

The Chief Rabbi's Rosh Hashanah Message 5785

During this most painful year, in addition to the trauma of the terrorist atrocities, the capture of hostages and the tragic war, we have been subjected to a constant barrage of falsehoods. Of these, none has been so insidious as the morally inverted claim of genocide, the modern-day blood libel.

On Yom Kippur, we will chant Kol Nidrei, a prayer steeped in history and emotion. Fascinatingly, historians differ on its precise origin. Many believe that it was composed as a remedy for Jews who had been forced to make oaths of conversion to Christianity. While Kol Nidrei declares 'all vows' made to God null and void, it was used as a pretext by medieval antisemites to portray Jews as untrustworthy in business and other civil matters. Despite assurances that Kol Nidrei did not apply to vows between people, the lie persisted, causing deep-seated hatred.

According to an old adage, a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still lacing up its boots. Sadly, in the era of social media, this is truer than ever, particularly where Israel is concerned.

In just one such example, in July, a well-known medical journal published a letter on its website. The authors estimated that the total number of casualties in Gaza attributable to Israel might eventually reach 186,000, if one were to factor in the impact of secondary causes, such as lack of housing and poor healthcare infrastructure. No attempt was made to assign any responsibility to Hamas, nor to differentiate between the deaths of combatants and non-combatants, nor identify the 'Gaza Health Ministry,' on whose data its conjecture was based, as Hamas-run. Nevertheless, campaigners attributed this 'new data' to the journal itself, rather than to a letter it had received. Some claimed that the journal had 'released a study,' while others stated that the estimate was 'peer reviewed.' Before long, millions had read it and it was cited by activists, British Parliamentarians, and a UN Special Rapporteur.

Kol Nidrei is chanted during our deepest moments of personal and communal introspection. In our confession of the High Holy Days, we call out to Hashem in candour: "You know the hidden secrets of every living soul. You search the innermost chambers of the conscience and the heart. Nothing escapes You. Nothing is hidden from Your sight." This is a moment of the purest honesty.

The Torah instructs us, "Distance yourself from falsehood," because it is not enough to be truthful; we must create an environment intolerant of falsehood.

Indeed, despite the centuries of lies and hatred, Kol Nidrei has endured because we have always found solace in moments of perfect truth between ourselves and Hashem.

When we know in the deepest recesses of our souls where truth ends and falsehood begins, no lie can diminish us.

The truth will prevail. Am Yisrael Chai!



Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE

