

“Liar, Liar”
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*Not upon mortals do we rely, nor upon angels do we depend,
but upon the God of the universe, the God of truth, whose
Torah is truth, whose prophets are truth, and who abounds in
deeds of goodness and truth.*
(“*Bei Anah Rachetz,*” from the Shabbat morning siddur)

The other day, I couldn’t stop myself. I felt myself drawn to watch at least a few portions of a film I had seen a long, long time ago -- in fact, twenty years ago. It may not be a great film, but it has its charms. And I couldn’t stop thinking about it as the week progressed.

The film opens with a shot of an elementary school classroom in which a teacher is asking her students what their parents do for a living. One child says that his mother is a doctor; another says that his father is a truckdriver. Another boy says that his mother is a teacher. And then the schoolteacher asks, “And what does your *father* do?” At first, the boy isn’t sure what to say, but then he says, “Oh, my father’s a *liar*.” The teacher is a bit flustered, until the boy finally explains, “Oh, you know, he wears a suit, goes to court and talks to the judge.” “Oh, I see!” the teacher exclaims, “You mean he’s a *lawyer*!”

In fact he is, but, as we discover very quickly, this man is also, indeed, a liar; he **lies** and **lies** and **lies**. The name of the film is, of course, “Liar, Liar,” starring Jim Carrey. Jim Carrey’s character lies when he promises to show up at a certain time to be with his son and then he lies again when he actually shows up several hours late. He lies when he shmoozes with his co-workers. He even lies in court. In fact, it’s his ability to lie convincingly with conviction that makes him a much sought-after attorney.



But then something happens. His son, who is, naturally, upset with his father's lying, makes a wish before he blows out the candles on his birthday cake. "I wish," he says, "that for *only one day*, Dad couldn't tell a lie." And yes, from that moment on, his father is forced to tell the truth. He cannot tell even a white lie! He is miserable!

If you haven't seen the film, you can imagine the humor simply by imagining how stressful it would be always to have to state the absolute truth, and never to tell even a white lie. The film does have some funny moments. Mainly it's funny because of Jim Carrey's physical comedy. It's also funny because as we see the film, we appreciate how so many of us tell little untruths, so much of the time. We can imagine ourselves in Jim Carrey's predicament. It's also funny because, let's face it: it's only a movie! The stakes are low. And we know that the lies in the film are, for us, entirely inconsequential.

I thought a lot about this movie during the past week.

Let me tell you why.

It has to do, of course, with this week's Torah portion.

Reviewing it, I realized that the way many of us recall the Exodus story is different from the way it's actually presented in the Bible. We tend to remember it as a story of:

Moses going before Pharaoh;

Moses afflicting Egypt with a plague, while saying, "Let my people go;"

Pharaoh refusing; and then,

Egypt getting zapped with another plague.

Well, that happens *some* of the time, but *some* of the time, something different happens.

After, for example, the **second plague**, the plague of frogs or *tsfarde'ah*, Pharaoh says to Moses: "Plead with God to remove the frogs from me and my people, **and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.**" (8:4) That's what he says. He

promises to let them go. But then the text goes on to say that “when Pharaoh saw that there was relief” -- in other words, once the frogs went away -- “he became stubborn and would not pay attention to Moses and Aaron.” (8:11)

A few verses later, after *arov*, or swarms of insects, come across the land (the **fourth plague**), Pharaoh does the same thing: He promises to let the people go -- but then, when the plague stops, he takes back his promise.

Then there is a third time in the parashah, when the **seventh plague**, the plague of *barad* or hail comes along. Pharaoh makes the same move. “I’m guilty,” he says. “God is in the right. I and my people are wrong. Plead with God; **I will let you go**; you need stay no longer!”

Only, once Moses prays to God and the hail ceases, Pharaoh retracts his promise. (9:28) He doesn’t let the people go.

Finally, once again, in next week’s parashah, when the **eighth plague** of *arbeh*, or “locusts,” afflicts the land, Pharaoh again promises to let the people go -- except that once Moses removes the locusts, Pharaoh retracts his promise.

Pharaoh, like Jim Carrey in that movie, but much more insidiously and destructively, lies and lies and lies.

This helped me understand something about the Book of Exodus I’d long known, but not fully appreciated.

Think about it: the Book of Exodus could have focused exclusively on the rescue of an enslaved people. And if it had, it would have been an exciting, fulfilling work. And we wouldn’t necessarily have questioned whether anything was missing.

But the Book isn’t simply the story of a group of slaves fighting for their freedom. It’s a book in which they are seen as not just running **away** from something but also running **toward** someplace else.

What's that all about?

I think it's this: The Land of Egypt, as symbolized by its Pharaoh, with his lying, his cruelty and his indifference to suffering, is an immoral place. It is degrading. It's contaminating. Think about Moses' experience earlier in the story: Raised in Pharaoh's palace in ancient Egypt, he could have lived out his days in luxury. And yet, when he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, he realized that the price of that choice was steep: he would have had to turn a blind eye to the wickedness inherent in that place at that time. He would have had to become **indifferent**. *That* he wasn't prepared to do, and so, as we know, he intervened by killing the taskmaster. That ultimately led to his decision to challenge the immoral regime in Egypt and help free the Israelites, his people.

The same was true of the Israelites themselves. Even if they could have lived freely in Egypt -- and some Israelites, then and later, would have preferred to do just that -- they had to leave. They had to cleanse themselves of the mendacity and the other evils of that society. Otherwise it would have contaminated them.

Only by standing up not only for their own freedom, but for decency and morality, could they possibly achieve full freedom. They had to leave; they had to go to Mount Sinai and receive, and confirm their commitment to, the Ten Commandments in particular, and the Torah in general.

Note that two of the Ten Commandments have to do with integrity, and with respect for the spoken word.

We all know that, don't we?

“Don't take the name of the Lord in vain.” This means that we shouldn't make false oaths. We shouldn't promise something, and then fail to deliver. We shouldn't say, “Oh, I'm going to release you,” and then fail to do so. Why not? Well, if we do that, then our word is worth nothing, and we are worth nothing. Think of that Jim Carrey character in “Liar, Liar”: As charming and handsome and endearing as he is, it's clear to everyone -- certainly to his son and ex-wife -- that unless he stops making promises he has no intention of keeping, he'll be

impossible to live with. It's ironic: it isn't until he is forced to start telling the truth that we come to realize just how much of a liar he really is.

There's also the commandment, "**Don't bear false witness against thy neighbor.**" Specifically, this refers to giving false testimony in court, but understood more generally, it means that we shouldn't say false or misleading things about other people. We shouldn't, for example, spread lies about those who criticize us or refrain from flattering us, whether out of a sense of wounded pride or for any other reason.

The Israelites had to learn these mitzvot from someplace, and they weren't about to learn them in Egypt. After all, Egypt was a land in which a **fundamental falsehood** -- namely, that their mortal ruler, Pharaoh, was a god whose every word was truthful -- was enshrined in the culture. They had to go elsewhere, and they had to learn from someplace else how to live. And so, to fully express this point, the story must continue with the people trekking to Mount Sinai, receiving and accepting the Ten Commandments, and expressing their willingness to fulfill them.

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Just as the Israelites realized that they needed to separate themselves from the evil exemplified by Pharaoh's mendacity, so do we.

For truth is an essential value in Judaism. The world, as Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamaliel teaches us, rests on three values: justice, peace, and truth. (Avot 1:18)

The Hebrew word for truth is *emmet*, written like this in Hebrew characters: אמת. The Hebrew word for falsehood is *sheker*, written like this: שקר. The Talmud explains that each of the letters of אמת have two legs; each of the letters of שקר rest on only one leg, to demonstrate that what's done in a truthful manner is firmly based; what's done under false pretenses is not. אמת is, as it were, the "seal" of God. Where there's truth, God is present. Where it isn't, God is absent.

We must distance ourselves from mendacity, for if we don't, not only will we lose the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, but we will also become distanced from our faith and our way of life.

I'm not suggesting that we pack up and move elsewhere. Let's not be overly literal here. There are things we can and must do, right here and right now.

We must do whatever we can to promote truth -- and there is a lot we can do in this regard.

For example, we can and should condemn lying, with vigor.

We must promote truth in science. The idea that scientific truths should be suppressed is absolutely appalling. Is the Enlightenment coming to an end?

We must also reject the odious, shameful notion that a free press is the enemy of our nation. The opposite is true: a free press -- and possibly *only* a free press -- can save us by exposing the truth. This was the bedrock belief of Justice Louis Brandeis, who believed that "truth ... could and would come only from the relentless, disinterested and critical study of facts." (Judge Henry Friendly, *Mr. Justice Brandeis: The Quest for Reason*, 108 U. Pa. L. Rev. 985, 999 (1960)) We must not be complacent. We must promote a free press.

In "Liar, Liar," Jim Carrey's character was forced to tell the truth for only one day. That was enough for him. By the end of that one day, he came to understand just how destructive his compulsive lying had become.

But one day is not enough for us. May we hold ourselves, and anyone who speaks in our name, accountable for telling the truth each and every day.

Shabbat shalom.