

How do you know what you know?

YK morning 2021

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An old man is walking around town sprinkling an unknown powder on the grass, sidewalks, and roads. Thinking the old man is senile, some of the townspeople inform the local police to ensure his safety. A police officer approaches the man and asks, "Sir, why are you spreading powder all over the town?" To which the old man replies, "To keep the elephants away, of course." Confused, the police man says, "But sir, there are no elephants." The old man smirks, "Good powder, eh?"¹

This reminds me of what I would tell my kids when they were little and scared to go to sleep at night. I told them of the powers of the magic blankee from my childhood. When I was frightened of demons and ghosts, I would grip my white blankee and it formed a magical force field around me. The forces of evil never could penetrate it. I quickly discovered that even if I didn't have it, the top most cover on the bed would work as well. And so, I told Gabriel and Shane, just clutch the blanket and you will be protected as well. Gabriel, one night, asked me skeptically, "How do you know?" I replied, "Look at me, I did it and I was fine." With a smile, as she gripped the blanket, she fell asleep.

It can be harmless enough to sprinkle powder to keep the wild animals at bay or to tell of magic blankets but there are times when misinformation, misunderstanding, and falsehoods can have tragic consequences. I'm sure you can think of some examples. We are living in a time where any idea or thought can spread within minutes, reaching thousands or even millions on social media, without any accountability. I remember my mailman Adolf when I moved into my home years ago. He was so friendly and personable. One day, he asserted that Barak Obama was a Muslim who was born in Kenya. I informed him that that wasn't true. He declared that he saw it on the internet.

Tragically, we are well aware of the myths and crazy rumors about Covid vaccinations that have led too many people to avoid these protective shots. Sadly, there is one couple with connections to our synagogue. Both in their early forties, the woman was vaccinated, her husband though was against getting the vaccine. Well, they both contracted Covid in August. The woman had a slight runny nose. The man couldn't breathe, was admitted the hospital, was put on a ventilator, and in days he died. He left behind three school aged children.

One falsehood that I have heard multiple times is how the vaccines can affect fertility. I first heard it from a parent of a young adult and then in Alabama, the bartender confided that while he got the shot, there was no way he was going to let his older daughter take it. He was amazed that his wife, even after getting vaccinated, still was menstruating. I responded that there is

absolutely no link between fertility and the vaccines. Do you really think that Israel would've vaccinated its population, if there was one? I didn't persuade him but we are living in a time of immense misinformation and people are literally dying from it.

Today, too many people cannot tell the difference between fact and falsehood. Jonathan Rauch in his book, The Constitution of Knowledge, writes about a woman who believed in the conspiracy theory of QAnon that the military would intervene and install Trump as president instead of Biden. Rauch writes that, "...her faith in the standard truth-bearers of American democracy- courts, Congress, the media- eroded. She felt that she could trust nothing but believe anything... 'Sometimes you feel like, gee, am I crazy?' she said. "We know we're not insane, but our world has become very chaotic and we're just trying to sort it out."2

Rauch points out that our social media sites were not engineered to sort out truth from lies but instead were geared towards outrage. The more emotion a post gains, the more reactions it gets, the wider it spreads. Twenty four hour cable news programming is also orchestrated for an emotional reaction from its viewers. If it provokes us, we are more likely to tune in again, and the advertisers will reward networks. We get caught up in staying abreast on the latest and wanting to know what was tweeted and retweeted. We keep trying to get our fix by posting and reacting to others posts and the truth be damned!

As Jews, we are people of the book and knowledge is very important. We value education because we know it is key to making informed decisions, understanding our tradition, and our future. The thing about Jewish knowledge, is that it's available to everyone. As a rabbi, I don't have any secret, revelatory insights. My Jewish knowledge comes from specific sources that you can access as well, especially since so much of our sacred texts are translated into English. Even fifteen hundred years ago in the Talmud, the rabbis go out of their way to say that they learned this teaching from rabbi so and so and this information from rabbi such and such. We follow the source. We take time to verify. Knowledge, learning, and being critical thinkers is fundamental to Judaism.

The best of our Jewish tradition has always integrated knowledge from science, history, astronomy, and medicine. Maimonides, a 12th century doctor, philosopher and Jewish legal scholar, studied Greek philosophy and modern day theology coming from both Christian and Muslim academics. Interestingly, he wrote in the Guide for the Perplexed that there is a difference between good and bad and truth and falsehood. While Adam was in the Garden of Eden, before the eating of the forbidden fruit, Maimonides teaches that he had an intellect from God. Maimonides states, "Through the intellect one distinguishes between truth and falsehood, and that was found in [Adam] in its perfection and integrity. Good and bad, on the other hand, belong to the things generally accepted as known, not those cognized by the intellect. For one does not say: it is fine (good) that heaven is spherical and it is bad that the earth is flat; rather one

says true and false with regard to these assertions.”³ Maimonides was pointing out, even in the Middle Ages, that the shape of the heavens and earth can be demonstrated as true or false as opposed to subjective beliefs. In the Garden of Eden, Adam could make such a distinction between truth and moral reflections however when he ate of the fruit of the tree, he lost this ability and instead became preoccupied with subjective ruminations.

If people were struggling with the difference between facts and falsehoods in the past, this problem has accelerated in the last two decades due to the ease of posting on social media sites. Rauch points out that in the past the main news networks had an incentive to strive for accuracy and truthfulness. They were few in number and their reputations were on the line. Conversely, today media sites are vast and aim for reaction, likes, and retweets. Some of this is being re-evaluated with Facebook and Twitter but the onus, the responsibility rests ultimately with us.

How do you know what you know? What sources of information do you trust? And how do you come to make the decisions that you do in your life? You might say your doctor, your parents, your spouse, or your friends. Many also get information from talk radio, news and cable stations, Facebook, and Twitter feeds. How do you know if the information you are getting is reliable, trustworthy, and can help you live healthier and happier lives?

First thing we need to know is that we are all heavily biased. Yes, even the brightest and most intelligent of us are. Jonathan Rauch lists some of the biases that one can have. We can be vulnerable to an Optimism bias where we overestimate our chances of success, Familiarity bias where we believe things that are repeated often, Fluency bias where we believe statements that are easy to understand, and Perseverance bias where we hold on to beliefs despite disconfirming evidence. These are only a few of a hundred biases that have been identified.⁴ Furthermore, in an interview on NPR back in June, Rauch stated that we are wired to believe things that increase our status and confirm our bias. Our beliefs can be integral to our identity and therefore hard to change. With all these biases, we see that we as individuals can be prone to error but what is the solution?

Rauch details the importance of the Constitution of Knowledge. The crucial part of the Constitution of knowledge is that it is **community based** and **reliant on many others** to fact check and verify. The Constitution of Knowledge is the operating system of the reality based community. First of all, he asserts, “the fallibistic rule: no one gets the final say. “You may claim that a statement is established as knowledge **only** if it can be debunked, in principle, and only insofar as it withstands attempts to debunk it. That is, you are entitled to claim that a statement is objectively true only insofar as it is **both checkable and has stood up to checking**, and not otherwise.”⁵ And so, the person asserting that Obama was born in Kenya, would have to show proof of the claim in order for it to have legitimacy.

Secondly, according to Rauch, no one has personal authority. “You may claim that a statement has been established as knowledge only insofar as the method used to check it gives the same result regardless of the identity of the checker, and regardless of the source of the statement.”⁶ Rauch continues that, “It requires that propositions be contestable: subject to systematic, organized comparison and criticism from diverse points of view.” And furthermore, “Claiming that a conversation is too dangerous or blasphemous or oppressive or traumatizing to tolerate will almost always break the fallibilist rule.”⁷

Rauch says that it is important to support our institutions that archive and retrieve specialized knowledge, connect people across disciplines, prioritize research, establish norms of conduct, and recruit and train the next generation. “Only institutions,” Rauch states, “- universities and scientific and medical organizations, law schools and bar associations, media organizations and journalism schools, government research and intelligence agencies, and the like – can do that work.”⁸ By supporting our democratic institutions, we can put a check and balance on our own biases and this will only benefit our society.

I was intrigued with Rauch’s criticism on the right and left end of the spectrum. He is especially critical of the blatant falsehoods of our former president on both minor and major issues. When even the trajectory of a hurricane and the size of inaugural crowds can be lied about, this fuels a mistrust of our institutions. On the left, he is very critical of the cancel culture and forced conformity of ideas. He asserts that pluralism and viewpoint diversity is essential to overcoming our own biases. Ultimately, Rauch asserts that a system for recognizing and developing shared conclusions of truth must be based firstly on knowledge, secondly on freedom that encourages human creativity and diversity of viewpoints, and lastly on peace where the goal is to have more disagreements resolved and for there to be social conciliation.⁹

What I am getting at is that we each have to work a lot harder to acknowledge our own biases and go to extra efforts to verify our sources of information. We need to be good Jews! We study, listen, debate, and share how we came to conclusions that we have. And we must be willing to adapt and change them as new understandings come to the fore.

Wisdom, *Hokmah*, is a highly valued trait in our tradition. In the Torah, it can denote an unusual skill or ability such as Joseph’s ability to decipher dreams. But in the time of the kings, it suggests an ability to live in equilibrium within the world and having intelligence and sound judgment such as when Solomon speaks to God, “Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”¹⁰ Our great king Solomon was beseeching God for wisdom so he could be a good leader.

And then in the Writings section of our Bible, in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, wisdom, it is connected with the quest for meaning in life. Such as in Proverbs, ““Wisdom belongs to those who seek advice.”¹¹ And in Ecclesiastes, A wise one has eyes in one’s head, whereas the fool walks in darkness.”¹²

We need wisdom, i.e. *Hochmah*. We need it to utilize our strengths to live and flourish. We each have various capabilities and skills that we can continue to strengthen. But we also must inculcate an ability to distinguish between right and wrong and truth and falsehood. King Solomon prayed for this trait and we need it today now more than ever. We need to be able to listen, think, verify, and reflect on the information presented to us. And we need to be able to adapt and change as need be. We must support our institutions of knowledge and protect them as we protect the Constitution of our great country. There is so much to do but so much to gain. With wisdom and good institutions of knowledge, we won’t need magic blankets or powders to protect us, we will be situated to make good decisions for ourselves, our families, and our society. And if we can develop and increase wisdom, we will have more meaningful days and years on earth.

Notes:

- 1 <https://upjoke.com/unknown-jokes>
- 2 The Constitution of Knowledge by Jonathan Rauch. g. 183
- 3 Guide for the Perplexed pg. 24-25
- 4 The Constitution of Knowledge by Jonathan Rauch pg. 26
- 5 “ ”Pg. 88
- 6 Pg. 89
- 7 pg. 90
- 8 pg. 107
- 9 pg. 76
- 10 1Kgs. 3:7-9
- 11 Proverbs 13:10
- 12 Eccl. 2:14