

*Emet—Truth, Hidden and Revealed*

RABBI LISA L. GOLDSTEIN

TOL'DOT IS A TROUBLING PORTION for those who are seeking guidance on how to live an upright, ethical life; indeed, it seems more attuned to those with a Machiavellian orientation toward getting what they want. Upon first reading, *Tol'dot* is an account of falsehood upon falsehood, deceit upon deceit, as the members of Isaac and Rebekah's family each act for their own personal gain.

Trickery characterizes everything we read about Esau and Jacob. In the first interaction we witness between them, Jacob takes advantage of Esau's exhaustion after a day of hunting and coerces Esau into selling his birthright to Jacob (Genesis 25:29–34). Later, Rebekah instructs her favorite son, Jacob, to disguise himself as his brother in order to receive the blessing Isaac intends to give Esau. Despite some initial trepidation (Genesis 27:11–12), Jacob complies, identifying himself boldly—and falsely—to his blind father as *anochi Eisav b'chorecha* (אָנֹכִי עֵשָׂו בְּכֹרְךָ), “I am Esau your firstborn” (Genesis 27:19), and therefore receives the blessing. Even Isaac plays the role of deceiver. Faced with famine, he takes refuge with Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and pretends that Rebekah is his sister because he fears that Abimelech would kill him and take his beautiful wife (Genesis 26:7).

The Rabbinic tradition largely sets about to destabilize the truth even further. Rashi, for example, tell us that it was not Jacob who was the great trickster between the two brothers, but rather Esau. By describing Esau as one who “understands hunting,” Rashi comments that the text suggests that Esau was skilled

at entrapping and deceiving his father with his mouth.<sup>1</sup> Rashi also interprets Jacob's declaration of identity quite differently than one might expect. Instead of understanding *anochi Eisav b'chorecha* as "I am Esau, your firstborn," the plain meaning of the words, he reads Jacob's words as "It is I! Esau is your firstborn," transforming the lie into a technical truth.<sup>2</sup>

What is going on here? How are we to understand the actions of our mythic ancestors and their apparent complete disregard for the "truth" (*emet*, אמת)?

The truth about truth is that it is not always so simple. We get a glimpse of this uncomfortable reality in a midrash about the creation of the first human being. Rabbi Shimon taught that when the Blessed Holy One decided to create the first human, the ministering angels divided into opposing blocs, some of whom said that humans should not be created, while others said that humans should indeed be created. The Angel of Loving-Kindness and the Angel of Justice argued in favor of the creation of humans, who would strive to do acts of loving-kindness and justice. But the Angel of Truth and the Angel of Peace disagreed. The Angel of Peace argued that humans would be entirely made up of conflict, and the Angel of Truth argued that humans would be entirely made up of lies. In response, the Blessed Holy One flung the Angel of Truth to the earth, whereupon all the other ministering angels gathered around and said, "But Master of all the worlds, is not Truth Your own seal? Raise Truth back up from the earth!"<sup>3</sup>

The Angel of Truth, of course, speaks the truth: we humans are indeed "entirely made up of lies." Look no further than our Torah portion and then at our own experiences. We, like Rebekah, Jacob, and Isaac, are profoundly limited in our perspective, in our awareness, in our understanding of our own desires. We make assumptions about others' motives all the time. How can we even begin to speak about truth?

It is not our fault that we cannot recognize the whole truth. According to the midrash, our inability to recognize the full truth is essential to the way we were created. Still, truth matters. The midrash suggests that truth is so important, so connected to the essence of divinity, that it—more than all the other qualities—is the divine seal, while at the same time proposing that perhaps it would have been better for humanity not to have been created given our inability to tell the truth.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, the Chasidic master Rebbe Gedalya of Linitz (d. 1803–1804) offers us a path forward with his insight about the nature of truth:

It should be obvious to anyone who pays attention that the quality of truth is the vital force sustaining all Creation. . . . Truth is contained even in the husks [*k'lipot*], and it is its force that sustains them as well. This is the mystery . . . the teaching of the Sages, "Any falsehood that does not also have some truth in it will not in the end be sustained" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35a*).<sup>5</sup>

Rebbe Gedalya is offering a very helpful teaching. When he speaks about "the vital life force," the *chiyut*, he is describing a fundamental Chasidic way of understanding God. In this understanding, God is not ultimately a character in the *Tanach*, but rather "the vital life force" that unfolds through time and space, supporting and renewing Creation moment to moment. When we say that truth is God's seal, it is another way of saying that truth is the essence of the life force itself, that there is a truth at the core of everything that exists. However, sometimes the truth is hidden. Just as, according to the Lurianic Creation story,<sup>6</sup> there are husks or shells that hide sparks of divine light, so, too, husks can hide the truth. However, that does not mean truth is not there. In fact, without truth, lies cannot exist.

We see an example of this phenomenon as we return to our *parashah*. At the very beginning, Rebekah, greatly suffering during her pregnancy, demands an explanation from God and receives the following insight:

Two peoples are in your belly;  
two nations shall branch off from each other [as they emerge]  
from your womb.  
One people shall prevail over the other;  
the elder shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:22–23)

In other words, Rebekah on some level already knows the truth hiding under the lies. Instructing Jacob to disguise himself as Esau and to take his blessing by stealth, Rebekah may unconsciously believe she is acting according to God’s will: Jacob is the son destined to lead. Of course, deception comes with consequences. Esau’s great and bitter cry (Genesis 27:34) and the subsequent enmity between the two brothers hold echoes to this day.<sup>7</sup>

On a mystical level, the more lies are spread, the more husks exist, and the less divine essence reaches the world. In our own lives, the less we are able to discern the truth, the more we bring suffering to ourselves and to those around us.

So what do we do? We bring greater attention to our habits of truth-telling and lying. When is it easy for us to tell the truth? When do we take refuge in a lie? When we find ourselves not telling the truth, we can, like Rebekah, look deeper inside ourselves and search for an explanation from our inner knowing: What is in fact the truth? Is there some truth contained within this falsehood? How might things be different if we could acknowledge that hidden truth?

We humans may be “entirely made up of lies,” but we are also made in the divine image. By bringing more truth into the world, we can bring more divinity into the world and lessen suffering for us all.

### Questions to Ask

Rebbe Gedalya of Linitz understands truth to be the defining characteristic of the life force of the universe. What does that mean to you? If you

would suggest a different characterization, what would it be?

Find an example in your experience in which a lie contained a truth at its core. What kept that truth from emerging?

### Practice for the *Middah* of *Emet*

Set an intention to notice each time your instinct is to distort the truth in some way. When you notice that instinct arising, take a moment to ask yourself if there is an element of hidden truth that is yearning to be noticed.

### Another *Middah* to Consider

Isaac digs two wells, but the water rights are disputed. He digs a third well, which is not disputed, and names it Rehoboth, or “spacious” (Genesis 26:18–22). Explore how naming something helps amplify *hakarat hatov* (הַכָּרַת הַטּוֹב, “gratitude”).

### NOTES

1. Rashi on Genesis 25:27.
2. Rashi on Genesis 27:19.
3. *B’reishit Rabbah* 8:5.
4. An ironic note about this midrash: The Rabbis bring a proof text for this battle between the ministering angels from Psalms and then read the verse in a most subversive way. The surface meaning of the verse is that loving-kindness and truth met (*nifgashu*) and justice and peace kissed (*nashaku*). The Rabbis deliberately misread the verbs not in a loving way, but in a violent way, suggesting that “met” means “fought” and that “kissed” means “clashed.” This echoes their reading of Jacob and Esau’s eventual reunion, in which Esau’s kiss is understood to be an aggressive, violent act.
5. Rebbe Gedalya of Linitz, commentary on *Re’eh*, in *T’shuot Chein*, translated by Rabbi Jonathan Slater.
6. See, e.g., Daniel C. Matt, *God and the Big Bang* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2016), 80–82.
7. “Esau” became a symbol in Rabbinic literature for Rome, for Christian Europe, and by extension, the anti-Semitism found in today’s white supremacy.