

Big and Little Lies

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The culture we live in nowadays is one of lies. The truth is that it has always been thus even if at certain stages, the lies have been more venal and destructive than others. Ancient monarchs swore to defend and protect their citizens and promised victory when they knew they had neither the capacity nor the intention of doing so. Priests and oracles claimed they heard voices from the gods when they never did.

Lest you think we are any better today, just consider the way different ideologies from Marxism to Nazism and all stops in between, have and do lie, distort and select what their organs of communication decide to print and say. As if theirs were the only ways of looking at a situation and theirs was the undeniable truth. Or look at how the New York Times refused to report Nazi atrocities against the Jews let alone its biases today.

How long have we Jews suffered from lies and libels propagated by men and women who seemed to have believed in all honesty that they were, by killing us, saving us from the devil we were supposed to be in league with? Or how the enemies of Jewish self-determination blame Israel alone for the violence in the Middle East and deny any ancient association between the Jewish people and their ancient homeland?

There are indeed today, religions and political ideologies that believe quite unashamedly that lying is perfectly legitimate, indeed praiseworthy in the pursuit of political and ideological ends. It was the Nazi Josef Goebbels who said that " If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it...It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all its powers to repress dissent, for truth is the mortal enemy of the lie and by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State." And do we not see how today, conspiracy theories have come to dominate public discourse and overwhelm the truth and those who try to protect it.

This week we marked Holocaust Day. Yet the internet in all its most popular sites is full of Holocaust denial. As if it never happened.

The German philosopher Kant thought that truth was such a fundamental and innate concept, an absolute, that one should always tell the truth, regardless. The challenge to this is if a Nazi comes to your door and asks if

there are any Jews inside and you know they will be killed, according to Kant's principle you must not lie.

Pragmatic utilitarian thinkers like John Stuart Mill argued that there is a difference between lying for personal gain or benefit and lying to save someone's life. He said that lying was wrong only when it hurts others. Many modern philosophers argue that we cannot make absolute rules or categories altogether. One person's truth may be another's lie.

"What is truth?" the Roman procurator in First Century Judea is supposed to have asked? And philosophers from Aristotle to this very day have been arguing about it. We are still no nearer. Christianity's response according to Jesus as quoted in the New Testament was "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes unto the God my father except through me." Every religion has its own truths. So, can we say that every religion has its own lies?

The Hebrew word for truth is **Emet**. Which starts with the first letter of the Hebrew Alphabet, **Aleph**, and includes the middle letter **Mem** and ends with the last letter **Tav**. This tells that truth must incorporate the whole, not just a part. The sound of truth is soft and warm, like a mother. But a lie, **Sheker**, is hard and discordant.

Seven times the Torah warns us against lying, both in court and in person. And it adds extra laws against misleading and deception. The question is not whether lying is justified, but whether there be exceptions or what we might call little white lies?

Judaism, I am proud to say, has never accepted the concept that the end justifies the means as a universal principle. Which nowadays seems to be the only standard that counts in societies around the world.

Yet Jewish moral and judicial law qualifies this principle in two areas, to protect life and limb and to protect human feelings. The Talmud says that human life is so important that all laws can be transgressed to save a life except murder, adultery, and idolatry. So, there are cases where one may lie. They also distinguished lies that have negative consequences or personal gain and those lies told for humane reasons, such as telling a bride she is beautiful, or to achieve peace between warring partners or to ease someone's mind who is dying who may not want to know the truth.

These may be gray areas. But the tradition draws a clear distinction between deception and being humane. Lying for gain is forbidden in Judaism quite unequivocally. Paying an unwarranted compliment or refusing to declare that someone is ugly may be a lie. But it does not cause harm. Although given the American schooling culture of only wanting to praise and pass, it may be that in the long run, it does do harm.

However, the sad fact is that both in Jewish religious, political, and social life, lying is far more commonplace than it ought to be. I am sad to say that prominent figures in Jewish rabbinical, evangelical and commercial communities seem to have no problem with lying or deceiving both for personal gain as well as praiseworthy ends or institutions.

A new book has just come out in the USA called "Liars," written by Cass Sunstein American Legal Scholar and Obama appointee. This last qualification does, as you would expect, lead him to try unsuccessfully to distinguish Trumpian lies from those of his more politically correct predecessors. As if they never lied (perhaps not as blatantly). Such biases do not hold up and a lie is a lie, is a lie wherever it comes from.

An example that occurs in many marriages and relationships is when one holds back information, is that called lying? We notice it more because thanks to the internet secret encounters and affairs of the air are much more common (as are the means of detecting them). Can one say that where there was no actual, physical betrayal, there was no mental betrayal?

A Jewish halachic answer would be that if revealing this information would seriously damage the trust in a marriage or a relationship, then hiding it is the same as lying. Even if one may not have acted on it. Normally Judaism does not punish for thought itself. Only actions count in penal terms. But when it comes to not being open and honest it may undermine the trust of a relationship with consequences. Withholding in such a case is a lie.

In other words, it is the dishonesty of pretense, the hypocrisy that is the sin. Pretending to be honest and objective when in reality one is biased is dishonest. It is a lie. And how many people do you know who do not? Morality ought not to be decided by the mob.