



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

Introduction

Fake news has become a serious issue in recent years as we have witnessed the impact of fictitious news stories perpetrated by print and broadcast media outlets, in social media, and throughout the wider internet world. In this unit, we examine the issue of fake news against the backdrop of Jewish tradition.

The assertion with which the unit begins is that there are two types of fake news:

- Stories that are patently false.
- Stories that may include no false information but are misleading. They are often designed to lead news consumers to a particular - usually mistaken – conclusion.

The lesson focuses on the latter, a more subtle form of fake news, with the hope of making students active “prosumers” of news rather than passive “consumers”.

Blended Learning Methodology and Technology

The unit is designed as a blended learning program that combines online learning with traditional classroom activities. The online components are presented on a Nearpod online learning system in order to promote a high degree of interactivity, and to allow for flexibility in the presentation. Teachers can use the Nearpod and the online tools embedded in it in a variety of ways:

- Online activities can be used for group learning activities by using a computer projector.
- Online activities can be used as independent in-class activities in a classroom in which students have access to their own devices, or shared devices.
- Online activities can be assigned as independent homework activities.
- The unit design assumes that independent activities will serve as the basis for classroom discussions that summarize or enrich the work completed online by the students.

To use the Nearpod:

Students should type a name and click "Join"



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

Students can move from one unit of the lesson to another using the tabs at the bottom of the page.

Students can click on the arrows at the side of the slide to move the slideshow forward or backwards.

Goals

Students will:

- Learn and analyze the following classical Jewish texts:
 - *Pirkei Avot* 1:18
 - *Vayikra* 19:11
 - *Shemot* 23:7
 - Bamidbar 13:17-18; 27-33)
 - *BT Eruvin* 13b
 - *Mishnah Brachot* 8:7 and *Devarim* 8:10
 - *Devarim* 1:22-27
- Learn to identify elements of misleading reporting and to distinguish between fact and opinion.
- Appreciate the concept of multiple truths and know how to distinguish between multiple truths and unfounded opinions.
- Understand the role of consumers in verifying the accuracy of news reports and develop strategies for doing so.

Lesson Guide:

Part 1

After establishing the Jewish value of pursuing truth, as reflected in the dictate of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, Part 1 examines the two commandments in the Torah that prohibit falsehood. While one is straightforward (*Vayikra* 19:11), the second (*Shemot* 23:7) is worded in a unique way – “distance yourself from falsehood.” No other commandment in the Torah requires distancing ourselves from a prohibition, which is language usually used in rabbinic decrees that are designed to create a “fence around the Torah”.

Students are presented with 3 possible explanations of this language:

- The Torah requires us to take extra steps to distance ourselves from falsehood because it is such a serious offense that is easy to perpetrate.



Fake News – Teacher's Guide

- We must make sure that even when we say things that are true, we must be careful not to mislead or give a false impression.
- When someone else tells a lie, we must refute them so that we not be complicit in the lie.

The students are then asked to use the padlet tool to indicate which reason they find most compelling, and to give an example or examples from their personal experience of any of these interpretations. Note that the padlet also allows for collaborative learning in which students can be asked to react to the responses of fellow students.

Tips for using the Padlet:

To add comments to the padlet, students should click on the + at the bottom of each column which causes a post-it to appear.

They need to add a title and can either write their comment or click on the ... at the bottom right of the note, and choose to record themselves, audio or video.

Following this activity, the teacher should conduct a classroom discussion to summarize student responses, and to focus a bit on examples of the second interpretation, which will serve as the background for the next part of the unit.

Note: There is a broad and rich discussion of this verse in classical Jewish sources. Teachers who wish to expand the examination of this prohibition, can consult a resource sheet that provides several additional relevant commentaries and sources, with thought questions for discussion.

Part 2

In this section, students will be asked to analyze the story of the spies sent by Moses to scout out the Land of Israel as an example of fake news in the Torah. They will compare Moshe's instructions to the spies (*Bamidbar* 13:17-18) with the report of the spies (*Bamidbar* 13:27-33). The students are asked to review the report of the spies and highlight everything in the report that's factual **in green**, highlight any statements that are false **in red**, and highlight any statements that are opinion **in yellow**.

Tip for using the technology:

1. To highlight the text, students choose a highlight color from the palette by clicking on the highlighter on the bottom left of the screen.



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

2. Then they click on the words and drag the highlighter over the text that they wish to include.

After doing so, each student or student team (if they work collaboratively) should submit their work. The teacher should follow up with a class discussion including the following points:

1. Did the spies follow Moshe’s orders, or did they diverge from them? How so?
A comparison between Moshe’s orders and the report of the spies reveals that the spies were, for the most part, true to their mission. They reported exclusively about the things that Moshe had mentioned and brought the physical evidence that he had requested.
2. Which parts of the report were true, which parts were false, and which were opinion?
It seems that most, if not all, of the facts in the report are true. The only information that is not verifiable is the perception of the spies in the eyes of the “giants”, unless they overheard a conversation in which the giants mentioned that the spies looked like grasshoppers to them.
3. Which of the spies first introduces opinion into the report?
It appears that Caleb is the first to introduce opinion into the discussion with his declaration: “Let’s go now and take possession of the land. We should be more than able to conquer it.” From that point on, the other spies also offer their opinions. Yet, it seems that Caleb was reacting to something that the other spies had said earlier which had frightened the people.

Nachmanides suggests that “their sin and transgression was when they said: ‘However, the people who live there are strong ...’” Nechama Liebowitz explains that the use of the word “however” (סוף) turned their factual statement into an opinion.

In support of this understanding, she also quotes the commentator Yitzchak Arama (Akeidat Yitzchak): “Their terrible sin was that they removed themselves as objective observers and became advisors... It can be compared to a man who says to his agent, ‘Go to the warehouse and have a look at a tallit the merchant has in stock, examine it carefully for the quality of the wool and linen for size, appearance and price and let me know, as I wish to purchase it.’ If the agent returns and says, ‘I had a look at it and the wool is pure, it is long and wide, greenish and reddish in color and the price is a hundred gold pieces,’ he has carried out his mission correctly. But if he said, ‘I had a look at it, the wool is pure, it is long and wide, but it is reddish and greenish in color and is very dearly priced at 100 gold pieces,’ then he has exceeded the bounds of his mission and become instead an advisor. This is as a result of inserting the qualifying word ‘but’.”



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

Accordingly, the color coding of the section might look like this:

²⁷ “We went to the land where you sent us. It really is a land flowing with milk and honey. Here’s some of its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who live there are strong, and the cities have walls and are very large. We even saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the Negev. The Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the mountain region. And the Canaanites live along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and all along the Jordan River.”

³⁰ Calev quieted the people toward Moshe, and he said, “Let’s go now and take possession of the land. We should be more than able to conquer it.”

³¹ But the men who had gone with him said, “We cannot go against those people, for they’re too strong for us!” ³² So they began to spread bad reports among the Israelites about the land they had explored, saying: “The land we explored is one that devours its inhabitants. All the people we saw there are very tall. ³³ We saw Nephilim there, the descendants of Anak of the Nephilim. We felt as small as grasshoppers, and that’s how we were in their eyes.”

The conclusion of this discussion is to show how nuances and the blurring of fact and opinion can make a factual account into fake news.

Note: If students have difficulty identifying the report of the spies as “fake news”, it should be pointed out that our point of departure is that the Torah itself finds the report problematic, to the degree that it delayed the entry of the Jewish people into the land for 38 years. The exercise is to see why the Torah viewed the report negatively when it was essentially factual.

Part 3

In this section, students learn about various ways in which news reports can be misleading, including unbalanced reporting, mixing of fact and opinion, nuanced language, lack of context, etc. The Prezi material intentionally minimizes references to reporting about Israel or current American politics in order to avoid undesired controversy in the discussion. Teachers who wish to include issues related to reporting about Israel can find material on the “Honest Reporting” website at: <http://honestreporting.com/>.

Ways to use this material:

- 1) Split the class into small groups and have each look at one section of the Prezi and report back.



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

- 2) Work through each of the sections as a class, inviting students to read aloud and share insights. (This could take multiple class sessions.)
- 3) Find several reports on a current controversial news story and see if the students can find examples of misleading reporting reflected in the Prezi. Have them share their findings with their classmates.

Part 4

This section counterbalances the issue of fake news with the concept of multiple truths. The study includes 4 main points:

- The differing opinions of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai.
- The equal validity of both opinions.
- The selection of Bet Hillel’s opinion because they quoted the opinion of Bet Shammai before their own.
- A look at a particular controversy between Bet Hillel and Bat Shammai in order to differentiate between multiple truths and unfounded opinions.

The students then consider the implications of these sources for good reporting by looking at guidelines for accurate reporting provided on the “Media Helping Media” website.

This portion of the unit has no particular activity associated with it. It can be studied together and discussed in class, or it can be assigned for independent study. If the latter, it is suggested that there be a summary discussion in class.

Parts 5-6

Section 5 considers who is actually responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the news. After studying and analyzing Moshe’s retelling of the story of the spies in *Devarim* 1:22-27, students are asked to consider who bore primary responsibility for the incident. The original story in *Bamidbar* places at least some of the blame on the spies, while Moshe seems to focus primarily on the people. Students are asked to give their opinion on a survey as to whether primary responsibility belonged to Moshe, the spies, or the people. They are also asked to explain their answer in the Today’s Meet forum.

Tips for using the technology: To post on the chat (Backchannel Cjhat), students do not have to log in. They simply have to type their names in the box and click join..

Section 6 is based on Moshe’s premise that the people bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of news. While it is certainly incumbent on reporters to accurately report the news, news consumers cannot assume that reporters are adhering to proper standards of reporting. The section encourages them to become “prosumers” of news by brainstorming strategies for checking the accuracy of news reports that they



Fake News – Teacher’s Guide

receive. The brainstorming is done on a Mindmeister. Instructions for adding comments to the Mindmeister are included in the upper left-hand corner of the Mindmeister screen.

After students have completed their brainstorming, it is suggested that teachers conduct a classroom discussion to organize and summarize their work.

Here are some ideas culled from various blogs to aid in the discussion:

- **Be skeptical of what you read, starting with the headlines and pictures.** The first thing that you see in a news story are the headlines and the visuals. Read beyond the headlines and check to see if the headlines and visuals reflect what is in the whole article. Consider whether you think they are believable.
- **Investigate the sources.** Make sure the story is written by a source that you trust and if you are not familiar with it, go to the “About” page and learn more. Try to use sources that you know have some degree of reliability. Do not rely on social media for your news.
- **Compare the story with other reports.** Comparison shopping is smart — especially when it comes to the news. Compare how the story is reported in other well-known news providers. Since many providers have a bias, it is good to develop a group of competing news sources for comparison.
- **Examine the sources cited.** It is important that reports give attribution for eye-witness reports, background information, and opinions quoted in the story. Make sure that the story cites and quotes credible sources — e.g. a person with a name and a title representing a credible organization. If the article cites a foreign news source, examine whether it is coming out of an area in which the government exercises a high degree of censorship or coercion. Also, check to see if the report quotes sources reflecting varied perspectives, or gives inordinate attention to sources reflecting the same perspective.
- **Utilize fact-checking sites.** Fake news stories that go viral are often exposed by such websites as Snopes.com, TruthOrFiction.com, Honest Reporting, and FactCheck.org.
- **Think critically.** If the writer seems to have an agenda and does not have much to back it up, there is a likelihood it is fake.

Part 7

Though social media is not always a reliable source for accurate news, teenagers get a lot of their information through sites and apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, as well as satirical news sources such as The Onion. Memes are ubiquitous in the internet-driven world in which our teens live.



Fake News – Teacher's Guide

This final portion of the lesson asks students to use the knowledge they've gained so far to gauge the truthfulness of images in a familiar form. Though the images have been created using styles which will be familiar, the subjects are biblical stories and characters, not the usual subject of internet speculation. Some are true to primary source text, some are not, some contain misleading information, opinion, and falsehood.

Students will be asked to look at the images and accompanying words and judge if they are true or if all or part of the words and image could be categorized as fake news.

There are five images in this section. You might choose to work through these as a class or give images to small groups of students to investigate and report back.

Below is the key to each meme:

Joseph

Most of the words accompanying the picture in this story are factual, though presented in a sensationalized way. In the "crawl," the words along the bottom, the text suggests that the brothers deny knowledge, which they do not directly do in the biblical narrative. Clearly, the picture is of a well that looks similar to some found in the Middle East. There are certainly times when editors use a picture that symbolizes the event being reported but was not taken there.

Sara

Though it was indeed a blessing that Sara and Abraham were able to conceive at the ages of 90 and 99, respectively, Sara didn't say so. When she overheard that she was going to have a child, she laughed. Interestingly, when asked by God why she laughed, Abraham denied that she had done so.

Ruth

The image certainly looks as though it could be Ruth and Naomi. The quote is a riff on "Wherever thou goest, I shall go," the famous words Ruth says to Naomi. The internet is full of misattributed quotes. The one on this poster is attributed to Confucius; it may have originated with him, though an internet search provides a number of different sources for the saying.

Abraham

Most Jewish school children know the story of Abraham breaking the idols; it is a foundational story, often told in the primary grades. Though it is part of Jewish tradition, it is a midrash and is not found in the Torah.

Quail

At first, the Israelites complained that the food in the desert wasn't as good as the food was in Egypt. They let Moses know that what they really wanted was meat. So they



Fake News – Teacher's Guide

were given meat, lots of meat, as quail fell from the sky. Soon there was more quail that they could eat. God, in anger, caused the quail to rot even while it was in the mouths of those who were eating it. They got both physically sick and sick of quail. It rotted, and they begged for it to be removed.