

A society based on lies is not what God wants

Parashat Vaera 5782

January 1, 2022; 28 Tevet 5782

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Everybody fibs. Adults fib, and children fib. Leaders fib, and so do parents, partners, spouses, and friends. Not everyone fibs in a diabolical or pathological way. Oftentimes the fibs we tell are more like half-truths or little white lies; what we say to avoid hurting other people's feelings or to err on the side of politeness or to minimize unnecessary conflict. We might tell a host or hostess that the food was wonderful, even if we thought it was awful. You might remember that old Seinfeld episode when the whole gang goes out to visit a friend in the Hamptons who recently had a baby. To make a long story short, this little one was not cute. But Jerry and Elaine decide that they have to tell the mother that her baby is beautiful. It was, as they said, a "must lie situation." How could you possibly tell a mother that her precious newborn is anything less than a masterpiece of creation?! Even the Talmud^[1] validates fibbing to a bride on her wedding night, because, according to Beit Hillel, all brides must be considered *na'ah ve'chasuda*, fair and attractive, without exception.

Experts say we start lying at a very young age...four year olds lie, on average, every two hours; and six year olds lie, on average, once every hour! We begin lying mostly to deny misbehavior: 'You stole the cookie from the cookie jar? Who me? Couldn't be! Then who?' When we get a little more sophisticated, we not only learn how to deceive each other, we become rather adept at sticking with our false stories and even sound sincere while doing it.^[2] Lying to your mother-in-law that her meatloaf was delicious when it was barely edible is one thing; lying to be manipulative or deceptive, to take advantage of someone or harm them is quite another. Most of us would excuse the former, but definitely not the latter.

In this morning's Torah portion Moses told an intricate, persuasive fib; and he repeats it skillfully and with conviction over and over again, in cahoots with God! Not that any of us should have one iota of sympathy for the cruel and inhumane Pharaoh, who Moses lies to...But it's still hard to escape the feeling that Moses's negotiations could have been a little more forthright and above board. He says to Pharaoh, 'let the Israelites leave the borders of Egypt so that they can worship God in the wilderness.' Maybe it's not a lie, but it's hardly the whole truth. Moses left out the tiny detail that even if the Israelites do go to worship God in the wilderness, they are never coming back to Egypt! During the fourth plague of *arov*, swarming insects, Pharaoh backs down and says, 'Okay Moses, you and the Israelites can go ahead and offer sacrifices to your God, but do it within the borders of Egypt.' Thinking quickly on his feet,

Moses says “*lo nachon la’asot ken*,” ‘that wouldn’t be the right thing to do Pharaoh. You see, the animals that we Israelites offer as sacrifices to our God are worshipped as gods by your people! The Egyptians will be insulted and will stone us when they see us sacrificing *their* animal diets. We really need to go *derech sh’loshet yamim*, a distance of three days into the wilderness in order to perform these sacrifices, where no Egyptians will see what we’re doing.’ Again, Moses does not say to Pharaoh that the people have no intention of ever coming back. Going a three-day’s journey into the wilderness was to give the Israelites enough of a lead so that when the Egyptians finally figured out that they escaped they would be long gone! But Pharaoh, growing more desperate with insects engulfing every inch of land and space, says ‘Fine, go. *Rak harchek lo tachriku*, just don’t go too far.’ But before Moses even leaves the palace, Pharaoh has already changed his mind. The Israelites aren’t going anywhere.

In every encounter with Pharaoh, Moses says *Sh’lach et ami ve’ya-avduni*, let my people go so that they can worship God. Not let my people go so that they can be free. Not let my people go so that they can go back to their ancestral homeland, the promised land, where they no longer have to live as slaves. Not let my people go and feel free to never, ever come back to Egypt. But let my people go, so that they can worship God in the wilderness. Why doesn’t Moses tell Pharaoh the whole story? Why doesn’t he let him have it, and just tell him that this whole system is unjust and cruel and we are going to march right out of here to freedom? At the end of the Shema we say *Adonai Eloheichem Emet*, our God is a God of truth! Why is there something less than the truth being conveyed here?

Because, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks^[3] so eloquently writes: “Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved. Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power...They have to use their wits to survive...this is not how things should be, Rabbi Sacks writes. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible place. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.”

Think about it, how many children lied about their age on the platform at Auschwitz? A young child arriving in that unimaginably horrible place faced certain death. So they told the Nazis they were teenagers in order to survive. How many answered the camp guards by falsely claiming that they possessed certain skills or knew a trade or a craft in order to make themselves useful, again in order to survive? How many Jews over so many centuries lied to their neighbors, pretending to be Christians in public, while secretly living as Jews within the confines of their homes?

Not long ago we had an Iranian Jewish family along with some other guests for Shabbat dinner at our home. Everyone at the table was shocked to hear that in Tehran today there are numerous kosher restaurants, synagogues, yeshivas, mikvehs, and Jewish bookstores. To all of our utter surprise, this family described a bustling, active Iranian Jewish community, not centuries ago, but right now! I asked if the regime ever interfered with Jewish activities or threatened the community in any way. They said absolutely not...they really leave the Jews alone. How is that possible, I pushed, when Iran openly threatens to wipe Israel off the map and funds, arms, and trains terrorists that attack Israel. Ah she said, that's the only thing we can't talk about in Iran. You can be as Jewish as you want to be, as religious as you want to be...as long as you don't mention Israel. No Israeli flags in synagogues, no prayers for Israel, no celebrating *Yom Ha'atzmaut*. Other than that, you can do what you want. Once again, Jews are forced to conceal part of their identities, forced to lie, in order to survive.

The Jewish, former Soviet dissident Peter Pomerantsev asked in a New York Times Op-ed:

“Imagine if you grew up lying. Not a little bit, for convenience, but during every public moment of your life: at school, at work, at social events. You had to lie to survive, because the punishment for telling the truth was the loss of your academic or professional career, or even prison. For Russians who came of age before 1991, this is the only way they know.”^{[\[4\]](#)}

This is why Rabbi Sacks says that “the Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today...A society where people are forced to be less than fully honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make.”

One of the ways of referring to the world to come is the *Olam ha'emet*. The world of truth. One of the attributes of heaven or eternity is that it is an existence where lies and falsehoods will be stripped away, and the soul will exist in its truest form. Along with all the other beautiful things we hope for in a world redeemed, we can start by practicing these attributes in our own lives, maybe even more earnestly as we begin a new calendar year. We can strive to be genuine and sincere with our loved ones; we can stop pretending or embellishing or altering our narratives to try to appear better or more valued in the eyes of others. We can conduct our businesses and relationships with even more honesty and integrity. We can be faithful to our spouses, loyal to our friends, and trustworthy to those who confide in us. We can demand honor and decency from our leaders. When we strive for these attributes in our own lives, we will bring the *olam ha'emet*, the world of truth a little closer to reality, helping to build a society where no one ever has to lie to survive.

■

[\[1\]](#) Ketubot 17a

[\[2\]](#) “Praise Can be Bad; Lying is Normal,” NPR, All Things Considered, August 27, 2009

[\[3\]](#) Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Freedom & Truth,” Parashat Vaera, 5777, January 24, 2017

[\[4\]](#) “Russia’s Ideology: There Is No Truth,” by Peter Pomerantsev. *The New York Times*, December 11, 2014