

The Concept of Truth in the Book of Genesis

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The Hebrew word אמת (*emes*), translated as ‘truth,’ occurs in the Torah for the first time in the 24th chapter of Genesis in verse 27. It occurs soon after in the same passage as an adjective in verse 48, and again as a noun in 24: 49.

What is the structure of the event in which this word *emes*--‘truth’ enters the world of the Torah? Who utters it? And to whom? And most important, what does it mean? What does its novelty add to the world? And possibly to our own world? Why did it happen? This is the question (these are the questions) I am going to address in the remarks that follow. I will start with the last question: why did it happen?

It happens, on the first layer of explanation, because Avraham decided it would happen. He had already accomplished three of his four greatest actions: 1) circumcision; 2) the offering up of Yitzak on the altar on Mt. Moriah; and 3) the burial of Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. His fourth and culminating great action is to bring about the marriage of Yitzak. The arranging of this marriage is the context in which the word *emes*--truth first occurs.

Chapter 24 of the Book of Genesis begins:

“Now Avraham was old, well on in years, and haShem had blessed Avraham in everything.” (24:1)

‘Everything’ and ‘oldness’ become thematic by being repeated. We read further:

“And Avraham said to his servant, the *old* one of his household who controlled (המשל) *everything* which was his: ‘Place your hand under my thigh (i.e. hold my circumcised genital in your hand), and I will have you swear by haShem¹, God of the heavens and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but only to my land and to my kindred shall you go and take a wife for my son, for Yitzak.” (24: 2-4)

Avraham directs his top servant, his old chief of staff, to go back to the land and to the family he himself was instructed to leave behind those many years ago. Later in this chapter we learn that the exact wording of the oath is אל בית אבי—‘to my father’s house,’ to Terach’s house. (24:37)

Again, reading further:

“The servant said to him, אולי —‘perhaps’ the woman shall not wish to follow me to this land.” (24:5)

This is not the first time in these narratives that someone has said אולי —‘perhaps.’ In chapter 16 Sarah said: “perhaps I will be built up through my handmaiden Hagar,” and in chapter 18 Avraham says “perhaps there are 50 (or 45, or 40, 30, 20, 10) righteous men in Sodom and Gomorrah.” Neither of these possible positives is actually the case. But when Avraham’s servant says ‘perhaps’ in chapter 24, he is not referring to a possible positive fact but to a possible negative fact—perhaps the woman will say, “No, I will not go.” Remarkable. Everything depends on the free consent of the woman. Not on her being coercible or persuadable, but after she takes everything into consideration, on her free consent or refusal. “Yes” would mean nothing if it is not only possible but also permissible for her to say “no.” If she says “no,” the servant’s oath to Avraham is absolved. The world continues as if the oath had never happened. This is a radically important first: an oath that is made contingent on the consent of the woman.

What follows, bringing us nearer to where we want to go in the text, to the word *emes*--truth, is a description of the caravan of ten camels and its destination, which is Aram Naharaim, the land between the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates, to the city of Nachor, who is Avraham’s brother.

The servant conceives a test. He will stand with his ten camels kneeling under their loads by the city’s springs toward evening when the women of the city come out to draw water. He will ask one of them for a drink, and if she says, “Drink, and I will also draw water for your camels,” she is the one designated for Yitzak. Designated by whom? The servant says he will know through her that haShem has done חסד (*hesed*)--‘loving-kindness’ with my master. (24:14) This word *hesed* is not a new word in the text. It is often something a woman does for a man. For example, in an earlier passage (20:13) Avraham asks Sarah to do her *hesed* for him, her loving-kindness by pretending that he is her brother rather than her husband in order to save his life. *Hesed* always has to do with sustaining life.

Even though Avraham’s servant understands through his proposed test that *hesed* is a necessary trait for Yitzak’s future wife, he senses that it is not sufficient. He has not been able to finish thinking his thought when Rivkah bursts upon the scene. Rivkah, we are told, was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nachor, Avraham’s brother. (24:15) We readers are told this crucial information, but the servant is not told. Rivkah fulfills the requirement of *hesed* by also watering the ten camels, and the servant is astonished. He reflects silently, wondering whether haShem has made his journey successful. At this point, knowing what she is—she is kind—but not who she is, the servant places the tokens of engagement on her--two bracelets and a nose-ring. Only after doing this, he asks her, בת מי את —‘whose daughter are you?’ She tells him. It is then and it is only then that the word *emes* is uttered for the first time in the world of Torah. (24:27)

“He said, ‘Blessed is haShem, God of my master Avraham, who has

not withheld *hesed v'emes*—loving kindness and truth from my master. As for me, haShem has guided me on the path to the house of my master's brothers.”

‘Brothers’ is in the plural, and as we will see, this seemingly peculiar detail matters because it includes as relevant the long-deceased third brother Haran, not just Nachor.

From this moment on in the Torah where *emes* occurs as noun, it is normatively preceded by the word *hesed*. For example, in Exodus 34:6 when Moses is permitted a glimpse of the traits of God, we hear *רַב חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת* --'abundant in loving-kindness and truth.' Again, in Psalm 25:10 “All His (God's) ways are *hesed v'emes*.” Truth requires as its prerequisite loving-kindness, but loving-kindness is not enough. *Hesed* is a character trait, but truth requires a certain identity. Why? Why does it matter, and matter essentially, whose daughter Rivkah is? Who is she?

We know that Avraham was aware of Rivkah before he sent his servant to Aram Naharaim (Gen. 22:33), and that her family's history is interesting in a surprising way. But to begin to grasp the full significance of Rivkah's immediate family background as it traces back to Terach, Avraham's own father and her great-grandfather, we must look very briefly at the genealogical list at the end of chapter 11. It goes through the ten generations from Noah down to Terach. Going through time, this list will tell us something about time. It has a consistent pattern. The pattern is:

x lived m number of years when he begot y, and x lived n number of years after begetting y, and he begot sons and daughters.

This exact pattern, iterated ten times from Noah to Terach, is inexorable and undifferentiated. Inexorable, yes, but we notice it has been weakened from what it was in the earlier ten generations from Adam to Noah (Gen. 5: 1-32). In those first ten generations m and n, the years until the begetting of the relevant (though not necessarily first-born) son and the years after are explicitly added together, i.e. made into a total. After the finite total of the years for each begetter is given, these earlier iterations each end with the statement “and he died” (*וַיָּמָת*).

But in the second genealogical list (Gen. 11: 10-26), the one from Noah to Terach, the numbers m and n of the years are not added together, and the iterations do not conclude with the phrase “and he died.” No totalization², and death, though of course it happens in each generation, is no longer quite as final, quite as conclusive. These changes mean that in the sequence leading from Noah to Terach time, while still countable, is no longer essentially arithmetical, no longer mathematizable. In contemporary phraseology this would amount to saying that functions of time, for example the lifespan of one's deceased parent, are not integrable. Something just as real as objectively measurable time, not yet articulated, is acknowledged by this patterned reticence

throughout the list. (Parenthetically, functions are not integrable when they diverge toward infinity). That the death, the physical *terminus* of each individual is *not* mentioned in this second genealogical list means that the unit of life, though still a nameable individual self, is no longer a finitely delimited self and thus no longer completely autonomous. Another way of saying this is that we affect each other in deep and decisive ways. This is new, uncharted territory.

This weakening of inexorable time³ also shows itself in a comparison of the tenth generation—Noah’s, with the twentieth—Terach’s. Both have three named sons instead of the normative one. Noah’s sons are listed as “Shem, Ham, and Japheth.” (5:32) We learn later that Japheth is the oldest, הַגְּדוֹל (10:21), and Ham is the youngest, הַקָּטָן (9:24). The arrow of time points both ways in this list--forward toward the future from Shem to Ham, and backward from Japheth to the other two. In the list of Terach’s three sons, Avram, Nachor, and Haran (11:26) there is no indication of a direction. We simply do not know. Later we learn that Haran and Avram had different mothers (20:12). All three are born in the same year, Terach’s seventieth year. They are not ordered in time even in a contradictory way. They are simultaneous.

It is in Terach’s family that undifferentiated monolithic time, already weakened to the breaking point, is shattered. Inexorable time, or as we would now say, time-space, is disassembled. Pieces will remain related to objective time like the facets of cubism are related to space, but in Terach’s family this shattering has taken place.

One brother, Haran, died while Terach was still alive (11:28). The verse reads: “Haran died in the lifetime (or in the presence) of Terach his father (עַל פְּנֵי תֵרַח אָבִיו), in his native land, in Ur Kasdim.” Did he die of natural causes? Or by his own hand? The text doesn’t say. Haran embodies a past without a present⁴, which is experienced as grief, and a past without a future, which is what despair is.

Another son, Nachor, in a unique act by Terach, an act that is unprecedented and which does not itself become a precedent, is named after Terach’s own father Nachor who is still alive. This is, I think, the only instance in the entire Hebrew bible where a son bears the same name as a living ancestor (11: 21-26). What is... is exactly the same as what was, named by the same name--Nachor, a present without a past or future essentially different from it. Nachor will stay in the land where he was born, in Aram Naharaim.

Avram receives the imperative (12:1) to leave that land, his kindred, his father’s house, and go “to a land that I will show you.” Later, (22: 2) for the elevation of Yitzak on the altar, he is instructed to go “to one of the mountains which I will tell you.” Both of these commands are stated in the same unusual way: לְךָ לְךָ--‘go toward yourself.’ Yourself is not here, not now. Avram, whose essence will be changed (as reflected in the alteration of his name to Avraham), embodies a future different from the present and from the past.

In Terach's family, inexorable time, William James' (or for that matter James Joyce's) 'stream of consciousness' has been fractionated into a pure past in Haran, a pure present in Nachor, and a pure future in Avram.

Now what? Now, after Haran's death and before Avram's journey, the one brother Nachor takes one of Haran's daughters as a wife (11: 29). Her name is Milcah, and it will remain so. Her nature remains unchanged by her marriage. She will give birth to eight sons. One of them, Bethuel, will become the father of Rivkah. Haran's other daughter, Iscah, is taken by Avram as his wife. Her nature along with her name is changed by this marriage. She becomes what the name means that Avram gives her: Sarai, 'my princess.' The Torah states: "Sarai was barren. She had no child." (11: 30) In this ordering of these two statements, her general condition, barrenness, is seen as not final but as contingent on a specific fact.

Haran, though deceased, has a continuation in life through the marriages of his two daughters to his two brothers. In Yitzak, the son of Avraham and through his mother Sarah the grandson of Haran, and in Rivkah, the granddaughter of Nachor and through her grandmother Milcah the great-granddaughter of Haran, Terach's family in its whole three-brother array still exists. From its temporal and spatial dispersions the genealogically re-convened family of Avraham-Nachor-Haran steps back onto this new stage in the persons of Yitzak and Rivkah.

Avraham's final task, his culminating great action involving *everything*, is to arrange through the engagement of Yitzak and Rivkah the parts of splintered time into a new whole, a whole no longer seamless, inexorable and fatalistic, but in which there is an opening for the word אולי -- perhaps. This would be a world arising from real contingency rather than from strict necessity. The scenario in which this new whole is born is not the battlefield (as in the *Iliad*), not even the marriage bed (as in the *Odyssey*), but the act of engagement. Through this engagement a *new* possibility becomes real. This is the locus of *emes*--truth⁵.

This new kind of wholeness is what the word *emes* means: wholeness which is contingent on free consent by the woman (her husband-to-be still sight-unseen), and free acceptance of her (also sight-unseen) by the man. Everything depends on the words of the servant rather than on sense perception.⁶ It is a wholeness in which time or time-space is not a totality, not all there is, but in which the partitions of time, the past of Haran, the present of Nachor, and the future of Avraham are all there and free to interact with each other as in a colloidal suspension, suspended in what is not time, in what Thomas Aquinas called 'an infinite sea of substance' (S.T. Pt. I, Q.13), ... in God. The 24th chapter of Genesis does not provide us with a logical proof of God's existence. It shows us a way to become aware of what the word itself means.

It means that the featureless, gray numbness of fatalism—what we express with our quip of 'whatever'--opens up into the rich colorations of interacting faceted times, into our humanly definitive experiences of hope and of courage, of an amalgam of joy and grief, of judgment, and

also of despair and of תשובה—the Hebrew word which means ‘to return.’ All six of these primal forms of consciousness, these basic colors arrayed on the Jewish palette, are evident in the 24th chapter of Genesis in different persons at different moments. I will point to them.

1) “Rivkah ran to tell her mother’s household about these things.” (24: 28) She experiences hope: an exciting future informs her present. 2) The next day, when asked point-blank if she will go with Avraham’s servant, she replies אֵלַי—‘I will go.’ In that all-important moment she is courageous: her present claims her future.

3) Rivkah brings her habitual exuberance, her *joie de vivre*, to the occasion: “Drink, and I will water all your camels.” (24: 19-20) At this same moment Yitzak is suffused with grief over the death of his mother. His marriage to Rivkah, when it does happen, “consoles him concerning his mother.” (24: 66) For both of them their pasts persist into the present.

4) In another facet of the event recounted in chapter 24, Rivkah must and does form a judgment about the testimony of Avraham’s servant. Being keenly aware of the discrepancy between what actually happened at the well, which she of course experienced first-hand and then ran to tell her unnamed mother, and the altered (i.e. re-sequenced) account of it she hears the servant tell her brother Laban and her father Bethuel, should she accept what the servant is telling them all about Avraham’s situation, about Yitzak, and even about the servant’s own identity and mission? She does accept his testimony even with its obvious inconsistency.

And Yitzak must also make a judgment about Rivkah (remember she is veiled) after “the servant recounted to Yitzak all the things that he had done,” (24: 66) both the facts and the rhetorical re-sequencing of those facts in order to overcome the opposition of Laban and Bethuel. Would the servant, in order to fulfill his oath to Avraham, try to persuade him, or at least guide him in any way? He decides to accept Rivkah. In these judgments, in judgment in general, the present establishes the meaning of the past.

What about the action of the past on the future, despair in which we feel that what has been good cannot last forever, and what has not been good can diminish or even destroy the future; and also the action of the future transforming the past if that is even possible? 5) We know that Yitzak, having by himself stepped down from the altar on Mt. Moriah because Avraham was forbidden to touch him or even to speak to him (Gen. 22: 12), did not return with Avraham to Avraham’s young men who were waiting with the donkey at the foot of the mountain. He departed from his experience on Mt. Moriah by a path different from his father’s and disappeared from the narrative until now. He went not to Beer-sheva, which means the wellspring of God’s oath to Avraham, where Avraham dwelled, but to a place called Beer-LaHai-roi, which means the wellspring of ‘life-seeing.’

It is relevant here, and I think it will help us to understand chapter 24, to recall that in a passage much later in Genesis where Yaakov is negotiating a settlement with Rivkah’s brother Laban

(31: 53), he swears his oath בַּפְחַד אָבִיו יִצְחָק, ‘by the dread of his father Yitzak.’ Yitzak’s experience on Mt. Moriah was terrifying—absolutely rivetingly terrifying. In the unusual phrasing of the text in chapter 24, Yitzak has just “*come from coming* to Beer-LaHai-roi.” (24: 62) He is topsy-turvy and has gone out alone toward evening into the field לַשׁוּחַ --often translated as ‘to beseech,’ or sometimes as ‘to meditate.’ We can sharpen our sense of its meaning by turning to Psalm 102, which is an extended gloss on this very word:

“A prayer of the afflicted man when he is disoriented

and שִׁפְךָ שִׁיחֹו (translated as ‘he pours forth,’ and I translate שִׁיחֹו (from שׁוּחַ) as ‘his silent scream’, as in the painting by Edvard Munch) before haShem.

HaShem hear my prayer and let my cry reach you.

Hide not Your face from me on the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me on the day that I call-- answer me soon.

For my days are consumed in smoke

and my bones are charred as a hearth.

Smitten like grass until withered is my heart,

for I have forgotten to eat my food.

From the sound of my sigh my bone clings to my skin.

I am like a night bird of the wilderness.

I have become like the owl of the wasteland.

I have been diligent, yet I remain like a lonely bird upon a roof top....”

לַשׁוּחַ--this is despair. It is evening. The darkness is on-coming.

Yitzak, alone in the field, raises his eyes and sees the camels coming, the camels Rivkah’s *hesed* has sustained in life when she drew water for them until they had finished drinking.

In order to better hear the underlying fundamental of all these embodied overtones in the astonishing climax at the end of chapter 24, we might for the sake of contrast glance back one more time to the first genealogical list, the one in chapter 5. In what starts out to be the seventh iteration of its pattern, inexorable totalized time-space is for the first time de-stabilized (Gen. 5: 21-24). We read there:

“Enoch lived sixty-five years and begot Methuselah (x lived m number of years and begot y...so far so good. Then--) Enoch walked with God for three hundred years after begetting Methuselah (not ‘lived,’ as in all the other iterations, but ‘walked with God’), and he begot sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. (His foreshortened years have still been added up into a total. Things seem back on track. Then, again--) And Enoch walked with God, and he was no more for God took him.”

This intrusion of God-consciousness, ‘walking with God,’ is stated twice, and as we learn later from Joseph (Gen. 41: 32), its being stated twice means that it is inescapable. Enoch does not end his life as others do by dying. He is taken out of existence altogether. He disappears.

6) Yitzak, by contrast, finally returns from his transfixing, terrifying God-consciousness on the altar on Mt. Moriah when he now walks toward the camels, toward Rivkah, toward life. (24: 64-67). We read:

“And Rivkah raised her eyes and saw Yitzak, and she lowered herself from the camel. And she said to the servant, ‘who is that man in the field walking toward us?’⁷ And the servant said, ‘He is my master.’ She then took the veil and covered herself. The servant recounted to Yitzak all the things that he had done. And Yitzak brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother. And he took Rivkah, she became his wife, and he loved her. And Yitzak was consoled concerning his mother.”

The verb וָיָשָׁב--‘and he returned,’ (Gen. 22: 19) was said of Avraham when he came down from Mt. Moriah, and it could now finally be said also of Yitzak. This returning, not to greater piety, but to greater vitality is what the Hebrew word תְּשׁוּבָה—*teshuvah*--means.

In the engagement and marriage⁸ of Yitzak and Rivkah, Avraham’s last and greatest action has been consummated without himself (or Nachor or Haran) being on-stage. A new kind of wholeness now exists, a wholeness in which *all* facets of time can freely interact with each other, and which is called *emes* or truth.

Soon thereafter in the Torah text though some 38 years later in its chronology, Avraham, old and content, ויגוע וימת--‘expired and died.’ (25: 7-8) ‘Expired’ refers to his physiology. Perhaps ‘died’ refers to the full realization of his original conceptual imperative: לך לך –“go toward yourself.” His age is stated as a total although in reverse order from normal Hebrew: “One hundred years and seventy years and five years.” Avraham is not taken by God as Enoch was, as we might now say ‘to heaven.’ He is gathered “to his people,” not to his ancestors, or to his kindred, or to his family, but to his people. Who are these people of Avraham? Who indeed?

They might be ourselves if we try to learn our own humanity from Rivkah and from Yitzak. In this sense they are:

- 1) those who allow non-delusional hope knowing that life is larger than we imagine it;
- 2) those who at critical moments are courageous rather than timorous;
- 3) those who care for the dead by continuing to learn from them rather than forgetting them, and who care for the living by sustaining them rather than ignoring them;
- 4) those who in their judgments distinguish what matters more from what matters less;
- 5) those who endure the silent pain of despair rather than seeking distraction or oblivion;
- 6) those who return from trauma back into life.

Such dwellers in this new kind of wholeness called *emes* or contingent truth are the people of Avraham—ordinary people being excellent.

¹ HaShem means ‘the Name.’ It is one of several expressions used to avoid physically saying the actual Name, the tetragrammaton. The Name is irreducible to the physical realm.

² Rf. *Totality and Infinity*, by Emmanuel Levinas.

³ We know inexorable time as the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the foundation of modern physics.

⁴ This is an adumbration of Levinas’ concept of dia-chrony. Haran’s life becomes a past discontinuous with the present of the narrative. For Yitzak and Rivkah, his descendants, it is a past that was never present.

⁵ This meaning is still found in the slightly antiquated English word ‘betrothal,’ which means ‘be-truthing.’

⁶ Language alone can change the status of a person *prior* to all experience. See also Jer. 1:4-5.

⁷ Levinas characterizes ‘the gesture of being’ (*le geste d’être*) as ‘appearing’ or ‘manifestation’. This passage could serve as an example of ‘the ethical gesture’: “She raised her eyes and saw..., she lowered herself..., she asked ‘who is that man walking toward us?’”

⁸ In their marriage, the prolongation and deepening of this first encounter, Rivkah and Yitzak are portrayed as לנכח (Gen. 25:21)—face-to-face rather than as side-by-side looking out at the world. Rf. Emmanuel Levinas, *As Old as The World in Nine Talmudic Readings* (1994). See Exodus 25:20 where the cheruvim on the ark of the covenant are איש אל-אחיו—face-to-face.