PEOPLE ARE NOT BRICKS
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There is a curious thing about horoscopes and fortune cookies – read either of them and they will almost always speak with great insight into what is going on in your life, what you are contemplating, struggling with or experiencing at that moment. Why is that?

We might think that it's the prescience of the writer of these oracles of observation, and while you're welcome to believe that if it helps you with facing the perils they describe, a more rational, reasoned explanation is more likely something called , "Confirmation Bias" also known " biased assimilation".

Confirmation bias occurs from the direct influence of desire on beliefs. When people would like a certain idea or concept to be true, they end up believing it to be true. They are motivated by wishful thinking. This error leads the individual to stop gathering information when the evidence gathered so far confirms the views or prejudices one would like to be true.

Once we have formed a view, we embrace information that confirms that view while ignoring, or rejecting, information that casts doubt on it. Confirmation bias suggests that we don't perceive circumstances objectively. We pick out those bits of data that make us feel good because they confirm our prejudices. Thus, we may become prisoners of our assumptions.

All of this was rattling around in my head this week as I considered what message to share with you this morning for Parashat Noach.

Last night I spoke about the seven Noahite laws and how those, commandments, given to all of humanity are the foundation code for human behaviour and that our self-assessment of our adherence to those seven laws is an important determination, individually and collectively if we will end up in the boat or in the water during the next divine judgement of humanity. Its on YouTube, I invite you to watch it.

I mention confirmation bias because as I read Noah this week so many of the messages I think we need to hear are found in this text; I had to wonder was the Torah speaking to us like a fortune cookie or a horoscope with predictive insight into our present experience or was I simply looking for everything I was finding; that the lessons of this parsha are a result of confirmation bias on my part not great insight on the part of the ancient texts?

It matters because if we are to give authority to our textual tradition, we need to confront it with the integrity of not trying to make it say what we want to hear.

This of course is a topic de jure with regard to how we hear political speech, how we read data about COVID cases and testing, the Climate Crisis and was a cornerstone of the recent US

Senate confirmation hearings for Judge Amy Coney Barrett. Where the debate sound very much at times like those in rabbinical seminar or even Talmud over the letter or the intent of the law. I will make the caveat that I am being generous here to compare nearly any political debate today, let alone supreme court confirmation hears with the Talmudic dialectic is to do a great disservice to the rabbis of the Talmud. Hillel and Shamia famously argues for the sake of heaven, "l'shem shamayim" – political debate today more often get the converse response shouted at our TV, "Oh for heaven's sake…"

With all of that as perhaps a far to lengthy introduction I want to hold up two stories from this morning's Torah Portion for each of us to consider for the message they provide for this moment in the human experience.

The first is the story of Noah himself, and *'ish Tzadik b'dorotam'* a righteous man in his generation. Surrounded by so much wickedness that God decided to destroy the world and all human being in it, Noah and his family are the only remanent of humanity worthy of divine salvation. Why does Noah survive and everyone else drowns in the flood waters? Was it human wickedness or homicide at the hands of heaven?

If we start from the premise that God is good and as our Torah proclaims, "all God's ways are of justice and peace" then God is Truman and his decision to use the atomic bomb to end WWII. The necessary evil that prevents the greater destruction and loss of life. This reading would have God pressing the rest button on humanity to save the natural worlds from human destruction. As I taught last night at least two and perhaps more of the seven Noahide Laws are environmentally and ecologically focused. From this lens God is removing a cancer (human beings) from the body which is the planet.

Another view, and there are certainly more than the two I am presenting is that God gives up on human beings and in anger and rage seeks to punish rather than rehabilitate human behaviour. Later in Torah God sends prophets, gives commandments, expresses regret and even permits humans to face the consequences of our own mistakes.

Is God hero or villain in the Noah story. What is Noah? Silent in the face of a human genocide. It could depend on what you are looking for the story to tell you, it could depend on your confirmation bias.

The second story comes later, the Tower of Babble.

"All the earth had the same language and the same words," (Genesis 11:1) we are told, and they gathered in the land of Shinar and said, "Come, let us build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over all the earth!" (11:4).

A favourite midrash that may sound familiar explains: Many, many years were passed in building the tower. It reached so great a height that it took a year to mount to the top. A brick

was, therefore, more precious in the sight of the builders than a human being. If a man fell down, and met his death, none took notice of it, but if a brick dropped, they wept, because it would take a year to replace it. So intent were they upon accomplishing their purpose that they would not permit a pregnant woman to interrupt herself in her work of brick-making when she went into labor. Molding bricks she gave birth to her child, and, tying it round her body in a sheet, she went on molding bricks. (Yashar Noah)

I read that story and I cannot help but think of the arguments taking place here and Canada and around the world over masks, lock downs, COVID and the economy. What is more valuable people or the bricks?

Many of us would probably respond without much if any hesitation, people of course! But some will say bricks, because the bricks give the people purpose and reason. The schlepping of those bricks were the non-essential businesses of the day that allowed people to put food on the table and give the workers dignity.

My point with both, is that you could read the story either way if you go looking to prove your point.

This is because people are prone to believe what they want to believe. Seeking to confirm our beliefs comes naturally, while it feels strong and counterintuitive to look for evidence that contradicts our beliefs. This explains why opinions survive and spread. Disconfirming instances are far more powerful in establishing the truth. Disconfirmation would require looking for evidence to disprove it.

Failing to interpret information in an unbiased way can lead to serious misjudgments. By understanding this, we can learn to identify it in ourselves and others. We can be cautious of data that seems to immediately support our views.

The nechemta, the 'moral of the story' is to set your hypothesis and look for instances to prove that you are wrong, not that you are right.

This is perhaps a true definition of self-confidence: the ability to look at the world without the need to look for instances that please your ego.

Willard V. Quine and J.S. Ullian described this bias in The Web of Belief as such:

"The desire to be right and the desire to have been right are two desires, and the sooner we separate them the better off we are. The desire to be right is the thirst for truth. On all counts, both practical and theoretical, there is nothing but good to be said for it. The desire to have been right, on the other hand, is the pride that goeth before a fall. It stands in the way of our seeing we were wrong, and thus blocks the progress of our knowledge."

Confirmation bias clouds our judgment. It gives us a skewed view of information, even when it consists only of numerical figures. Understanding this cannot fail to transform a person's worldview — or rather, our perspective on it. Lewis Carroll stated, "we are what we believe we are," but it seems that the world is also what we believe it to be.

A poem by Shannon L. Alder illustrates this concept:

Read it with sorrow and you will feel hate.
Read it with anger and you will feel vengeful.
Read it with paranoia and you will feel confusion.
Read it with empathy and you will feel compassion.
Read it with love and you will feel flattery.
Read it with hope and you will feel positive.
Read it with humor and you will feel joy.
Read it without bias and you will feel peace.
Do not read it at all and you will not feel a thing.

Today is election day in BC, it seems like every day for the last four years or more has been election day in the US. In the face of COVID, Climate Change and systemic racism we are confronted with data and anecdote that are complex and hard to discern at times.

My suggestion is this, be cautious of data that seems to immediately support your views. Look for what might disprove your assumptions and then make your best most reasoned decision on what it all means.

Being cognizant of confirmation is not easy, but with practice, it is possible to recognize the role it plays in the way we interpret information. You need to search out disconfirming evidence.

Hillel and Shamai were famous for arguing each other's point so as to arrive together at an understanding even if they still disagreed. See the other side, see all sides not just what you see from your perspective.