

## Chesed plus Emet = Teshuva

*A practice for the heart and the world, on Chochenno Ohlone land*

Kol Nidre 5779  
Rabbi Dev Noily

Shana Tovah.

### אמת

This year we're talking about Truth, *Emet*. I want to start with the Hebrew word itself – *Emet*. In our tradition words are holy. And not just words, but letters too – their shapes and their characteristics. The word “*emet*” – alef – mem – tav, is made up of the first letter of the alef-bet, the middle letter, and the final letter, in that order:



The word “*emet*” encompasses, and is a symbol of, the entire alef-bet, and of the power of language, and of the whole of what is. We're given the gift of language in order to seek truth, to name truth, to teach truth, from person to person, from generation to generation.

In contrast we can look at the word for “falsehood, lie, betrayal of trust” – the word “*sheker*.” The letters that make up the word “*sheker*” – shin, koof, resh – are all bunched together near the end of the alef-bet:

אבגדהוויז  
טיכלמנסע  
פצקרשת

They're also scrambled, they need to be taken out of the alef-bet and mixed up in order to form the word for "lie". There is no "lie" embedded in the alef-bet.

And what about how these two words look? Each letter in the word "*emet*" is solid, stable, and can stand on its own. The word itself is strong, stable, and a trustworthy foundation.

אמת

*Sheker*, on the other hand, is made of letters that have no foundation. Each of them is unbalanced and easily toppled. Nothing can be built on the foundation of the word "*sheker*"

שקר

In the word "*emet*" we can see two other words – "*Em*" – alef – mem, which means "mother"; And "*met*" – mem-tav, which means "death." Each of us comes from a mother; and each of us will die. The span of our lives, this mysterious gift we are given, from the moment we have a parent until the moment we die, is contained in this word – *emet*, truth.

Facing death is a big part of Yom Kippur –we imitate death by not eating, drinking, bathing, or lovemaking. We wear white – some of us wear a *kittel*, the garment Jews traditionally are dressed in when our bodies are

prepared for burial. We do this because death is *true*, and real, and most of the time, we hide that truth in the recesses of our mind, unless we or someone close to us is at the boundary between life and death.

Facing death is how we touch the exquisite treasure that this life is. It's how we touch the depth of our love for those closest to us, letting that love swell so that the little annoyances that too often fill our attention can be diluted into proper measure.

Facing the truth is how we remember who we *really* are, and what is *really* at stake, and how we illuminate the path to choosing life. But facing the truth is no easy thing.

## חֶסֶד וְאֵמֶת

So in our tradition, Truth, *emet*, has a faithful companion, a partner, a buddy. The first time the word *emet* appears in the Torah, in the book of Genesis, it's paired with *chesed*, with lovingkindness.<sup>1</sup> And that pairing returns again and again. Many times during the High Holy days we chant the 13 Attributes of G-d, including the words "Rav chesed v'emet" – G-d is filled with *chesed and emet*, together.

*Chesed*, loving-kindness, without *Emet*, truth, can lead us to delusion, to distorting the truth to see only what we think will be beautiful. And *Emet* without *Chesed*, truth without lovingkindness, can lead to harsh judgment and destructive rage, which in turn can lead us to avoid the truth altogether because its cost can feel so dear.

Rabbi Jordan Bendat Appel translates *emet* as "honest-looking." He teaches that *chesed* and *emet*, loving-kindness and honest-looking are the two primary orientations we take toward our lived experience, in the practice of Jewish mindfulness. Honest-looking, he says, requires bearing witness as honestly as possible to whatever arises. It requires the curiosity that comes with the posture of someone who is trying to learn. And it requires the courage to look at what is present, even when it's messy, confusing or painful. His advice is: "Don't duck!"

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 24:27

And *chesed*, loving-kindness, requires that we meet what is true with warmth and acceptance, with compassion and softening.<sup>2</sup>

This partnership of *chesed* and *emet* is the foundational practice of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is turning to face the truth with love and compassion, ready to walk the path of accountability and repair. We might say that *chesed* plus *emet* equals *teshuvah*.

In this way, we re-align ourselves with the truth of our being, and we liberate ourselves, little by little, from the unwelcome habits that weigh us down, and from the distortions that pull us away from ourselves. Many of us will spend much of tonight and tomorrow reflecting on our lives and looking inward. As we do, I invite you to experiment with practicing *emet* and *chesed*. To practice with curiosity and softening.

### *Teshuva* for this Place: Living on Ohlone Land

This practice of *chesed* and *emet* can also guide us as we reflect on harm, and on healing, in the world. And tonight I want to bring this practice to our relationship to the land we live on.

For a while now my attention has been drawn deeper and deeper into the need for *teshuvah* on this beautiful ancestral Ohlone land. Many of you have been my teachers, and my companions in this, including Dvora Gordon, Carol Rothman, Nancy Feinstein, Aurora Levins Morales, Ariel Lucky and Hazzan Shulamit.

I don't know yet where this process of *teshuvah* will lead. And I don't fully understand yet why the call is so powerful for me. But I can't turn away from it. The stakes feel very high. Understanding the truth of what happened here, meeting that truth with compassion, and doing *teshuvah*, have become priorities for me. And as I engage in this process I can feel myself softening, opening, and being drawn in more deeply. So I want to invite you to explore it with me, tonight, and beyond.

I've lived almost all of my life in California, and though I learned "California history" in school, I was never taught about the lives of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jordan Bendat-Appel, *Foundations of Jewish Mindfulness*. Institute for Jewish Spirituality workshop handout, shared with me by the author via email on 9/18/17.

indigenous people, or about what really happened here. And when I ask kids now about what they are learning, I hear that it hasn't changed much. A group called the California Indian History Curriculum Coalition is fighting to bring this history into California's public schools. Rose Borunda, a coordinator of the coalition recently said, "For so many years, the story of California Indians has never really been part of classrooms. Our story has never been present. It's often sidestepped because it's inconvenient. But it's the truth, and students should learn it."<sup>3</sup>

It's the truth, and we *all* should learn it.

We should know the truth of the thriving communities that lived here from time immemorial, and *how* they lived. And we should know the truth of how those communities were decimated by waves of conquest – Spanish, Mexican, and finally the gold-crazed U.S. conquest. And we should know the truth of how the survivors have kept their culture and their stories alive, while struggling to heal from past and ongoing trauma, violence and disruption.

The first academic book in the U.S. to fully document the genocide of indigenous people in California was published in 2016. *In 2016*.

Written by Benjamin Madley, it's called *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe*. Madley confirms that between 1846 and 1873 at least 80% of California's indigenous people were exterminated. Madley writes, "State and federal policies, in combination with vigilante violence, played major roles" in their near-annihilation.<sup>4</sup> The genocide of indigenous people here was state-sanctioned, it was legal, and it was lied about for decades.

That's some of the *emet*, the truth of where we live. My life here, our lives here, are built on *Sheker*, on falsehood, on an unstable foundation that can't support us.

Tommy Orange writes in his best-selling novel, *There There*:

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2018/07/27/native-americans-push-schools-to-include-their-story-in-california-history-classes>

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide*. Yale University Press, 2016. p. 346.

*“The wound that was made when white people came and took all that they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All these stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal.”<sup>5</sup>*

And the indigenous women leaders of the Sogorea Te Land Trust say: *If you live on Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone land, you are inadvertently benefitting from the genocide waged against the Ohlone people and the theft of their land. Whether you know it or not, however you feel about it, this is an inescapable fact. The civic infrastructure, the economic system, the private development and the consumption of natural resources in our society are all connected to and in different ways built upon the colonial occupation of this land and the violent displacement of the Ohlone.*<sup>6</sup>

This is the truth, the *emet* of this place where we live.

And along with the *emet*, the difficult, painful truth, there is also abundant *chesed*.

Corrina Gould, a co-founder of the Sogorea Te Land Trust, said, *We can create a healing for the people that are here. Not just the Ohlone people, but all people that exist on this land.*<sup>7</sup>

That is *chesed*.

And in Corrina’s vision of healing, I can begin to see the seeds not only for the healing of the Ohlone history of genocide, but also for the healing of our Jewish history of genocide, and also for the healing of our mother, the Earth. Because the only way for us to heal is if we all heal together.

## Our Traveling Jewish Homeland & Our Home Where We Live

It strikes me that this is the Jewish year 5779. In Jewish mythic time we count five thousand seven hundred and seventy-nine years since the creation of the world. The whole span of Jewish time is about the same as

---

<sup>5</sup> Tommy Orange, *There There*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2018. p. 137

<sup>6</sup> <http://sogoreate-landtrust.com/shuumi-land-tax/>

<sup>7</sup> Corrina Gould, in *Beyond Recognition* documentary film. Underexposed Films, 2014. [www.beyondrecongnitionfilm.com](http://www.beyondrecongnitionfilm.com)

the 5,000 years that the Ohlone, and other indigenous peoples of California, are known to have lived here, in this very place.

I keep trying to wrap my mind around that. As I look at my own family's history, I can't count more than two generations that were *ever* born in the same place. I'm curious about you all.

Was anyone here born in the same city or town or village as your parents were? What about grandparents – anyone born in the same place as your parents *and* your grandparents? Great grandparents? Is anyone the 4<sup>th</sup> generation born in the same place? Most of us don't have continuity of place for more than 2 or 3 generations.

But before white people came to this place, indigenous people had already lived here for *hundreds of generations*. Passing on teachings and practices particular to *this* place –to its trees, rocks, waters, and creatures.

In his classic book *The Ohlone Way*, Berkeley author Malcolm Margolin reconstructs that time before Europeans came, imagining a mother and daughter on a springtime walk to harvest grass seeds. He writes:

*The two women now head away from the crest of the hills down the side of a ridge and follow the path alongside a tiny creek. The path is wide enough only for one person, but it is well-worn, stamped into the ground by thousands of footsteps.*

*In some places it is a foot below the level of the surrounding land. When she was a little girl, the mother had followed **her** mother along this same trail. And her mother had followed her grandmother. So it had been from very ancient times.*

*Not only is the path well-worn, but it is also intimately known. Every turn in the path has a proper name. Tiny groves of trees, clumps of bushes, rocks, resting places and spirit places along the path also have proper names. In fact the path itself has a name....*

*On the way back, at a turn in the trail, they come to a wide, very quiet place. The mood is different here, the temperature is different, a different smell pervades the air. Feathered prayer sticks have been planted in the ground. This is a holy place, a place of powerful spirits, a place where, if one is spiritually prepared, one might hear snatches of the magnificent power songs that were sung at the very creation of the world.*

*The women stop and fall silent. Then, throwing a handful of seeds on the ground [as an offering], they speak a formula of thanks and continue on towards the village.*<sup>8</sup>

I try to imagine what it might be like to walk on a narrow path in the footsteps of my ancestors. In the footsteps of *so many* generations of ancestors that the path has been trodden down to lie a foot below the surrounding ground!

For me, the path of my ancestors is portable. It's text and melody and prayer and Hebrew letters. As Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, it is a path of holy *time*, of sanctification of *time*, not of place.<sup>9</sup>

In his recent book *A Traveling Homeland*, Daniel Boyarin teaches that Jews carry our homeland with us in diaspora, in the form of textual, interpretive communities built around Talmud study. He teaches that the later editors of the Talmud constructed this traveling homeland intentionally, in a radical move of liberation from a single, fixed and favored land.<sup>10</sup>

People like Heschel and Boyarin have taught us that we can be fully Jewish anywhere in the world where we can build a community, and that Judaism can thrive in diaspora. Diaspora is a *primary*, not a secondary location for Jewish life.

But while my *spirit* is fed by the cycles of sacred time, and by the trans-generational community that lives in the portable homeland of holy text, my *body* still lives in a place, in a specific location on the earth. And as a human being, I need to be connected, physically and spiritually, to the place where I am.

For me the thriving of diaspora depends on our connection to *both* the Traveling Homeland of text, community and holy time, *and* on our

---

<sup>8</sup> Malcom Margolin, *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area*. Heyday Press, Berkeley, 1978. Reprinted with a new Preface, 2014. pp. 46-47

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland, The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Dust jacket back flap, pp. 9-26.

connection to the physical homeland of the place where we live-- right here, right now.

Part of what we're doing, and growing, at Kehilla is a new weaving together of our traveling Jewish homeland and our home on ancestral Ohlone land. We are weaving together *emet and chesed*: The *emet* of white people's genocide of indigenous people here, and our accountability for its legacy, with the *chesed* of the Ohlone invitation to create a healing for *all* the people that exist on this land. As we follow indigenous leadership, and as we learn about the sacred sites and stories of this land, we are also starting to see new possibilities emerge for our healing, and for our place-specific, diaspora Jewish identity.

Below, you can see some of what we and our members are doing, and how you can plug in. All of these things are small steps toward healing, toward doing the *teshuvah* that needs to be done for us to live on this land. For us to live.

One of the great Jewish teachers of the last century, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, wrote about *teshuvah*:

*Teshuvah comes from the depths—from a great depth in regard to which the individual human spirit is not a self-contained entity but a **continuum** of the great, universal being. As the Talmud teaches, “Great is Teshuvah, which brings healing to the world. And when one person does teshuvah, they and the entire world are forgiven”. (Yoma 86b)<sup>11</sup>*

May our *teshuvah* rise up tonight, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow night, and may it bring healing-- to us, and to our world. *G'mar chatimah Tova*, may we all be sealed for goodness, for *chesed* and for *emet* to in the year to come!

---

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Lights of Teshuvah*. Translated by Yaacov David Shulman. Dot Letter Word Press, 2017. p. 31. In Yoma 86b these are the words of R. Meir.

# LIVING AS KEHILLA ON OHLONE LAND

## SHU'UMI LAND TAX

Kehilla pays and promotes the Shu'umi land tax, a voluntary tax that supports the indigenous-led Sogorea Te Land Trust to buy back land in the East Bay for indigenous people. Kehilla makes an annual institutional tax payment, and this year we added a link on our membership form, inviting people to make an individual payment of the tax when joining, or renewing membership. In this way, we build an intimate, integral connection between the gift of having a physical home on this land, and our obligation to restore the land to indigenous hands and indigenous leadership.

[www.sogoreate-landtrust.com/shuumi-land-tax/](http://www.sogoreate-landtrust.com/shuumi-land-tax/)

## WEST BERKELEY SHELLMOUND & VILLAGE SITE

Many of us have been part of the fight to save the West Berkeley Shellmound, an ancient sacred site and village site, and the last such place in the East Bay that hasn't been fully developed. As of September 2018, the City of Berkeley has rejected the latest development proposal. But the struggle is far from over as the "owners" seek new developers. We can help realize the dream of restoring that site to the Ohlone people, for ceremony, teaching, and healing.

[www.shellmound.org](http://www.shellmound.org)

## LIVING AS JEWS ON OHLONE LAND - WORKSHOP

In collaboration with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and with the blessing of the Sogorea Te Land Trust, Rabbi Dev developed a workshop to teach Jewish communities in the Bay Area about the indigenous history of this land, to grow the practice of paying the Shu'umi land tax, and to explore Jewish text and teaching about how to honor and respect the land we live on. The goal over the next few years is to train a group of people to offer this workshop, and to take it to every Jewish community and organization in the Bay Area.

[rabbidev@kehillasynagogue.org](mailto:rabbidev@kehillasynagogue.org)

## 1000 GRANDMOTHERS

Kehilla members Barbara Rhine, Carol Rothman and Nancy Feinstein are among the organizers of 1000 Grandmothers Bay Area, a movement of elder women inspired by Standing Rock. They bring their bodies and wisdom to act in response to climate change and the impacts that are unevenly and unjustly borne by indigenous and front line communities around the world. They stand, or sit or roll in support of climate justice and indigenous-led ways to love and heal our earth for future generations.

[www.1000grandmothers.com](http://www.1000grandmothers.com) and [www.facebook.com/1000GrBA/](https://www.facebook.com/1000GrBA/)