

## **“The Seal of God is Truth...”**

R' Todd A. Markley – *Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770*

The rabbi was walking through the center of his village when he stumbled upon a group of boys loudly clamoring over one another. He stopped to investigate the focus of their attention to discover a dog in the midst of the chaos. “What are you boys up to?” he inquired. “We found this stray dog, and we’re trying to figure out who gets to keep him,” said one of the lads. “Yeah, we’re having a lying contest. Whichever one of us tells the biggest lie gets to keep the dog,” another chimed in. “Well I never...” intoned the rabbi. Raising his voice he scolded, “Don’t you know that it’s a sin to lie? Why, when I was your age, I never told a lie!” Forlorn, the boys all sulked as they stared at their feet. The rabbi felt quite successful in his moral lesson when one of the boys broke the silence, nodded towards the rabbi and said, “All right. Give him the dog.”

We like to think of lying as something aberrant. It is a miserable act reserved for the repugnant executive who lies before Congress to cover up his company’s wrongdoing. It is the compulsive liar whose mental state causes her to misrepresent entire eras of her past or the imposter who takes on a wholly false identity. Liars are cheats, con artists, and boys who cry wolf. Yet, if we believe that distaste for the truth is limited to these characters alone, well then we’re just lying to ourselves.

Comedian Ricky Gervais will be releasing his newest movie, “The Invention of Lying,” in just a couple of weeks. The film’s protagonist lives in our contemporary world with one minor twist: nobody in the history of humankind has ever told a lie. Everyone speaks to one another with total transparency: blind dates admit openly that they are not attracted to one another, employees come clean about hating their bosses, and waiters readily confess to having sipped from customers’ drinks. The plot is inherently humorous because, with our knowledge of human nature, we find the thought of such a reality to be laughable. We know that, in our world...everyone lies.

And while we might feel anger, disappointment, or even dismay at the whoppers told by a Bernie Madoff to mislead thousands of investors, or by a governor who claims that the Appalachian Trail extends to Argentina, we ought not be shocked when such falsehoods are exposed.

The roots of deception span back as far as human record. Even within our own sacred texts, dishonesty abounds. Jacob, our forefather, colludes with his mother to deceive his father Isaac into granting him the blessing of the firstborn rather than bestowing it upon Esau, his older brother. Wanting to be thorough in his deception, and knowing

that his father was near total blindness, Jacob set about to confuse all of his father's senses. He wore his brother's clothes so as to smell like Esau, he donned animal skins over his own so as to feel like the hairier Esau, he served Isaac meat stew that would taste like the dish Esau normally made, and when his father asked him, "Are you really my son, Esau," he did not hesitate to look his own father in the face and answer, "I am."<sup>1</sup>

University of Massachusetts professor of Psychology, Robert Feldman, recently published a book entitled, The Liar in Your Life, in which he outlines the different ways in which we beguile and betray one another with surprising regularity. Jacob's chicanery falls into the category he calls "lies with intent," those proffered for personal benefit: The salesman who tells you that the pre-owned model is "good as new," the Nigerian prince whose e-mail assures us that he just needs a small \$5,000 loan in exchange for a fortune when he arrives on these shores, or the politician who promises that she has all of your best interests at heart in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. These are the people whom we often imagine as "liars." They use deception, manipulation as nefarious tools to gain profits, protection, or power. And while, Feldman notes that such lies with intent "fragment and fray the social fabric of daily life...undermine trust... erode relationships...[and] victimize [others with their [intent to harm]],"<sup>2</sup> these are far from the most common of the lies that we encounter.

A story: At the conclusion of his weekly sermon, the rabbi told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Isaiah 67 this week." The following Shabbat, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the rabbi asked for a show of hands. "Who here read Isaiah 67?" Every hand went up. The rabbi smiled and replied, "Isaiah only has 66 chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying."

Indeed, many of the lies that we hear, and that we tell, are for the sake of making ourselves look better. In conducting his own research, Feldman found that in the first ten minutes that two people meet, each person will lie approximately three times.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, many of these fibs take the form of mirroring the other's opinion for the sake of creating harmony. "You liked the new Harry Potter movie? Sure...me too!" We tend to avoid issues of conflict and focus on, or even fabricate, points of similarity. We also use "white lies" to grease the wheels of social interaction. "Do you know where Oak and Linden Streets meet?" "Sure," I reply, even though I have no idea. Admitting

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:24

<sup>2</sup> The Liar in Your Life, by Robert Feldman, Twelve, Boston, 2009, p. 165

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14

my ignorance would only grind the conversation to a halt and would serve no real purpose.

More often than one might think, however, such relational smoothing slides from harmless banter into pure creative fiction. One person in Feldman's study claimed to have toured the country as a pianist in a chamber group while another shared that his band had recently been signed to a record company. The former never toured the country, and the latter wasn't even in a band. Both were padding their resumes even though neither was applying for a job. They were just making small talk with a perfect stranger.<sup>4</sup>

The higher the stakes of the discussion, the more egregious our lies tend to become. The more attractive we find our blind date, the more times we will lie to create a positive impression of ourselves.<sup>5</sup> The more desirous the job we seek, the more likely we are to embellish our past work experiences during the interview.<sup>6</sup> Amongst the most alarming research is that done on our children. One study found that 75 percent of college students admitted cheating on an exam at one point or another.<sup>7</sup> Such behavior, in Hebrew, is called *g'neivat da'at* – literally, stealing another's mind – for doing so convinces others that one is more worthy of praise or reward than one actually is. We begin our children's educations by imparting the story of our nation's first president who could not tell a lie...he had, indeed, chopped down the cherry tree. Of course, when our children grow to learn that this story is, itself, pure fiction, and when they witness firsthand the flippancy with which we so often treat the truth, can we blame them for concluding that lying is the way to go?

If we are so complicit, both in lying to others, and in being lied to, then is it really all that bad? Tacitly, at least, we've come to accept the status quo as all that we can expect from our world.

But our tradition urges us to hold loftier goals for our relationships and our society. While the Torah has 365 different "thou shalt not" commandments, only one comes with a specific warning to actively avoid a particular deed: "Keep far from speaking falsehood."<sup>8</sup> Don't go anywhere near it. This view was amplified by philosopher,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 151

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 153

<sup>7</sup> Found in Feldman. McCabe, D., L.K. Trevino, and K.D. Butterfield. 2004. "Academic Integrity: How Widespread are Cheating and Plagiarism?" In *Restorative Justice on the College Campus: Promoting Student Growth and Responsibility, and Reawakening the Spirit of Campus Community*, ed. D. R. Karp and T. Allena. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 23:7

Immanuel Kant, over 200 years ago when he claimed that it was a moral imperative that we ought not lie...ever...for any reason. Like with most matters, however, the corpus of Jewish tradition is less absolutist in its claims on us.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has identified several instances when our Jewish tradition permits, or even mandates, lying to another.<sup>9</sup> We may lie to avoid being conned or if our physical safety is at stake. We can be untruthful with people who have defrauded us in the past. We are permitted to lie if no good, but only needless hurt, would come from sharing the brazen truth. Thus, when our matriarch Sarah learns that she will become pregnant in her old age, she laughs, exclaiming, “Am I really to find enjoyment with my husband who is so old?” When God later recounts this moment to her beloved Abraham, God puts different words in Sarah’s mouth, insisting that she laughed at the possibility of giving birth in her old age, not about the virility of her geriatric husband. According to Jewish law, one may also lie to spare another embarrassment or to protect one’s own privacy. An apt summary of the Jewish view on “white lies” might be found in Professor David Nyburg’s teaching, “Be untruthful to others as you would have them be untruthful to you.”<sup>10</sup> And while our tradition sees room for these falsehoods which serve to protect us from unnecessary harm, our Sages are far from casual about the damage that our lies can cause.

Our sacred texts teach that God considers lying lips an abomination<sup>11</sup>, and that any share one has in the world-to-come can be forfeited by speaking untruths.<sup>12</sup> My philosophy professor at Hebrew Union College, Dr. Leonard Kravitz, recalled that when he was a boy, his grandfather taught him that, “Jews don’t lie.” Of course, the irony in his statement is apparent. Nevertheless, the message is powerful. Without an open sharing and pursuit of truth, reality unravels. If everyone lies with reckless abandon, then there is no way of knowing what is authentic and what is fake, what is valid and what is misdirection, what is genuine and what is massaging of facts for one’s own gain.

Our quest for truth is further hindered by our own unspoken, even subconscious, desire to be lied to. We profess to desire honesty in our leaders, our spouses and partners, our coworkers, friends, and children. And yet, we also want to believe that our politicians’ actions are motivated by the needs of the whole rather than the special interests of the few. We want to believe that we got a really good deal on that used car. We want to believe that our work is great when we are told so, that the miracle juicer on the infomercial really will revolutionize our kitchens, and that when I ask Michele how

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<sup>9</sup> *You Shall Be Holy: A Code of Jewish Ethics v. 1*, by R’ Joseph Telushkin, Bell Tower, New York, 2004, pp. 422-451

<sup>10</sup> *The Varnished Truth* by David Nyburg, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 137

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 12:22

<sup>12</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Sotah 42a*

this tie goes with this shirt, her glowing praise for my fashion sense is genuine to its core. So ingrained is this mindset that our culture has embraced a new word, popularized by comedian Stephen Colbert, and now accepted by the Oxford English Dictionary. We seek not truth, but “Truthiness,” those understandings of our world which support our long held beliefs and resonate with our personal worldviews regardless of their relationship to demonstrable facts.

We are further hindered by the fact that truth is really hard to discern. We think that we are experts in knowing when others lie to us, but in fact, studies show that we are able to correctly identify someone who is lying only 47% of the time...those odds are a little bit worse than if we just flipped a coin to determine whether or not we're being lied to.<sup>13</sup> Most often, we don't have the time, the mental energy, or the inclination to ascertain whether we are being lied to or not.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to figure out what's authentic...it requires determination, fact checking, and lots of thoughtful questions. Is all this effort worth it? Our tradition would argue that it is.

For it matters deeply when our public officials lie to us for their own benefit because the policies they create profoundly impact millions of lives. With this in mind, our Rabbis taught that the existence our entire world rests upon the three pillars of truth, justice, and peace.<sup>15</sup> The order of this teaching matters. For without a clear understanding of truth, are justice and peace really attainable in our society? It matters when we cheat one another, or cheat on an application, resume, or entrance exam, because in doing so we reap rewards that we do not deserve. It matters when we deceive our friends and loved ones, in ways big and small, as is evidenced by the fate of our patriarch, Jacob. Having created a family dynamic rooted in lies, he comes to be deceived by his uncle, by his brides, and by his own children. He learned, as we ought, that when we foster an environment of untruth in our homes and communities, we slowly tug on the thread that weaves our fabric of reality together until there is nothing left on which to base our thinking, our judgments, and our differentiations between wrong and right. Furthermore, every time we deceive someone close to us, we add a brick to the wall that is slowly built between us. Over time, we obscure our true selves from view, dissolving the connections which tether us to those whom we love.

Our Sages taught that God's seal, the very mark of Divine Presence, is not to be found in supernatural events or in wondrous miracles, but rather wherever truth resides.<sup>16</sup> We

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<sup>13</sup> Found in Feldman, p. 31. Originally from Bond, C. F., Jr., and B. M. DePaulo. 2006. "Accuracy of Deception Judgments." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 10:214-34. ---. 2008. "Individual Differences in Judging Deception: Accuracy and Bias." *Psychological Bulletin* 134: 477-92.

<sup>14</sup> Feldman, pp. 44-45

<sup>15</sup> *Mishnah Avot 1:18*

<sup>16</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 55a*

have an opportunity over the next ten Days of Awe, to practice a fresh way of being in our world...one based in the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help us God, to keep far from falsehood, to demand honesty from the halls of power and the halls of our homes, and to make Your holiness manifest in our world by keeping truth upon our lips.