

I have been mesmerized, utterly fascinated, completely enthralled by the ongoing saga of George Santos. This is not some kind of schadenfreude...it's not that I am deriving any joy or satisfaction from one astonishing revelation after another of lies, deception, manipulation or utter fabrication of biographical details in the pursuit of getting elected to the House of Representatives, representing New York's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional district. The level of Santos's deceit has reintroduced a word into daily use: Fabulism. You wouldn't normally encounter that word outside of the study of literature. Fabulism is a genre, a literary form that combines science fiction, horror, mystery, fantasy and then places that bizarre combination into the context of everyday life. Fabulism is a most appropriate description for Santos, who truly seems to be a pathological fabulist: he made up details about nearly every aspect of his existence: that he graduated from an elite New York City prep school Horace Mann; that he graduated from Baruch College with degrees in economics and finance; that he was the star of the school's volleyball team; that he worked for Goldman Sachs and Citigroup...None of these claims is supported by any evidence at all. None of those places—from schools to businesses have any record of George Santos being a student, an athlete, or an employee! But then the fabulism gets even more nefarious: He claimed that his grandparents were Holocaust survivors. No evidence. He claimed that his mother was in the south tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11 and that her death from cancer was related to the attack. In fact, she was not even in the United States on September 11, 2001. Santos claimed he lost employees in the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando 2016. Again, no evidence that any of the victims were employed by George Santos. And then there is the mountain of lies and misrepresentation about how he made his money, how he financed his campaign, and all kinds of bad news coming out of Brazil where he allegedly engaged in illegal activities. I find it hard to look away from this trainwreck because I am so fascinated that a person could continuously generate this level of untruth, and then show up for work on Capitol Hill with a straight face...it's truly mind-boggling! This is more complex than the old saw that all politicians are crooked, or all politicians are, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, "on rather bad terms with the truth." There is a pathology that links power to dishonesty. A Columbia University study discovered that people in power tend to lie more easily because the psychological, emotional, cognitive effects of being in power tend to override whatever conscience or instinct not to lie. That adrenaline of being in the public eye, the rush of recognition and fame, the allure of being a person of influence and celebrity is just so intoxicating that there is a sense of immunity from lies or misrepresentation. And if I lie or manipulate the truth to make myself look more impressive to you, my voters, my constituents, then I will have even more access to power and prestige. Perhaps this is one way to understand the mendacity of people like George Santos. What it does not explain at all, however, is the character of Moses. Think about this: Moses is set to become the most powerful, influential, heroic leader potentially in all of human history. He faces down the most dominant national leader, the king of Egypt, frees thousands of slaves from his clutches, leads the Jewish people through the wilderness, delivering eternal laws and instructions, fending off enemies, suppressing rebellions, and bringing them to the brink of the promised land. All the while he is in constant, intimate dialogue with the Creator of the Universe, and known as the greatest prophet who would ever live. AND he is brutally honest. Moses is under no illusions of grandeur. In last week's parasha he says words that George Santos could never muster either in Hebrew or English or any other language: *Mi anochi ki eilech el paro?* Who am I that I should be the one to go before Pharaoh? *Ve'hotzi et bnai Yisrael mi'mitzrayim?* I am the one you want to usher the Jewish people out of Egypt? What qualifications do I have for such a monumental mission?? Moreover, not once, not twice, but three times Moses wants to make sure God knows that he is not an *ish devarim*, not such an articulate person; that he is *kaved lashon*, that he may even have a speech impediment; and in parashat *Va'era* he says *ani aral sefataim*, my lips are uncircumcised. Rashi says that means he stumbles over his words; Ramban says Moses doesn't feel "*hagun le'daber lifnei Melech Gadol*" he's not just fit, not comfortable with speaking to a great king like Pharaoh. There is no resume

falsification here. Moses is not trying to seize power or influence based on fraudulent biographical information or embellishments. He wants God, and presumably the Jewish people, to know exactly what they're going to get from him as their leader. I can't do it all. I don't have all the qualifications. I am not perfect or even ideal for this monumental task. And the amazing thing is that God won't hear of it. God knows what He's getting and wants what He's getting. Did you ever wonder why the same God who brought about ten unprecedented plagues, and then removed all traces of them didn't just heal Moses of his speech impediment. Why not just cure him, and truly make him the perfect specimen. Rabbi Moshe Taragin in his commentary on this week's parasha argues that this was a way to prevent Moses from becoming a cult obsession. If Moses truly had it all...good looks, charisma, courage, piety, and eloquence, he could have easily become worshipped in his own right. By not curing his speech, God made sure that he was flawed in a way that people noticed.

What a refreshing and wildly countercultural idea: Being flawed is okay. Being open and vulnerable about your weaknesses areas of potential growth is not a strike against you. Nowadays, when people are constantly curating their pictures and stories on social media, maybe you don't have to portray perfection to your followers or friends. God vehemently rejected Moses's attempts to back out of this mission because God knew that Moses had so much to offer; that he had gifts and talents; that he was so deeply committed to this people and to justice, that, speech impediment and all, he was actually just right for the job.

I wonder if George Santos would have been honest with the voters of New York's 3<sup>rd</sup> District; if he told them, you know what, I didn't graduate from Horace Mann, I didn't finish college, I may not have had the most glamorous jobs or made the millions of dollars, but I have a passion for public service and I care about the issues and challenges facing this district, if that might have gotten him elected. Even if it didn't, Santos and fabulism would not have become synonymous. Steve Israel, who represented the district for 16 years in the early 2000's said that "the chief casualty of this election was the truth." In the blessing we say after reading the Torah we say: *Asher natan lanu Torat Emet*, that God has given us a Torah of truth. Too many legacies are ruined when that value is compromised. Being truthful to ourselves, to each other, to God is always the best strategy for winning in life.

Shabbat shalom