

## Searching for Answers

5 year ago, a new podcast took the world by storm. People who had never listened to podcasts before were avidly tuning into Serial, a true crime podcast which



investigated one crime in

installments, releasing new episodes each week. Over 80 million people downloaded the episodes of Season 1, which explored the murder of a high school student, Hae Min Lee, and tried to answer the question: Did Hae's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, who was convicted for her murder, really kill her, or was he falsely accused and imprisoned?

Serial's fans listened with bated breath to the twelfth and final episode of the season, desperate to learn the answer: Did Adnan kill Hae?

When they tuned in, many were shocked to hear what Sarah Koenig, the show's host had to say. After all of her careful investigations, and

careful consideration, here was her conclusion. “I don’t know.” In the end, she didn’t feel that she could say with certainty who had killed Hae. She was sure that there was insufficient evidence to convict Adnan, and that if his trial had been conducted properly, he would have gone free, but she was not able to confidently say that he was definitely innocent.

The audience reaction was intense. Many were frustrated, flabbergasted that their avid attention was not rewarded with the clear answer they had expected. Others, however, were intrigued. What an unexpected conclusion! After all, we are accustomed from fiction to mysteries being cleared up in the end, to a satisfying resolution to a story that pulls together the loose ends. In life, however, we rarely get such a neat ending, and the real-life investigation of Adnan Syed in the podcast Serial was no exception to that.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about an encounter in which there appears to be absolute certainty. God speaks directly to the people of Israel and backs up the experience with miracles, including dramatic visual and audio effects, in case people needed further proof that they were really experiencing God. This is absolute certainty-- Truth with a capital T given from God to humans with no intermediate stops.

When we look more closely, however, even within this story there is a seed of confusion, and perhaps doubt about whether the people are

truly hearing from God directly. Immediately after the Ten Commandments appears in the text, we learn this: "All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when



the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." (Exodus 20:15-16)

So did the people hear from God directly, or was what they heard mediated through a person, through Moses?

There are several *midrashim*, suggestions from the rabbis, about the answer to this. Some believe that the people heard God speak all 10 utterances, and some believe that God spoke only two. Some think that the people heard God only make the sound of the silent letter *aleph*, and that the rest was given through Moses.

Maimonides learns a larger lesson from the idea that some commandments came straight from God, whereas others were given by way of Moses. He seizes on the *midrash* claiming that God spoke only the first two commandments, which are written in first person, and that Moses spoke the last eight. Maimonides points out that the first two deal with the nature of God, they proclaim that God exists and that God is one. Those laws, Maimonides says, are like axioms. They can't be

demonstrated or proven. You know the nature of God by having an experience of God. The other laws, however, are demonstrable: and their truth can be seen when we look at the world around us. They include commands like honoring parents, not murdering, and not stealing. We know they are true because our society tells us so, but also because we see that those rules make sense. Most truths, therefore, don't need to come from God. We can see their truth ourselves when we look around.

Even within our *Parashah*, we have a story about finding truth from sources other than God. Our *Parashah* opens when Moses's father-in-law Yitro comes to visit, and Yitro brings with him years of leadership experience as a priest in Midian. Yitro sees Moses' leadership style, realizes that it is completely untenable, and gives Moses some advice about how to delegate, which Moses immediately takes. Moses recognizes truth when he sees it, even when the source is

a person rather than God, even when the source is a person who isn't even an Israelite.

Later in the Bible, we have yet another model of finding truth. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people find a book that they haven't seen before, which is called the Torah-- probably the book of Deuteronomy. They have a public reading of the book, they explain it to the rest of the people and then the people do their best to follow one of its instructions, namely celebrating the holiday of *Sukkot*. Prof. Sam Fleischacker, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois, writes about the parallels between the two experiences of



receiving the Torah. In one, the word comes from God with signs and miracles. The people say "We will do and we will hear," accepting it without even knowing the contents. In the other, it comes from humans, who found it in a scroll, who believe and hope that it has some answers about how to live a meaningful life. They read it, explain it, and

then immediately set out to follow through on at least one of the laws within it. Despite the lack of a direct divine connection, the people trust what they hear.

Every day, we are faced with the same questions that the Israelites faced in the time of Moses and in the time of Ezra. Where do we turn for truth? We face this question when we go on Facebook and Twitter and even the news, we face it when we see all sorts of stories and warnings and infomercials and advertisements, and we wonder-- is this real? Is this something I have to worry about? Is this something that I should do, or buy, or make? We face this question when an organization asks us for money and when someone asks us to sign a petition. It is all around us. How do we know who and what to trust?

Unlike the Israelites at Sinai, we don't have a divine voice telling us what to do-- and if we think we do, generally that's a bad sign! We might be more like the people in the time of Ezra, doing our best,

figuring out what seems reasonable and who seems trustworthy, and

trying to make the best decisions we can with the

limited information we have. Like Sarah Koenig

creating the Serial podcast, we might listen to as

many people as we can, collect as much evidence as

we can find, and pay close attention to all the details-- and we may still

fall short of certainty. And yet, that doesn't stop us from living our lives.

That didn't stop the people at the time of Ezra from celebrating *Sukkot*,

and it shouldn't stop us from making the best determinations we can.



It also shouldn't stop us from living ETHICALLY. It shouldn't stop us from

trying our best to sift information that comes to us, seeking to discern

the difference between TRUTH and FALSEHOOD. There's a great

midrash that teaches us that the letters of the word *EMET*, truth, all are

on a solid foundation (the *aleph* and the *mem* and the *tav* all have two

points on which to rest, אמת). Whereas the letters for the word *sheker*,

falsehood, are all unstable, since they all rest on a single point (שקר).



Much of the time, upon careful examination, we can determine what seems accurate, and what seems right, when we truly listen and pay attention. May we all continue to seek the truth wherever we may find it.

Shabbat Shalom

