On Telling the Truth and Avoiding Deception

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During the recent series of commemorations following the death of Senator John McCain, I relished reviewing the scene from that town hall meeting in Lakeville, MN back in October of 2008. It was a period when racist conspiracies about then Senator Obama were being circulated in some social media outlets. In the now famous scene, a woman wearing a red, McCain-Palin tee shirt takes the microphone and begins, "I can't trust Obama. I have read about him, and he's not, um, um…." At this point, McCain begins to nod his head up and down in apparent enjoyment of the support. The woman continues, "… he's an Arab." Without a moment's hesitation, McCain removes the microphone from his erstwhile supporter and interjects: "No, ma'am. He's a decent family man [and a] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that's what the campaign's all about. He's not [an Arab]."

In that swift microphone removal and that unconsidered "No, ma'am …" McCain acted on what could only have been an instinct for integrity, a reflex to avoid deception and to speak truth.

The rabbinic sages of our Jewish tradition have much to say about speaking truth and avoiding deception. Sometimes they teach in the language of law and sometimes in the language of story. Altogether, they present us with useful touchstones for a consideration of this timely topic, timely both as it pertains to the serious challenge posed ever more relentlessly in the contemporary political discourse to which we have been subjected in recent months and also because of the imperative on these Days of Awe to engage in a serious process of self judgment and self correction.

And older tale to help us enter the conversation: once upon a time [as reported in the Talmud **Bavli Hullin 94b]**, Mar Zutra, a 4th century rabbinic sage in Babylonia, was heading from the town of Sikra to the town of Mehoza. Along the way, he encountered two of his esteemed older colleagues, Rava and Rav Safra, who were traveling in the opposite direction. Mar Zutra mistakenly assumed that his colleagues had come out especially to welcome him. So he blurted out: "Why did you rabbis make such an effort to come all the way out here on the road to meet me?!"

The McCain-esque Rav Safra quickly and truthfully responded: "We did not actually know your honor was coming…." Later on, Rava privately admonished

his walking partner, Rav Safra, saying: "Why did you say that? [Why did you tell the truth when you could have let Mar Zutra dwell in the mistaken but innocuous assumption that we had come to honor him? By truthfully correcting him, you have probably caused him anguish (by making him appear foolish)]."

Rav Safra, the truth-teller, insisted: "Had I done otherwise, I would have been misleading him!" Rava, still disagreeing, countered: "Not so; he would only have misled himself."

This mundane scene imagined by the Talmud raises for our consideration the inter-related topics of truth, truth-telling, and deception and, in doing so, goes to a place of core values within the ethical teachings of Jewish tradition. That is a place where we properly linger during these Days of Awe. In that place during this season of taking stock, I find myself worrying about the potential damage to our collective and individual psyches and souls as we continue to endure erosion of the social fabric of this nation. In particular, I worry about the damage due to what some have described as a loose relationship with the truth by the current occupant of the White House. In the setting of this sanctuary, I need not enumerate nor describe the manner of deceptions, half- truths and false conspiracies that have become our daily fare since the presidential campaign of 2016. More to the purpose of this sacred setting, as we have now stepped through the threshold of a New Year, I would invite us not into an exercise in political punditry but rather into extended self reflection on our own relationships with truth and truth-telling. When or in what circumstances ought we to heed Rav Safra, striving to tell the truth and avoiding deception? When or in what circumstances ought we to heed Rava, allowing a different claim to mitigate the obligation to strive for truthfulness?

I would admit from the outset that, in a philosophical sense, tall barriers block our ability to perceive the complete truth in all its dimensions. These barriers arise from our limitations as finite beings, creatures with only imprecise sensory receptacles for the detection, measurement, and analysis of all the stimuli that reach us. The familiar parable of the five blind men who each describe an elephant based on a singular encounter with one of its body part puts the topic of truth-seeking starkly. Each man describes the elephant accurately and truthfully but in distinct contrast to the descriptions of his fellows. None are wrong or deceptive, but all have perceived only partial, incomplete, even misleading aspects of the whole truth about what constitutes the exterior reality of an elephant.

By analogy, we are all metaphorically blind in that no human has the breadth of vision to take in the entirety of any event or the fullness of any scene; no one

has the depth of understanding required to fully grasp every aspect of any matter. By way of example, I have often marveled at how my adult children will describe an event at which I was present. It is not only that we recall the event differently but also that, from the moment of the experience itself, we actually perceive the event in different ways, with different sensory apparatus, from different angles, and with different mental filters. A common event yields a multiplicity of experiences. Thus, a truthful assessment requires one to humbly admit one's inability ever to know the truth in all its dimensions.

That is to say, and as our tradition teaches us, full truth dwells uniquely in the divine domain. As Rabbi Hanina says (Shabbat 55a): The seal, the essence, of the Holy One – i.e., not our human seal -- is truth. In this regard, we typically conclude the Shema by joining its final two words to the first word of prayer that follows, chanting *Adonai Elohechem Emet* – forming the phrase, Our God Adonai is Truth. God is Truth, God's seal, God's essence, is truth. God knows the whole truth and nothing but the truth and we humans, by contrast, do not. Yet, on the other hand, elusive as it may be to ascertain in its fullness, truth-seeking is an essential value and truth-telling a foundational practice for the serious Jew.

In point of fact, over and over again, in our prayers and in our sacred texts, Jewish tradition enjoins us to avoid deception, and to pursue truth in our wordsand in our hearts. Psalm 34 (13-15) puts it like this: "Who is the one who delights in life, who loves all days, seeing goodness? **Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.**" Human decency, in the view of the Psalmist here, requires making a practice of avoiding deceit by speaking truthfully and, at the same time, turning away from hurtful speech. Elsewhere, in Psalm 15, our tradition bids us to direct our efforts at truth-seeking more deeply than by words alone: "Who may live in Your [God's] tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? The ones who live without blame, who do what is right, and **who speak the truth in their hearts**."

Thus, the Psalmist enjoins us not only to speak truthfully and shun deception in our speech but, even before the words rise to the tongue, to marinate them internally, to avoid self deception, a process easy to imagine but not necessarily so easy to achieve. The Hasidic Master Menachem Mendel of Kotsk once said [quoted by Ed Feinsten quoting Heschel]: "Nothing is easier than to deceive oneself." Scientific research supports the view. Some indicates that, as early as age 3, children exhibit a "positivity bias," a tendency to exaggerate their own positive characteristics. Further research suggests that by adulthood, we humans tend to draw mental pictures of ourselves that are more attractive, more capable, more moral than a factual portrayal would indicate. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua

Heschel once said, "as the mind grows sophisticated, self-deception advances." That is, even without the extra challenge that comes from living in a cultural milieu where many of our leaders engage in frequent fabrication, where social media feeds us a diet punctuated by recurrent falsehood, where facts have been superseded by "alternative facts," we humans seem to have an innate proclivity to lie to ourselves.

Thus, does our tradition urge us – especially at this season -- to be wary of this human tendency and to counter it with an effort to strengthen the habit so powerfully exemplified by John McCain during that town hall meeting in Lakewood, MN, to cultivate our neuro-muscular reflexes to avoid deception, to speak the truth aloud and in our hearts. Our prayerbooks invite us every Shabbat and every holiday to prayerfully intone: "*V'taher Libenynu L'ovd'cha B'emet*; **Purify our hearts that we serve You in truth.**" That is, the goal of the Psalmist to speak truth in our hearts becomes a plea for help with the challenge posed by the aspiration to align our interior spaces of heart and mind with our exterior behaviors in the realm of truthfulness.

Back to Rava and Rav Safra meeting Mar Zutra on the road: because the example is mundane, the kind of circumstance that could happen to any of us, and because two opinions are presented without resolution, the Talmud invites us to enter the story and imagine further context and competing ethical claims. In that regard, we note that the 16th century legal code, *The Shulkhan Arukh*, acknowledges a mitigating factor in the realm of truth-telling; it rules in favor of Rava, saying: "When one does something in front of his fellow and that fellow might mistakenly conclude that it was done especially in his honor, such as meeting someone on the road when they think you came to greet them, it is not necessary to tell him [the truth and disabuse him of his mistaken assumption in your favor]." (Shulkhan Arukh H.M. 228:6)

However, we find that this opinion narrowly ruled, i.e., stated but with only limited application. As we read further in the same legal code: "Still one should not take the initiative to mislead someone as to your own good will towards him. [For example,] Rabbi Meir used to say: 'A person should not urge his fellow to dine with him when he knows that his fellow will not dine with him, nor should he make numerous offerings of gifts, when he knows that he will not accept gifts.'" In commenting on the same Talmudic passage, Rashi focuses on the fact that by misleading the other individual, s/he will "feel a debt of gratitude, for no reason" (**Hullin 94a**). If so, then one's silence in the face of another's misimpressions is tantamount to what tradition refers to as *geneivat daat*, deceitful misrepresentation, or literally "stealing the mind [of the other]," a strong phrase indicating the

strength of the default prohibition within Jewish legal sources against slipping into this all too easy manner of deception.

It turns out that Rava, the rabbi who had favored silence in the face of Mar Zutra's misimpressions about the intentions of his colleagues' travels, generally refrains from advocating deception as a practice. To wit, elsewhere in the Talmud we find a story [Yevamot 63a] about the [same] sage Rava who was being vexed by his wife regarding their meals. If he asked her to make lentils, she made peas. If he asked her to make peas, she made lentils. When his son Hiya got older, Hiya would intervene by reversing the request so that his mother would inadvertently make just what his father really wanted. Upon noticing the change, Rava said happily to his son, "Things are going better with your mother." Hiya then confessed to his father his role in reversing the request. When he understood the deception, Rava insisted that his son cease intervening even though he knew quite well that his dining experience would suffer as a result. And so it was.

Several commentators wonder why Rava should insist that his son avoid deceiving his mother in such a minor matter, when one easily argue that for the sake of greater peace in the home, a little deception would be permitted. The medieval sage Rabbenu Yonah offers this explanation: a person should avoid lying even when it is permitted and even about inconsequential matters, because there is the danger of developing the habit of falsehood, which then could lead to lying in matters of importance. That is, Rava recognized that one must make an effort to practice truth-telling in minor matters in order to make it habitual and that as a parent he had the obligation to encourage his son to develop the habit.

In real life situations, the challenge posed by the injunctions to avoid deception, to tell the truth with our words, and in our hearts, requires first of all noticing what is going on in the moment, in real time. Just this past week, I was sitting in a memorial service when I heard an adult son mention to the congregation something about his father's community involvements which I felt pretty sure was untrue. These days I do not trust my memory. But when I checked it out, I discovered that I was correct that the eulogizer had inadvertently given out some misinformation. I was going to see the son later that day. Should I correct his misimpression about a matter most would judge unimportant? Would doing so make him feel badly? Would it make me feel badly? If I were to remain silent would I be guilty of promoting deception or a habit of deception?

I am sure that each of us could supply any number of real life dilemmas where one must make a choice about whether or not to speak the truth, about our level of confidence in our own perspective on the matter, or whether other

overriding factors ought to come into play. The Mussar teacher, Alan Morinis, describes the following prosaic dilemma of truth-telling as it once occurred to him: "I was walking the dog one day soon after a big windstorm. I met a neighbor and we stopped to chat. "You know," I said, "I saw two cars that had been smashed by trees." In truth, I had seen one car with its windshield shattered. The other car I had been told about. I caught myself, and with tortured mental effort, I forced myself to utter, "Actually, I saw one and heard about the other."" [*Climbing Jacob's Ladder,* p. 109]

In real life in real time, sometimes we have the challenge of weighing speech versus silence. Sometimes, the challenge is our own propensity to embellish a story, at making the fish a little bigger, the suffering a little more awful, our retort a little more clever, our wisdom a little wiser, or the role we played just little more important than it might have been in truth.

As we continue our journeys into the New Year now underway may each of us seek some way to contribute to growing the culture of truthfulness; May we do so by beginning with an examination of our own words and our own hearts, our own tendencies toward self-deception, embellishment, failures of curiosity and reluctance to listen to the perspectives of others. When and how we each choose to engender a purification of our hearts to the end of truthful service, is a matter for each of us to determine. A prayer for the task was composed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, of blessed memory:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,

From the laziness that is content with half-truths,

From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,

O God of Truth, deliver us.

To which those who assent will say, "amen."