

To Tell The Truth

Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5778

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Thirty years ago, I sat down with two survivors of the Holocaust who were both living, here, in Los Angeles. They had grown up in my ancestral shtetl of Panemune, in Lithuania. Drawing on their memories from the 1930s, I drew a map, listing who lived in each house, and noting the roads and paths that led to and from the shtetl. In 1990, as the Soviet Union began to collapse, I traveled to Lithuania, the map in hand, to visit my family's village. When I showed the Lithuanian driver my hand-drawn map, he went wild with delight. It turned out the maps issued during Russian rule were bogus. Fearing a military invasion, they were all deliberately falsified, and were useless for directions. When we need map directions, maps must be truthful.

There is another category of maps we use, which are formal and informal rules for navigating with other people in our society. Here, too, our maps must be trustworthy. We trust that when we are pulled over for a speeding violation we won't be shot by the police officer. We trust that when we put our money into a bank we will be able to take it out. We trust that the food we are sold in the markets has been carefully packaged and that the expiration date is correct. We trust that when we put ourselves into the hands of a dentist or surgeon that they know what they're doing. Yet, we now find ourselves in a world in which trust is being undermined.

We can no longer trust the pictures that are before our eyes. Today, when we see a photo, we wonder: Is it real or totally fabricated? News stories in print no longer seem trustworthy, as well. You will remember this last year a man with an assault rifle stormed into a DC pizza parlor to free child sex slaves whom he believed were being held there by Hilary Clinton. Why? Because he had read about it on political blog sites and, therefore, it must have been true. And the President of the United States continues to publically state that reports from NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN and the New York times are "Fake News."

Our trust in politicians, never great to begin with, has hit a new low with the New York Times labeling the president, "a pathological liar." When our trust in the highest officials in our land is eroded, then we have less confidence and ability to influence what our government does. Since problems must be solved jointly, by cooperation, and since the problems of our world are complex, when we no longer have a set of facts that all can agree are true, even though our interpretation of those facts may differ, there is no solid foundation to begin our discussion. How do we debate whether more or less gun controls might have prevented the Sandy Hook massacre of school children, when a well-known liar, with an Internet audience of millions, declares that the massacre never took place? We will

not be able to solve the problems of the world, until we can trust the facts that we receive about it and can trust the people who are providing us that knowledge.

But having trust is not just important for the functioning of our government; it is also vital for the functioning of our society. Hannah Arendt, in her work on totalitarianism, wrote that when we no longer are able to believe in the truth of anything, then we lose our faith that the world is reliable and thus we lose our ability to confidently function in it. “Imagine,” Sisella Bok writes in her seminal work, *Lying*, “imagine a society, where word and gesture could never be counted upon. Answers given to questions, information provided would all be worthless.”

Determining the truth in the best of times is difficult. Our eyes are often deceived, our ears mishear, and our cultural upbringing and personal biases color our perceptions. There are many different opinions and perspectives about reality. But lying creates false maps; It makes the task of navigating through the world -never easy to begin with – even harder. Think of the situation that we’re traveling down a country road in the middle of nowhere, and are waved at by someone who appears to have broken down at the side of the road. Of course we should stop to help. But are they really stranded? Is this a set up to be robbed or assaulted? Lies create radical uncertainty about the world and our relationships with others in society. That is why “Trust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers.” (Bok) This is why our rabbis taught that the world sustained, on three pillars: on justice, on peace, and on truth. (Pirke Avot).

It seems that lying occurs everywhere we look in our society: Petroleum companies lie about the extent of oil spills; coal mining companies lie about their safety compliance; drug companies withhold studies; Doctors weigh how much they should tell patients.

Businessmen, when it comes to bargaining, bluster, and lie about what their bottom line is; lawyers bluff in settlement cases...On and on it goes.

But lying is not just what others do. It’s what we do, as well. At the start of these High Holy Days we cannot just point our finger at others. We need to take a long hard look at ourselves, as well. For when we think about it, “We exaggerate, we minimize, and we prevaricate, equivocate, make excuses, put up facades, deflect, dismiss, omit, and sugarcoat.” (Bok). We tell a client or our employer that we were late because of traffic, beg off from an unwanted lunch invitation by stating that we have another appointment. Because we don’t feel like sharing our life with another, we respond to “how are you?” with a glib, “I’m fine.”

And then there are the white lies we tell to flatter, to support, or to get us out of awkward situations. “Thank you so much for this birthday present,” we say, “it’s lovely.” “No,” we

say, “you haven’t gained weight.” When we don’t like the taste of the food at someone else’s home, we make excuses about our allergies.

We all lie. After all, lying is part of what it means to be human. On this, the anniversary of creation, we remember that no sooner than Adam and Eve eat of the tree than they begin to lie. Rather than answer the direct question of whether he ate the fruit, Adam replies: “It was the woman’s fault.” And Eve, in turn, immediately blames the snake. Abram going into Egypt with his wife, Sarai, asks her to lie and declare that they are brother and sister so his life will be saved. Jacob, in competition with his twin brother, Esau, for the love and the patrimony of their father doesn’t hesitate to lie to his father’s face. “Are you really my son, Esau?” asks blind Isaac suspiciously, and Jacob lies and replies: “I am.” And Jacob’s sons, in turn, will lie to him that Joseph was torn apart by a wild beast, when, in truth, they had sold him down to Egypt as a slave.

And so, we lie. Sometimes our lies are to cover serious failings, to conceal affairs, drinking problems, and addictive behaviors. And sometimes they are the “noble lies” we tell to our children. We want to shield our children from frightening news or from pain because we do not know how well they will cope. So we lie to them about family illness, about marital stresses, about the terrors of the world, in order to try and comfort or protect them.

Those who are dealing with aging parents lie to them, as well. “How much can they now handle and process?” we ask ourselves, and so lie to them as to why we are unable to visit that often or how the move to their new quarters is going to be wonderful, or even that their illness isn’t terminal.

But when our lies are exposed, when trust has been shattered, then relationships collapse. Those who have been deceived and lied to are resentful, disappointed and suspicious. “How can I trust you again,” the other exclaims, “when it turns out that you haven’t told me the truth?!” Even the social lies we tell take a toll when it’s clear we are being hypocritical. As a recipient of the Nobel prize for Literature once wrote: “You’ve got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend... You say, “how are you?” “Good luck”, but you don’t mean it. When you know as well as me you’d rather see me paralyzed. Why don’t you just come out once and scream it.”

Lying begins with us. It begins with our relationships with others and then moves outward into the world. I believe it is not a large step between the lies we tell one another, to the lies we tell to others in our society, to the spinning, fabricating, and obstructing that takes place at the highest levels of government.

So what can we do? The first thing is to realize the importance of truth. Our tradition has over 100 names for God, and one of those names is “Emet”: Ultimate Truth. To tell the truth, then, is to reveal an aspect of divinity. To lie is reduce God’s presence in the

world. Our Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon, taken from the book of Leviticus, makes it clear: “you shall not lie to one another.”

We must understand that we have the power to influence the amount of duplicity in our lives and to shape our speech and action accordingly. (Bok). We can decide to avoid lying when other alternatives exist. We can state our need for honesty in all things. We can call out those who are lying. We can acknowledge that we don’t know something. We can acknowledge that we were wrong; We can avoid exaggeration. We can try to avoid saying the opposite of what we feel. We can refrain from making promises we won’t keep because we feel awkward saying no. We can avoid putting people off with false excuses. We can try to say the truth.

Yes, there will be times when we should lie: to protect life; to avoid causing unnecessary hurt to another; to create peace. But though there may be some times when a white lie is a possible choice, we should first seek out more truthful alternatives. The default value must always be the truth, whereas, for too many of us, it is the white lie or outright lie that dominates. Lies should only be utilized as the last resort, not the first, automatic response. In a world that is increasingly uncertain, in a world in which it seems harder and harder to separate truth from fiction or even truth from outright lies, *we* must be islands of truth through our behavior with others. Each of us has the ability to make the world more truthful through the words that we use. In a world in which, too often, we are unsure of what the truth is, we have the ability to put into the world more surety, more confidence and more trust.

The tongue, our rabbis taught, is the most powerful of all our body parts. Let us, then, in the new year to come, use our tongue wisely, let us use it truthfully, so that we may sustain and uphold the truth in our relationships with our children, with our spouses, our parents, our friends, and our community. May the values of truth that we practice and uphold, flow from our lives into the lives of others, into the walls of our neighborhood, into our places of work. Indeed, may the words of truth that we will use in the new year to come flow into the very fabric of our nation.