



HAÏM KORSIA

Chief Rabbi of France

Steven ERLANGER

I appreciate your attention and the first speaker we have, quite extraordinarily, is the Chief Rabbi of France, Haïm Korsia. Haïm, go ahead.

Haïm KORSIA

Speaking in front of such a distinguished audience is a challenge for me. Moreover, I am going to shamefully cheat because the Sabbath starts in about half an hour. I am going to slip out instead of participating in the debate with you, which will release me from that terrible constraint. I am going to talk about something eminently important: what is truth?

How can truth be defined? If it is considered absolute, then the world cannot change.

I would like to tell you about something that happened to me when I was in Castellane, the smallest sub-prefecture in France, where I attended mass. The priest, who was terrific, explained a reading from the Gospels to the congregation. You can see I am familiar with the Gospels. It's called benchmarking, keeping an eye on the competition. The Gospels say that the last will be first, and the first will be last. The congregation looked puzzled. The priest explained it to them, standing up, like I am doing now, saying, "You don't understand 'the first will be last', but you know how to play *pétanque*, don't you?" Everybody nodded. Then he said, "When you play *pétanque*, you toss the *cochonnet*, the jack ball." I don't know if the word *cochonnet* can be said here in Morocco because it means piglet, but since I'm a rabbi, I'm also concerned, so I'll take the chance. You toss the *cochonnet* and then the players throw their balls, trying to get them as close to the *cochonnet* as possible. One player tries to hit another player's ball that's very close to the *cochonnet* and misses. His ball goes very, very far. Then another tries. He misses too, but strikes the *cochonnet*, which goes very, very, very far, next to the first ball. By and large, this is Galileo. How can Galileo be understood with the *cochonnet*? It's not complicated.

You have a truth. It is yours and you want to share it. You stand by it. But you are far from the truth accepted by everybody. Very far. And then at some point, minds change and so does the truth. It makes it way to you. That is what Steven was saying the other day. The truth also depends on the moment. Obviously, then, it can change at some point in time; so absolute truth does not exist. That idea seems essential to me.

Moses was the first person in history to use global media. He received the Torah, the Ten Commandments, on Mount Sinai. Those values reverberated around the world and they still do. Love thy neighbour. Thou shalt not kill. Those values are at the heart of our societies. There is a *midrash*, an allegorical commentary, which says that Moses asks God, "What will become of this law?" "Turn around," God answers. Then Moses finds himself at the school of an eminent rabbi named Rabbi Akiva 1,500 years later. He hears the Bible being commented and cannot understand a thing. "Has it changed that much?" he asks God, who tells him, "Listen carefully." And Moses hears that when the rabbi, Rabbi Akiva, is confronted with a question, he says, "I learned it from my teacher, who learned it from Moses." He tells him the history of things, in other words, the history of truth. Perhaps science, for example, has changed between Galilee and us, but it is because of Galilee that we can be here.

Thus, the principle of truth is a road that only works with the fuel that nourishes this debate; here, it is dialogue and exchange.

In the Talmud, when Hillel, an eminent rabbi, argues with Shammai, one says white and the other black, one says yes and the other no, one "allows" and the other "forbids". They never agree. Never. Then a voice from heaven says, "These and these are the words of the Living God."



The truth does not lie in the affirmation of one thing, but in an ethical tension between two positions, which requires finding a balance.

Look at how folk wisdom has translated it. Everywhere, no matter what the culture, we affirm that bad arbitration is better than a good trial. Yet, a trial is supposed to find the truth, the legal truth, the judicial truth at least. No, we prefer bad arbitration, which does not give us the truth — who is guilty, who is responsible, who must pay— but arbitration means that nobody loses too much. In the end, that is exactly what we try to do every day.

The big nagging question of fake news is not so much about what is spread, but how the news that reaches us is ranked. Without talking about fake news, when you read the press every morning, you can see that you read about the same event — we just heard Renaud — in *Le Figaro* or *Libération*. Today is the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. Yesterday, *Libération* said it was a catastrophe. I don't think *Le Figaro* mentioned it at all. In *Le Monde*, it depends, we shall see tonight. Listen to my humble advice: the best is *La Croix*, which treats news ethically, or *Le Parisien*. You see five serious newspapers — I am not talking about little fanzines or websites — treating the same information from different angles.

In the end, the truth is probably the conjugation of all these angles. It is, in fact, dialogue, i.e. the ability to be enriched by the truth of the other. That is what happens in the debate between religions. We must give thanks to the French Republic and the secularism it upholds. If there is no secularism, a country or a government can either be open like Morocco and allow everybody to worship as they choose, or can keep the republican model, where the State is neutral and everybody has freedom of religion. In fact, nobody says anything strict. Nobody says, "I have the truth". Every religion says, "We have our truth". But in order to be able to express my truth, I must fight to allow the others' to exist. Saying that, I argue that there are several truths. In my view, that will be the point of your debate.

I have left myself 12 seconds to, if I may, wish all of you *shabbat shalom*, a good Sabbath.

Steven ERLANGER

I think the point I take from this is that truth is a balance. It is something that emerges from dialogue and discussion, but I always remember what I think Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a great American politician and writer, used to say, which is, 'You can have your own opinions, but you cannot have your own facts'. When we talk about truth, yes, truth emerges from discussion, but there are some things that simply are true, even if Galileo had to die for something he understood later was correct.