I get asked a lot if I always knew I wanted to be a rabbi. In fact, it was only eight years ago that the thought even crossed my mind. I was living in South Florida and so for Yom Kippur, I found myself visiting my friend and mentor, Judith, in a nearby hotbed of Jewish life: Knoxville, Tennessee. It was in during the break between the morning service and Yizkor that Judith and I ended up on a bench overlooking the Tennessee river, and I was trying to find the words to explain to her why my fancy new job as a fundraiser for the Miami Jewish Federation still didn’t quite feel like the right fit. I remember telling her that I wanted to be a part of people’s Jewish lives, to influence their Jewish identities, not just their financial decisions. Judith looked at me and said, you know, Emily - you’re supposed to be a rabbi.

It was a funny suggestion, all things considered. Because I really didn’t believe in female rabbis.

You see, I grew up without them. I had never really known or connected to a female rabbi. I grew up here in Denver, mostly Conservative, a day school kid for 13 years. And, though I know Temple Emanuel had a few female assistant rabbis over the years, my family didn’t belong to Temple so I didn’t really know them.

And, every single one of the influential rabbis in my life - those who had taught me and shaped me and lit inside me this spark of love for Jewish learning and teaching - they all shared one unique characteristic - every single one had a beard.

So no... I didn’t believe in female rabbis. Except... I couldn’t get the idea out of my head.

Minus the beard, the idea fit like a glove - and once I imagined myself in the role, I couldn’t unsee the perfect fit. I wanted to teach, to inspire, to guide, to welcome -
and I knew the minute the words left Judith’s mouth that she was right. I just had to figure out what to do about the little itty bitty truth: no beard.

So, I sat with it. I stewed on it. And I eventually realized something REALLY important. That truth that I was holding onto so tightly, the truth that women cannot be rabbis - was not a truth at all.

I’ve come to learn that we hold truth in different parts of our bodies. Some truths live in our brains - these are the facts and figures, science and equations. We have an absolute relationship with these intellectual truths. 2 + 2 really does equal 4, and at the end of the day, I don’t have a lot of feelings about that particular reality.

But we hold other truths lower down, in our guts. In yiddish we call them our kishkes - our insides. These truths are a product of what we feel, a visceral reaction to what our existence and experience and exposure has taught us to be true in the world. These are emotional truths.

What we’re not very good at doing is knowing the difference between the truth that lives up in our heads and the truth that lives in our kishkes -- and they are definitely NOT the same.

Philosophers have, for centuries, debated these theories and the existence of truth. Aristotle talked about the truth in our heads. He said “to say that what is - is, and what is not - is not, is true,” but Neitzsche found truth lower down, saying “there are no facts - only interpretations.” Mark Twain reminded us that truth is
stranger than fiction, and none of that really matters because, as Jack Nicholson told us, **we can’t handle the truth** anyway.

And probably, Jack is right. Truth is impossibly hard to understand.

My son Neil just turned three and to him, the world is still black and white. His truths are easy to identify - and they haven’t yet taken up residence in either his head or his kishkes - they just are. It either hurts or it doesn’t. He wants it or he doesn’t want it. He’s hungry or he’s not - though if you put ketchup on it, he’ll probably eat it anyway - but he hasn’t developed the nuance that makes him question or complicate these truths.

For most of us though, truth comes in a million shades of gray - and in those first moments when the most fundamental truths in each of us begin to change (and they will), it feels as if we have been ripped from our foundations.

In all honesty, “truth” is one of the hardest things about my job. I’ve been here at Temple for just over a year, and it’s been a doozy. Among other things, there have been gunmen in synagogues that leave us mourning the loss of life and security. Natural disasters that leave cities destroyed in their wake. Vicious debates over fundamental constitutional rights that leave us unsure WHICH truths are still, in fact, held to be self-evident. And an official impeachment inquiry now underway for the president. It’s been a year full of violence and unrest, distrust, embarrassment and extreme political polarization. And after each tragedy or disaster or debate, I wrestle with truth. I think we all do.

I’m afraid that I don’t know the real truth. How can I speak to you from this Bimah today, to ask you to learn with me this morning, how can I spiritually move you and
motivate you and morally inspire you when I can’t be certain that I know the truth of what I’m telling you? And how could I even pretend to know? These truths are far from self-evident. Every news channel tells us a different story, every website has a different explanation and we live in a world where we literally had to add the term ‘fake news’ to the dictionary - a world of artificial intelligence, of deep fakes, of indistinguishable computer generated imaging. So how can I possibly hope to identify and extract some truth from the sticky and tangled web of information and misinformation floating through our airwaves?

And so I’m thinking of abandoning the truth.

You see, Judaism is not now, and never has been, a religion of truth. We are a skeptical bunch - a people of questions, debate, of different opinions and schools of thought. We don’t have just one question, we need four! From the moment that Abraham refused to believe in the pagan power of many gods and smashed the idols in his father’s shop, we became the descendants of a beautiful legacy of investigation in which we refuse to blindly believe in things. And especially today, on Rosh Hashanah and at this season, we push back - not just on the outside world, but on that which we cannot tolerate in our own selves. We are not a people of complacency: we push back on ourselves, on others and on the world. We fight against that which denies us the chance to challenge.

Except… we aren’t fighting. We’re distracted by the need for truth. I was distracted by truth. That truth that women cannot be rabbis - that was, for me, a kishkes truth. It was not held in my brain because in my brain I know that I was raised by a powerful woman who taught me that I can do ANYTHING - not because I am a woman but because I am a PERSON. THAT is a truth.
The hebrew word for truth is EMET - today, on Rosh Hashanah, as we celebrate the anniversary of creation, we recall a story about the angels fighting while God was creating. The angel of chesed - loving kindness pleaded with God to create humankind for they would be filled with love. The angel of truth, of EMET, however, begged God NOT to, as humans would inevitably be filled with lies. What did God do? God threw the angel of emet to the ground, leaving him stuck on the earth with us, and teaching us that truth is not found in heaven, it is here with us - and so the three hebrew letters that spell EMET: aleph, mem and tav, are actually the first, middle and final letters of the hebrew alphabet. The letters of emet are the bookends. Our tradition teaches that the truth is found in the words that WE make from that whole alphabet. We hold every letter and so we have total power over words - both those that are true - and those that are not.

But Emet is also in the same family as a different word - one we use infinitely more often. Emet shares the same origins as the word AMEN. Amen is a statement of affirmation - but not necessarily one of truth. Amen comes from Emuna - faith. From Ma’amín - believe.

Emet is how we know what is true. But Amen is what we do with the reality we find. When we say AMEN at the end of a blessing, it means “I’m with you.” We don’t declare EMET at the end of each blessing or prayer. We are humble enough to know that we don’t always know the truth.

Emet - Truth - creates in us the illusion that we somehow have the capacity - and the right - to know the truth about the big questions of why things happen. But, perhaps the truth is not for us - there are moments of magnificence and enormity that are too powerful for truth. When we first learn that our children will feel inconsolable pain that we cannot fix. When we find ourselves caught in webs of addiction and destructive behavior. When we gather as families in ways that
make us cry happy tears. When brides and grooms walk down the aisle. When we watch our parents begin to forget things more important than where they put their glasses. When we watch our grandparents... parents...husbands and wives, or God forbid, our children, take their last breath.

These big moments - moments of power, or triumph, or beauty, or pain - they are not moments of truth. They are not Emet.

But they are Amen.

We say AMEN when we recite shehecheyanu, the blessing for just having made it, the blessing for surviving.

We say AMEN after each blessing of gratitude - for waking up in the morning.

We say AMEN after the Mi Shebeirach prayer for healing, as we wait for a reprieve from suffering.

We say AMEN at the end of each section of the mourners kaddish - telling those who grieve “I’ve been there. I hear you.”

And we say AMEN at the end of our prayer for peace. Oseh Shalom Bimromav - May the one who makes peace make peace for us.
We say AMEN at the end of these prayers because we believe in them. Amen is not a knowing, it is an affirmation, it is a hope. A wish. It is a dream of what our world could look like. We say Amen... but not emet.

Truth has nothing to do with it.

I learned that those truths we hold so tight in our guts are beliefs waiting to be challenged. I didn’t really believe that women shouldn’t be rabbis, I just hadn’t spent enough time dreaming about it. I couldn’t see it.

**Now I can.** I was saying Emet where I needed an Amen.

The truths that hold us today are no different. These truths of good and bad, black and white, wrong and right - right and left - are no different. They are just sitting in our kishkes waiting for us to challenge them, to push back and resist. Yes, there are those who cross the line into evil, those to whom we SHOULD NOT listen. But they are not the majority of people with whom we disagree. For most people, it isn’t about whether they are right or wrong - because most of the time, our world exists somewhere in between. This is not about WHAT we believe, it’s about HOW we believe and we are not a people of absolute truth to the exclusion of all other truths, we are a people of investigation and examination and questions. We are the people of Shema, Yisrael - of listening.

And we have stopped listening to each other. **If I have learned one truth during this year when I have learned to fear truth**, it is that we have stopped listening. So hear me - we either love this president or we hate him. We support this government or we protest it. We are relieved or we are terrified - and it isn’t that our truths about what WE believe are wrong - it’s that the truths we think we know about those who don’t agree with us are pushing us further and further
away from each other. And, that enormous gaping divide and the desperate battle to prove the TRUTH to those standing on the opposite side of the canyon has robbed us of the ability to listen to each other. We cannot hear over the reverberating and deafening roar in our own echo chambers.

And so, I pray that we give up on truth.

Give up on our need to be right, to prove others wrong, to get the last word. We are not a people of EMET, we are a people of AMEN. If you can do one thing in this next year, it is Shema Yisrael - listen to those around you. Sit with those who are different than you. Eat with them. Drink with them. Pray with them. Speak with them and challenge them, but hear them and love them. And not just those who look different, or pray different or dress different... mostly, I mean those who vote different... Because if I know any truth at all, you’re not that different. You have all sat in my office and talked about your fears and your hopes and your dreams. We’ve cried here, laughed here, celebrated here, prayed here, celebrated here and mourned here. And now, we do teshuvah here.

May we find words of peace to speak to those we’ve ignored. To those we’ve turned our backs on because we forgot that we aren’t that different. To those who we think won’t listen to us. May we speak words of peace, may we hear words of peace and may we, through the crossing of aisles, the reaching out of hands, the muting of televisions, the recycling of newspapers, the disabling of notifications and the abandoning of truth - make peace in our world. And, together WE say: Amen.