probably enough to say that roughly half of the dialogue falls into the category of "words that must never be said from the bimah!"



However, I had a moment of religious awareness towards the end of the show. Without giving too much away or veering into the territory of "words not for the bimah," the show's moral is summed up when one character says to another "Don't you get it? It's really a metaphor!" And, indeed, we see the characters coming to the position that when you look to the stories, no matter how absurd they may seem on the literal plane, for the metaphor you can get out of them, you will find the deepest form of Truth. In the case of the musical Book of Mormon, it concludes with individuals doing their best to live a good life, be of genuine service to others, and seek the happiness of everyone as a way of serving God. This greatly improves the world they live in, and so is consistent with the mission of religion.

I think that mission is the general Truth of all religion, and I know it to be the heart of the Torah. We are urged to ask: Will these actions make the world a better place, a more just place, a happier place, a more caring place? Do these stories motivate me to make that the aim of my life? If so, then these stories are, at the deepest levels, Truth.



Our gazelle skin Torah scroll is a real, and holy, and sacred symbol of Truth that has been cherished through the generations, passed from community to community over thousands of miles, and now rests with us, quite literally, at the center of our ark. This is why the urge to continue to associate it with the shameless schemes of Rabbi Youlus are counter-productive. Hermann Goering's biographer reports he was stunned and depressed when told his Vermeer was really a forgery. However, that beautiful painting by Van Meegeren is every bit as much of a work of classical technique at the highest levels, whether it was a forgery or not. In fact, paintings by Van Meegeren are

highly sought after today, whether they bear his signature or one of the forged names that he painted under. They are sought because he was a truly gifted painter. What Goering missed was that the essential Truth of a piece of art is in the humanity of the brushstrokes and not in the name signed at the bottom.

In our search for Truth, let us continue to keep these lessons in mind. Whether we are looking to the inspiration of Torah, to the stories of our collective past or individual journeys - Truth is to be found in every story that leads us to create a better, more just, more caring, happier and holier world, and to dedicate our lives to that pursuit.

I wish for you and your loved ones a Good, Sweet and Healthy New Year of 5774. L'Shanah Tovah!

