Be Informed

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The concept of an ethical will is one I pondered for quite a while before composing my Elul story this year. I wanted to go beyond the obvious and overarching values like "being kind to others" and "doing what's right," as important and guiding as towering maxims like those can be. I searched through my own experiences to find a message that I could impart with a more narrow, instructive, and personal vantage point. And finally, it hit me.

BE INFORMED. I have been a high school English teacher for 17 years, and as such, I have been witness to the impact of burgeoning technology and, more specifically, social media on our nation's youth. Aside from how it has been degrading their reading and writing abilities, more importantly perhaps - and certainly ironically -- it has degraded their ability to truly be informed citizens of the world. The reason for this is that social media venues and the Internet in general are ripe for the proliferation of MISinformation. This impacts adults just as much as young people. Too often people see something someone has posted online and pass it on through cyberspace without checking the validity of the information, and thus a meme is born, regardless of how accurate or balanced it is. In this upcoming election season, this becomes more problematic when people head to the voting booths. Too often nowadays, people vote not based on what they really know to be true about a candidate, but instead based on the Facebook postings of their friends. Every year, I do a lesson with my students wherein they get a list of "facts," some of which are indeed factual, and some of which are not. I then charge them with the task of going on the Internet and determining which is which by evaluating the reliability of the
sources from whence they came.

The most powerful lesson I did in this vein was with a group of tenth graders who had just finished reading *Night* by Elie Weisel. I showed them several web sites that proclaimed that the Holocaust never happened, which shocked them, and then proceeded to magnify their incredulity when I told them the percentage of people in the world who believe what these sites purport - according to an article in *The Atlantic* from 2014, "Only a third of the world's population believe the genocide has been accurately described in historical accounts." They then were given a project requiring them to search for primary sources to refute the Holocaust-denying web sites.

We each have an enormous responsibility in today's technology-driven age. Word travels faster and reaches more people than ever before. By making the effort to sift through the "noise" of cyberspace to be informed, we ensure that our efforts to "do what's right" are guided by truths - not someone's midnight rantings. If I can teach my students and my own daughters to do this, then I feel I will have passed on a critical tool for living a life that contributes to the betterment of the world as a whole.

*Jody Siegel and her husband Chris have two daughters, Bethany and Shayna. Jody sing in the Adult Band and the whole family is involved in Youth Group.*

Would you like to share your Elul Story? Write an ethical will, in the form of a letter, a story or a collections of sayings. Include the "gifts" you would like to leave to your family focusing on the values and character traits which you feel are most important. Send it in its entirety or send a section of it to: raysusie@gmail.com. If you missed any of the previous Elul Stories you can go to www.tbtny.org (media galleries/elul stories).