

Fake News

How do we know what to believe? What's truth and what's fiction? In our age of “alternative facts” and “fake news” that is a commonly asked question.

If you are stumped do not worry-this is not a recent conundrum but rather has been an issue for the ages. When Joseph's brothers tell their father Jacob that Joseph is alive, Jacob could not believe them. ויפג לבו כי, “his heart went numb for he could believe them.”¹ Why at this moment could Jacob not believe his sons? *Rashi* comments, נחלף לבו, “His heart changed and he ceased believing-his heart was not swayed by their words.”² Because the brothers were deceptive, pretending that a wild beast devoured Joseph, at their “moment of revelation” their father will not believe them. He thinks it is fake news.

What causes Jacob to change his mind? The following verse reads וידברו אליו את כל דברי יוסף, “They (the brothers) spoke to him (Jacob)

¹ Genesis 45:26

² Rashi on Genesis 45:26 ד"ה ויפג לבו

regarding all of Joseph's words.³ However, Jacob is not swayed by words. He does not believe Joseph is alive until וירא את-העגלות אשר-שלה "he saw the wagons that Joseph sent."⁴ At that point, ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם, Jacob's spirit revived.⁵

As the adage goes, "seeing is believing." Jacob needed to see physical proof that Joseph sent something in order to know that he was alive and well. We all know that "talk is cheap"-that is the problem with fake news. I can say anything I want to and you have no way whatsoever of verifying its veracity until you see it for yourself. The brothers also "cried wolf" and you can only do that so many times and still be believed.

A rabbi who I worked with told me a story related to this. He went to a USCJ rabbis and presidents conference in New York City. His congregational president wanted to buy a gift for his wife in the Diamond District and wanted a discount. The Israeli would have given a rabbinic discount but he did not believe that the president was

³ Genesis 47:27

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

accompanied by a rabbi. The rabbi answered all sorts of halachic questions but the Israeli was undeterred. Finally the rabbi pulled out his rabbinic credit card, and the Israeli finally said “Now I know you’re a rabbi” and gave him the discount.

It is difficult to know when something is “The Truth” versus a tall tale, fabrication or stretch. That is why “fake news” is such a common thing. Jacob did not believe his flesh and blood until he saw a mark of physical proof. Can we expect anything less from us?

When we see something on the news or get told a story, let us take the time to verify that it is true before jumping to conclusions. We know how easy it is to start rumors and get the ball rolling to such an extent that we cannot stop it. It is often better to be skeptical rather than gullible, although not always showing it. It is too bad that we need to question things but whether we watch FOX, CNN or SHALOM TV, let us take the time to get things right before we jump in to believing hook, line and sinker. *Ken Yhi Ratzon*, may it be our will to do so.