

Shabbat Parashat Yitro 5786

Do Not Be a False Witness

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There is a commandment in the Ten Commandments that most of us think we already understand. “Lo ta’aneh v’rei’acha ed shaker.” Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Most of us hear that and think: don’t lie. Don’t make things up. Don’t falsely accuse someone in court.

All of that is true. But I think the Torah is aiming at something broader and more challenging. Because false testimony does not only happen when someone lies outright. It also happens when we decide in advance who is right and who is wrong, and then fit the facts to that decision.

I’m guessing this theme feels familiar. I’m hoping it rings relevant. So to explore it further, let’s start with something current.

For many years, people have raised serious concerns about the United Nations and Israel. Those concerns are not imaginary, and they are not new. Critics point to patterns that feel built into the system. Israel is the subject, or really the target, of a disproportionate number of resolutions. There is a standing agenda item in the Human Rights Council focused on Israel alone. Voting blocs often make outcomes feel predetermined. Investigations are sometimes structured in ways that assume guilt rather than examine facts.

It is reasonable to notice that, and it is responsible to talk about it. Naming this does not declare Israel’s perfection in its pursuit of security and peace. It does call out a spectacularly lopsided double standard when Israel is compared to the rest of the world.

And then, last week, I attended a UN observance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. I expected something very different. I expected couched critique, veiled indictment, maybe even a half-hearted attempt to convince the gathered crowd that the UN truly cares about this day at all.

But instead, it was genuinely meaningful, carefully constructed, and sincerely presented.

The speakers were serious. The memory of Jews and non-Jews who perished was handled with care. The message was clear, and it was not just about history. It spoke directly to the present. Antisemitism is real. The Holocaust and the lessons that must be learned from it still matter. Silence and indifference are moral failures. Remembering the Shoah is not only a Jewish responsibility but a human one.

And I found myself holding two truths at the same time. There are legitimate criticisms of the UN. And there is, at times, real moral good that happens there as well. One does not cancel out the other. Both are real.

That tension, and if I'm being honest a bit of dissonance, sent me back to the Torah.

A Torah that teaches us to be suspicious of the idea that people or institutions are either all good or all bad. That kind of thinking is easy. And it is usually, not always, but usually, wrong.

The Torah, after all, is full of complicated people, not dyed-in-the-wool saints. Abraham makes decisions our rabbis openly critique. Moses loses patience and gets angry, with himself, with the people, and even with God. King David is deeply faithful and deeply flawed. Even Pharaoh is not a cartoon villain. He hesitates. He hardens. He relents. He changes again.

Which brings us back to "do not bear false witness."

The rabbis understand this commandment as far more than a prohibition against lying in court. Most of us will spend our whole lives without ever appearing on a witness stand. How could a central commandment of our tradition apply so rarely?

No. "Do not bear false witness" is an everyday commandment. It is about making sure the truth is not distorted.

And that can happen in so many ways. When we exaggerate our side of a story and diminish another. When we leave out facts that are inconvenient. When we excuse behavior because it comes from someone we like. And when we condemn behavior because it comes from someone we already distrust.

In other words, false witness is not only about what we say. It is about how we see people, and how we see the world.

This matters far beyond the grand Assembly Hall at the UN.

It matters in families. In communities. In workplaces. In how we talk about other people when they are not in the room.

The Torah knows us well. We do not need to be in a courtroom to judge, or to be judged. So the Torah commands us to judge carefully, and always to leave room not only for complexity, but for a larger picture than the one we may have already painted in our minds. On the day we heard the account of revelation and its 10 foundational commandments read so beautifully by our wonderful bat mitzvah on this memorable morning, may we be reminded that the way we see others is itself a kind of testimony.

Shabbat shalom.