

# **Seeking Truth: Thoughts for Parashat Tazria**

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tazria  
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

How important is it to admit the truth when one is wrong?

In his book of sermons (Tokhahat Hayyim), Rabbi Hayyim Palachi of 19th century Izmir, opens his discussion of Parashat Tazria, with a reference to Uzziah, a generally successful king of Judah during the 8th century BCE. King Uzziah eventually became arrogant with power, and decided that he could serve as a priest (cohen) and bring an offering in the Temple.

Uzziah was warned by the priests and a prophet to desist from this flagrant violation of religious law, but the King proceeded in spite of the warnings. The Bible reports that King Uzziah was stricken with leprosy as punishment for his sinful arrogance. Although it was clear to everyone that Uzziah had acted wrongly, the King himself did not admit his sin. He lived the rest of his life with leprosy, never repenting for his error in judgment.

Rabbi Palachi cites the example of King Uzziah to stress the importance of admitting one's mistakes. Indeed, the wiser a person is, the greater the desire to adhere to truth.

In a remarkable passage, Rabbi Palachi wrote: "Anyone who comes to refute me in any of my teachings or rulings, whether something I wrote or spoke, let him refute and correct me with heavenly intent, to clarify the truth; he should not be ashamed or embarrassed [to disprove my teachings], for this is my wish and desire, especially for my children and students. They should not be concerned that I will take offense [at being proven wrong]; on the contrary, this is my honor." (p. 45).

Rabbi Palachi was emphasizing a vital concept: we must pursue truth; we must allow—and welcome—honest criticism and admit when we are wrong. Our goal must not be to promote our views at any cost; our goal must be to arrive at truth.

The search for truth entails several basic features. Diligence: one needs to pursue truth with single-minded devotion and thoroughness. Honesty: one must be as

objective as possible and consider a range of facts and opinions. Humility: one must be willing to admit error.

Beware of those who propound views that are not factually correct or that are based on biased or faulty reasoning. Beware of those who insist on their views, without taking into consideration the valid criticisms against them. Beware of those who promote their ideas, even when their ideas and policies have been demonstrated to be misguided and wrong.

Arrogant and egotistical people are not essentially interested in truth. Rather, they engage in propaganda, mind-control, and stubborn adherence to their own opinions regardless of how erroneous, biased, or dangerous. Like King Uzziah, they would rather suffer than admit personal error.

Professor Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli Nobel Prize winner in Economics, has coined the phrase “illusion of validity.” He points out that people tend to think that their own opinions and intuitions are correct. They tend to overlook hard data that contradict their worldview and to dismiss arguments that don’t coincide with their own conception of things. They operate under the illusion that their ideas, insights, intuitions are valid; they don’t let facts or opposing views get in their way.

The illusion of validity leads to innumerable errors, to wrong judgments, to unnecessary confrontations. If people could be more open and honest, self-reflective, willing to entertain new ideas and to correct erroneous assumptions—they would find themselves in a better, happier and more humane world.

The illusion of validity does not just affect arrogant and egotistical people, although it surely is most pronounced in such individuals. The problem affects all human beings, even the wisest and most humble. It is all too easy to become complacent with our “truths” and not maintain clarity of thought. Genuine seekers of truth maintain alert and critical minds; they are open to new ideas and new perspectives.

The Talmud at the end of tractate Berakhot teaches that Torah scholars have no peace, not in this world and not in the next world. Why not? Because they are always searching and growing, asking new questions and finding new answers. They are never content that they have mastered the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They go from one intellectual struggle to the next.

Rabbi Palachi taught that genuine seekers of truth are characterized by humility, the willingness to admit imperfection, the desire to learn and to grow. Those who follow the model of King Uzziah are destructive to themselves, their families and society.

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