

# Marc Shapiro and Jewish Censorship

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Human beings have always told lies. The purpose of lies, of course, is to try to cover up truth. It is just that some lies, under certain conditions, are considered less morally evil than others. All ethical systems have grappled with whether it is ever permissible to lie, and they have come up with range of possibilities, such as white lies, lies to avoid embarrassment, lies to save lives, and lies for the greater good.

One of the benefits of modern technology is that it is much easier and much more common to lie. For example, anyone who has used an online dating service (and I have not) knows that almost everyone lies. But it is also true that you are much more likely to be caught out thanks to the internet and your lies revealed for the deceptions they are.

Governments have always lied. Either to cover up their mistakes or because they felt the masses should not know how nasty their leaders were. Sometimes they have lied to protect their security services, their spies. On occasion it has been to help defeat enemies. But as hackers of various degrees of malignancy, or perhaps in belief that they were doing some good, have flourished, it has become increasingly difficult to hide anything. Even if one gives them the benefit of the doubt, two notorious examples, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, both lied as well as revealed. Religions and ideologies have been amongst the biggest liars, either to preserve their mystique or to retain their hold on the credulous faithful.

One of the tools governments (Marxists obviously and crudely, but even democracies less so) and religions have employed is censorship. If there are ideas floating around, books or films or art, anything that might be considered subversive or dangerous, the authorities have censored for what they saw as the greater good. In other words, ordinary people cannot be trusted with the truth, or it may do great damage to their acceptance of authority. So some authority sets itself up to ensure that certain things are not published, and if they are published they are not read.

Britain had an official censor, the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which was the official censor for virtually all theatre, publishing, and the arts in Britain, until it was abolished in 1968. Some plays were not licensed in the 1930s, during the period of appeasement, because they were critical of the German Nazi regime and it was feared that allowing certain plays to be performed might alienate what was still thought of as a friendly government (you can see the evidence on Wikipedia). Penguin, the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by D.H. Lawrence, were taken to court for obscenity in my student days, and you had to go to Paris to buy Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*.

The Catholic Church had a list of prohibited books, publications deemed heretical, anticlerical, or lascivious and therefore banned by the Catholic

Church. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was formally abolished on June 14, 1966 by Pope Paul VI.

In both cases the censoring agency ceased when it became blindingly obvious that you can never stop people reading or seeing what they want to if they are determined enough to do so. Censorship just doesn't work.

For years now Professor Marc Shapiro of the University of Scranton has revealed examples of mind control in Jewish sources. Opinions regarded as too lenient have been expurgated from books of responsa. Opinions once considered acceptable have now been proscribed in the current witchhunt against anything that might not completely condemn secular education. Records of great rabbis reading newspapers, Heaven forbid, have been removed from publications. Rabbis who held Zionist, tolerant, or modern views have had their names removed. Original approbations of great rabbis have been cut from their books so as not to misguide innocent modern readers.

But thanks to easy access to original uncensored editions and the availability of texts online, this is now out in the open and clear for all to see (who are not blind). In his latest book, *Changing the Immutable*, Professor Shapiro has provided an invaluable service to the world of Torah scholarship by giving chapter and verse of so many examples of censorship and distortion.

But I have to take issue with the implication of his last chapter, "Is Truth Really That Important?" There he gives an excellent overview of the attitudes toward lying in Christianity and Judaism, documenting cases where lying was considered to be a necessary and beneficial thing to do. He rightly points out the complexity of the issue, bringing examples from Jacob's misleading his father to Bill Clinton's famous lie about Monica Lewinsky. He gives cases where rabbis blocked lenient conclusions for fear of giving the wrong impression. He concludes that we need to redefine the word "truth". But he also implies, disappointingly, that rabbinic censorship might be morally defensible.

From a philosophical point of view, of course, truth needs to be more than a simple yes or no. Plato developed the idea of a Noble Lie. The great Maimonides spoke about different truths and admitted that his Guide for the Perplexed was written only for philosophers, not ordinary people. He was careful about what he said for the masses. Shapiro concludes that such distinctions are behind the attempts of Orthodoxy to play fast and loose with truth in the interests of preserving their cloistered life and mind style.

Professor Aryeh Frimer of Bar-Ilan has taken Shapiro to task on Shapiro's [the Seforim blog](#) for pulling his punches. He accuses him of justifying censorship on the grounds of good intentions. Shapiro defends himself by saying that he was only quoting authentic sources and his book has been well received in Charedi society. This might well explain his failure to be more condemnatory. But in most of the examples he brings from the Talmud and beyond, the rabbis concerned were motivated by meta-halachic considerations and openly admitted it. What worries me is when they refuse to admit their nefarious excisions even in scholarly contexts. Many of his cases are such, and I expected to see

more outrage. But then, to be fair, this is a scholarly work and not one of polemic.

I have always believed that education is concerned with opening minds, not closing them. One can understand the need on occasion to be protective of young, innocent minds in the knowledge that in due course they will grow up and discover other opinions. I might even, at a pinch, understand why if children never grow up because they are sequestered in protective enclaves for the whole of their lives they might never have access to other opinions, and it might be disturbing to try to force such challenges onto them. I was amazed to discover that Bais Yaakov schools only taught their girls a censored (sex-free) version of the Torah.

By all means decide how you want to educate your children selectively. But do not distort or pretend that a rabbi has not approved of a book when he did. Withdraw it altogether if you must. But do not claim a bastardized version was the original. That only compounds the deception. It's the intentional distortion while claiming authenticity that is hypocrisy.