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Liars, Damn Liars, and Statistics

Our rabbis tell the story of a very wicked man, a *Rasha Gamor*, who decided that he wanted to repent but without making any major changes to his life. But how could that work? This man routinely cheated and stole. He had killed with his own hands and had arranged for others to be killed. He had committed adultery. There was no commandment that he had not violated.

This *Rasha Gamor* went to a rabbi and explained his problem. The rabbi thought and thought. Finally, the rabbi said to him, “You can repent if you undertake to keep one commandment.”

“Only one?” asked the *Rasha*.

“Only one,” said the rabbi, “but it is an important one. You must only speak the truth.”

The *Rasha* agreed, but then he found speaking the truth to be more difficult than he had expected. When he went to steal, he realized he couldn’t because someone might ask him where he had gotten the item, and he couldn’t lie. Similarly, he realized he could no longer cheat his business partners, embezzle funds, or have affairs. Little by little, the wicked man found that he had no choice but to lead a life of virtue—all because he had agreed to follow that one commandment, to tell only the truth.

Rabbi Telushkin tells a 20th century version of this story, claiming it to be true:

“A psychiatrist had a patient who was a notorious womanizer. In his 50’s the man vowed one Yom Kippur to stop lying. He soon found that he could no longer juggle several relationships simultaneously as had been his wont. (He would get too tangled up without his false excuses.) As a result he entered into his first exclusive and fulfilling relationship.”

Whether in religious or in folk texts, Jewish tradition has placed a great deal of stress on telling the truth and has had a low opinion of those who lie. The prohibition on falsehood has been considered stronger even than the ban on stealing, cheating, or committing adultery. Our tradition does not just say, “Thou shalt not lie,” but instead says in the Torah, “Stay far away from falsehood.”

The Bible has a special abhorrence of those who lie, as lying is viewed as being irreligious at its core. Lies are told to cover something up or to impress others, and neither of these are the acts of a moral person. Finally, truth is an attribute of God—it distinguishes God and the godly—while lying is like forging God’s seal.

The importance given to telling the truth is translated into Jewish child-rearing practices. We are told that if our children do something wrong, we should forgive them without punishment—so as long as they admit the truth.

Rabbi Aaron Levine, a contemporary rabbi who writes about business ethics, notes that in Jewish tradition, the responsibility to keep our word increases in proportion to the degree it is relied upon. Therefore, lies in business or in other responsible positions are particularly reprehensible.

The potential for lies to do much damage is found in this nugget of history. During the 1930s, Walter Duranty, the *New York Times* Moscow correspondent, “put his money on Stalin,” and would not admit to being mistaken in any way. When confronted with evidence to the contrary, he just dug in. During the infamous show trials of the 1930s, he wrote, “It is unthinkable that Stalin and the court martial could have sentenced their friends to death unless the proofs of guilt were overwhelming.” In addition, he assured his readers that there were no food shortages in Russia, even though Stalin was carrying out a deliberate famine that led to the deaths of over ten million Russians.

Lawyers are not allowed to lie, even to benefit their clients. We are told, “It is wrong according to Jewish ethics for a lawyer to try to make it appear that an opposing witness is lying when the lawyer has no reason to believe he is.” The *halachah* goes on to say that the more that the opposing witness is speaking truthfully, the more the lawyer might feel it is vital to the case to impugn the witness’s testimony. But to do so is a direct violation of Exodus 23:7: “Keep far from a false matter.”

Rather than lying, it is much better to admit when we are wrong. Our tradition notes that Rashi, the greatest of the Medieval scholars, admitted when he was mistaken and wrote in his commentary, “I used to permit this, but I was mistaken.”

Many of us are familiar with this Yiddish proverb: A half-truth is a whole lie. Related to that is the statement of the Hassidic Rebbe, Naftali of Rotchitz, who warned about a notorious liar, “Not only is what he says untrue, but even the

opposite of what he says is untrue.” The worst lies are those that make it impossible to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong.

In praise of truth, the sages of our tradition wax poetic. Bahya ibn Paquda, the Jewish moralist and author of the Musar text *Hovot Halevavot*, writes:

“A little truth overcomes much falsehood,
As a little light dispels much darkness.”

Truth can be complicated, but that is its nature. The word for truth, *emet*, is made up of the first, the middle, and the last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Truth, we are told, has to be broad and open enough to encompass all letters, all words, all existence. By contrast, *sheker*, or lie, consists of three letters huddled together near the end of the alphabet. They make their own closed little circle and do not allow the light of truth to shine in. We are to accept truth whatever its source, as the measure of truth is its intrinsic worth.