

Righteous Like Noah

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Genesis calls Noah “a righteous man, blameless in his generation.”ⁱ Commentators debate whether the phrase “in his generation” emphasizes Noah’s goodness or minimizes it. Does he seem righteous only in comparison to his wicked generation, or is his goodness particularly praiseworthy, standing out from the evil crowd?ⁱⁱ

At the precipice of a new year, we are called to examine our deeds and seek repentance, to look to be the best versions of **ourselves** in 5787, not to reach the standard of any hero, matriarch, or sage of a prior era. Like Noah before us, we live amidst great evil. Our challenge is to rise above that wickedness to become the best people we can be **in our own day and time**.

In our age of fake news and “alternative facts,” we have a responsibility to be honest in both private and public communications. In our age of replacing science and scholarship with ideology, we are enjoined to stand up for facts. Besieged by antisemites who lie about Jews and Judaism, we must tell the truth about our people and our heritage.

When Kellyanne Conway coined the term “alternative facts” in 2017, she was defending press secretary Sean Spicer’s claim that President Trump’s inauguration had attracted more attendees than President Obama’s.ⁱⁱⁱ If we cared about crowd size, the photographic evidence was clear, but Conway was telling us that there is another truth out there—a “truth” reminiscent of President Clinton’s insistence that he **did not**, well, you know.

Public deceit has so accustomed us to lies that we may no longer notice. We should. Professor Arnold Eisen, then Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, emphasized the dangers of falsehood: “Listen to the anti-Semitic narrative of worldwide Jewish domination, or white nationalist lies about the dangers posed by immigrants and people of color, or alleged histories of Middle East conflict that distort or deny facts that many of us have lived through or witnessed with our own eyes, and you understand viscerally why we must never stop insisting on the value of facts or allow them to be replaced.”^{iv}

Torah teaches, מדבר שקר תרחק, “Keep far from falsehood.”^v The Sephardic commentator Sforno emphasizes that we “must be careful with [our] utterances so that a liar cannot exploit [our] words for [their] own nefarious purposes.”^{vi}

In most eras, a rabbi standing before a congregation, urging them to tell the truth, would be preaching mere platitudes. In our generation, though, lies have

proliferated even among good people—especially, but not only, on social media. When we see a post or receive an email that sounds right to us, one that speaks to our values, perhaps castigating a public figure we despise, we are tempted to “like,” forward, or repost it uncritically. The bots are counting on it. We must not feed those trolls. Sadly, even a friend we admire cannot be assumed to have fact-checked the claims they’re sharing. Nor can we trust an answer quickly provided by artificial intelligence. Instead, being righteous in **our** generation requires verification by checking with sources we **know** to trust. Forward only facts. We might even call errors to the attention of the friend who shared them, hoping to prevent further spread of even the most convenient untruths.

Often, the lies and half-truths that permeate our society are designed to undermine trust in science and other arenas of expertise. What Chancellor Eisen calls “truth decay” has led some of our leaders and tens of millions who follow them to believe, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that vaccines cause more harm than good, that long-established, credible media outlets are liars, and that rigorously peer-reviewed findings should be disregarded in favor of so-called “common sense.” That **nonsense** is all too common.

Our Jewish tradition, by contrast, reveres learning and expertise. God commands Moses and Aaron to place skilled artisans and builders—that is, experts—in charge of designing and erecting the Tabernacle, not just whoever most wants the job.^{vii} Even a millennium ago, our sages expected the highest Jewish court to be populated only by authorities with expertise not only in Torah but in secular learning, too.^{viii} Being righteous in **our** day calls on us to heed our physician’s advice or seek a second opinion from a reputable specialist, to expect professors to be scholars in their fields, and to learn Torah from a rabbi or learned teacher, all of which would have been unremarkable a decade ago.

Rejection of expertise is deadly dangerous to Jews. Antisemitism is a conspiracy theory, based on a twisted notion that an oft-persecuted people seeks world domination by controlling the media, universities, and banks. When ideologues replace experts in our universities, networks, and, frighteningly, even the military, extremist authoritarianism rears its ugly head, and Jews are scapegoated. Lies underpinned the murder of the six million, and we hear echoes of that perilous pseudoscience from both the far right and extreme left, from Tucker Carlson and Hasan Piker alike.

On one side, we are told that Judaism is no more than a set of religious beliefs and practices—a faith, not a covenant people with an eternal connection to the Land of Israel. On the other, we are told that our religious tradition has been

perverted to endanger American life. Both are lies, and being righteous in **our** day requires telling the truth about our tradition and our people.

Judaism from the very beginning is and has always been a sacred bond between God and the Jewish people, guided by Torah and rooted in the Land of Israel. Forged as the faith of a sovereign kingdom, our tradition has evolved across the centuries since the Romans destroyed our Temple and sent our people into exile nearly two millennia ago. Our people, though, never stopped identifying with one another or our long-lost holy land. Our connection to Jewish communities in Israel and worldwide is central to our faith.

Because this understanding of Judaism is so broadly accepted by our Jewish community, anti-Israel activists bring Jewish speakers to Little Rock to create the false impression that Arkansas Jews are misrepresenting our own tradition. Real Judaism, they falsely claim, is about faith only, not peoplehood, and Israel is a settler colonial state.

We need not support or defend every action of the contemptible Israeli government to proclaim the truth: We are a people who share a covenant with Jewish people worldwide. We need not label every critic of Israel an antisemite to speak the truth in response to lies that endanger Jewish life and limb. Even the study that demonstrates that only thirty-seven percent of American Jews identify with the term “Zionist” also indicates that nearly ninety percent of American Jews support Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.^{ix} American Jews, not Israel’s enemies, know the truth about our shared Jewish commitments.

The extreme right also lies about us. The Pittsburgh mass murderer, the tiki torch marchers of Charlottesville, and Nick Fuentes, Tucker Carlson’s favorite antisemite, peddle “the great replacement theory,” the claim that American Jews promote immigration with a goal of supplanting our nation’s historic white Christian majority. This falsehood, too, endangers Jewish lives. The **truth** is that **Judaism** and **Jewish** history are the reasons that American Jews largely support broadly legal immigration and asylum as well as humane and compassionate treatment of undocumented migrants. **We** remember the stranger, for we were strangers, not only in Egypt, but virtually everywhere our people has lived.

No, we are not expected to be righteous like Abraham and Sarah—but even if we were, they weren’t perfect either. We are called instead to be righteous like Noah—to be truthful, upstanding Jews in the face of today’s challenges.

Let us affirm that we, too, can be righteous, even in 5787, even in an age of lies, conspiracy theories, and antisemitism. We **can** tell the truth. We **must** affirm legitimate expertise. We are compelled to combat Jew-hatred. The psalmist

believed—and we can, too—that righteousness bears fruit, צדיק כתמר יפרח “The righteous bloom like a date-palm.”^x For Noah and his family, the fruit was sweet: a new world of blessing, descendants who produced the righteousness of Abraham and Sarah. For us, let the fruit of truth-telling be the sweetness of a new year, a better future—for each of us, for our Jewish people, for America, for Israel, and for all the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 6:9.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Rashi on Genesis 6:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eric Bradner, “Conway: Trump White House offered ‘alternative facts’ on crowd size,” *CNN*, January 23, 2017.

^{iv} Arnold Eisen, “The Truth—and Nothing but the Truth,” Commencement Address 2019, posted on May 23, 2019.

^v Exodus 23:7.

^{vi} Sforno on Exodus 23:7.

^{vii} Exodus 31:1-6.

^{viii} Sefer HaChinukh 491.4.

^{ix} Mimi Kravetz, “The ‘Zionism’ gap: What JFNA data really shows about Jews, Israel and Zionism today,” *JTA*, February 4, 2026.

^x Psalm 92:13.