

Breaking news: We've just received word of an attempted assassination of the highest government official.¹ A human asset outside the seat of government intercepted coded communication between two would-be killers.² Early reports suggest the men were angry about a recent political appointee widely believed to be unqualified for his position.³ Their attempted poisoning⁴ represents the clearest indication yet of a deep-state threat willing to stop at nothing to preserve the status quo.⁵

My guess is that while this commentary on the Book of Esther from Purim may *feel* like a sensational way to start a sermon, it's pretty mundane compared to the things you are already reading online or watching on TV:

You've heard of Pandemic, the idea that Bill Gates and others are using the COVID-19 pandemic to implant microchips within everyone who receives a vaccine? Some 25% of Americans think it's probably true.⁶

Maybe you've heard that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Donald Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring. Millions of Americans believe that, too.⁷

Or maybe your conspiracy theory circles are a bit more tame and only try to suppress voters by claiming that mail-in voting is rampant with fraud and foreign interference.⁸

We are all buffeted by these spurious, intentionally deceptive claims. What used to be confined under a rock in the furthest reaches of the dark web can now be found on Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, coming from certain mainstream media voices and even the mouths of political

¹ Esther 2:21 "In those days, as Mordechai was sitting at the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigtan and Teresh, among the guardians of the threshold, became angry and sought to do violence to King Ahashverosh."

² Mishnah Shekalim 5:1 "These are the officers which served in the Temple...Petahiah was over the bird offerings (this same Petahiah was Mordechai; why was his name called Petahiah? - because he was able to open matters and to expound them and he know 70 languages)." Thus even though Bigtan and Teresh sought to disguise their conversation in a foreign tongue, Mordechai was able to understand.

³ Midrash Rabbah on Esther 6:13 "What rage existed there? He (Ahashverosh) removed two noblemen (namely Bigtan and Teresh) who are distinguished guardians of the threshold and placed this barbarian sitting at the king's gate."

⁴ Rashi's commentary on Esther 2:21 "To give him poison to drink."

⁵ Yalkut Shimoni on Esther 1053: Esther orchestrated Mordechai's appointment, convincing Ahashverosh it would be worthwhile to have a Jew stationed at the gate to give advice when needed. Bigtan and Teresh planned to kill Ahashverosh so that everyone would comment that when they had guarded the palace, the king had been safe, but when Mordechai began sitting at the king's gate in their place, the king was assassinated.

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>

⁷ <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/qanon-groups-have-millions-members-facebook-documents-show-n1236317>

⁸ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/resources-voter-fraud-claims>

leaders in whom we have entrusted our fate and that of our country.⁹ Recognizing the malicious, false disinformation propagating on the internet is a challenge of modern day literacy, and as People of the Book — as Jews and as Americans — we have an important role to play: spotting fake sources, supporting credible ones, and challenging those who are part of the problem.

The book of Esther actually gives us our most powerful tool. When Mordechai overheard the guard's plot to kill Ahashverosh (with which I began), he told Esther of their plan. Her next action, according to Esther 2:22, was to “report it to the king in Mordechai's name.”¹⁰ It's easy to overlook this detail when reading the larger story, but the sages of our tradition teach that it's a detail upon which the very redemption of the entire world depends. “One who repeats a statement in the name of the one who said it,” we read in Pirkei Avot, “brings redemption to the world.”¹¹ Esther and the rabbis teach us to cite our sources. Want to stem the tide of disinformation and lies in our world? It's that easy. Cite your sources. Check your sources. Verify your sources.

Read something you absolutely agree with — or wholeheartedly don't? Before you are informed by it, much less willing to quote it or share it, check into the author. Reputable? Trustworthy? Are they even real? Next, look into the larger publication or website. Have you heard of it before? Do their other stories seem credible? Has it been around longer than breakfast? Many of us in Western Pennsylvania, myself included, fell for such a fly-by-night site this summer: July reports that Governor Tom Wolf might return counties to the original Red Phase of COVID-19 prevention were completely fabricated on a website that was recently a weather blog.¹² Instead of wasting time asking about how this would impact Temple and ECDC programming, we should have dug more deeply into this politically-motivated rumor.

This chart by Vanessa Otero and her team at Ad Fontes Media might be able to help.¹³ Take a moment to locate your favorite source of news. Is it at the top or the bottom of the curve? Consider well whether your source is a source of information or bias-reinforcing mis-or-disinformation. Your favorite source not where you would like it to be in terms of objective reliability? Instead of dismissing this chart, look further. Examine their process. Knowing your sources is information literacy 101 and an important first step to bringing redemption into this world.

We Jews have fully embraced the descriptor “People of the Book.” Originally a Koranic term describing Jews as inheritors of a valid religious tradition, we use it today to speak specifically of our relationship to Torah and more broadly of our fidelity to the printed word. Some might say we even carry this mantle to the extreme. Overflowing shelves and a love of books are hallmarks of Jewish homes and psyches — and why I have chosen to offer this sermon from my office. Reading, studying, sharing what we have learned is central to our religious practice, and inevitably we collect many books along the way. In doing so, we also support those scholars, authors, and publishing houses that advance our understandings and allow them to

⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/12/politics/qanon-congressional-candidates/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.sefaria.org/Esther.2?lang=bi>

¹¹ Pirkei Avot 6:6 https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.6?lang=bi

¹² <https://www.fox43.com/article/news/verify/verify-governor-tom-wolf-coronavirus-reopening-red-phase-pennsylvania-breaking-news/521-ad646baf-c266-4c75-9bda-400ca83d48fa>

¹³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G3UQrhEECo287oFfbwp-byFxRhZ5SDRB/view?usp=sharing>

continue their important work. I would suggest this is the second thing we can do to stop the propagation of disinformation and fake news: support and pay for quality you can depend upon.

The Brookings Institution states well what we already know: “Few Americans today hold print subscriptions, and newspapers have struggled to amass digital subscribers...Digital advertising...makes us a growing share of a shrinking pie (of revenue dollars).”¹⁴ When you find an author, when you find a reliable source that you support, you have an ethical obligation to chip in. Adults say thank you with money, and ensuring journalists are compensated for their efforts both encourages their work and raises the prominence of their voice in the crowded marketplace of ideas.

Finally, once you are able to spot fake sources and are doing your part to support credible ones, it's time to stand up to those who have yet to do so. We can apply pressure to government, to technology and news companies, and even to our friends and family to enlist their help in stopping the spread of disinformation.¹⁵ Governments can uplift, uphold, and ensure the value and safety of a free and independent press, even when — especially when — it holds them accountable in difficult ways. Technology firms can label or remove patently false lies and disinformation without impacting First Amendment rights. Legitimate news organizations can call out mis-and-disinformation without legitimating it or pushing more traffic its way. And, while it's a delicate line to walk because picking a fight is far more likely to make another person double-down on their original thought than change, we can even approach our friends and family. Even simple questions can often have a profound effect, if not on the person spreading disinformation at least on those subjected to it. “Do you trust this author?” “Are there other sources that can verify this claim?” “Who stands to benefit from this being in the world?” You are not alone in this effort. Organizations like the News Literacy Project¹⁶, the Poynter Institute's Mediawise¹⁷, and popular books¹⁸ can all help. Check them out and learn more.

As prolific content consumers — by email, social media, television, the printed world, and more — we are all subject to constant spurious, intentionally deceptive claims. If the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee reports are true, these deceptions will only increase as we draw closer to the November election.¹⁹ What used to be confined under a rock in the furthest reaches of the dark web can now be found everywhere we can be found. As People of the Book — as Jews and as Americans — we have an important role to play in identifying, challenging, and stopping this scourge. Esther showed us the way. Question and cite your sources. Support those worthy of your dollars. Challenge disinformation and those who put it out. Our nation, and — according to the rabbis of our tradition — the redemption of the whole world — depends upon it.

¹⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Local-Journalism-in-Crisis.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/>

¹⁶ <https://newslit.org>

¹⁷ <https://www.poynter.org/mediawise/>

¹⁸ <https://www.callingbullshit.org/index.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/press/senate-intel-releases-volume-5-bipartisan-russia-report>