

## Lekh Lekha 5779

Over the holidays I spoke at length about truth: the truth we must be willing to find within ourselves, the truth embodied in prayer, and the living truth of righteous actions. We know how important truth is in Jewish law and culture from the Torah's invocations against lying in court cases and cheating in businesses. At a time when rampant lying seems to be a daily ritual in public life, we feel sullied by a culture in which untruth is not only common, but expected behavior. And so it is with a bit of surprise when we study Torah and discover that in two separate instances, Abraham, and then God, bend the truth.

The first of these incidents occurs this week, when Abraham asks Sarah to represent herself to the Egyptians as his sister, rather than as his wife. He is worried that if the truth is known, his life will be at stake. She agrees, and they prosper while in Egypt. When God afflicts the royal household with a plague, Pharaoh realizes that Abraham and Sarah are the cause of their suffering, and banishes them from Egypt. Fleeing famine in Canaan, Abraham and Sarah arrive in Egypt already wealthy; leaving Egypt, they are even more wealthy and, moreover, have prospered by fooling Pharaoh. They end up safe, and in an even better position than before, but at the cost of a lie.

In a second incident, at the beginning of next week's parshah, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child. From within the tent, out of Abraham's earshot, Sarah laughs, saying she can't have a child when her husband is so old. God repeats her words to Abraham, but quotes Sarah as saying 'when I,' meaning Sarah, 'am so old.' And later in Bereshit, we know that in the next generation, Rebecca and Jacob will conspire to lie to Isaac in order to steal the blessing of the firstborn from Esau.

What are we to make of these lies? Do the patriarchs and matriarchs get a pass because of our high regard for them? Do we excuse the lies because of the future that they must bring into reality? And as moral exemplars, what do we learn from their example about how can we know when lying is acceptable? We need to examine the particulars of each case, and then draw a conclusion. In the case of Abraham and Sarah this week, we should take Abraham's fear of Egyptian designs to kill him and steal Sarah seriously. If they are to survive their time in Egypt, and if Sarah's honor is to be maintained, Abraham needs to find a way, any way, to do so. It is not only their fates at stake, but the entire future that God has promised them of land, progeny, and blessing. The purpose of his lie is to save life. Similarly, when God mis-represents Sarah's words to Abraham, we learn that it is more important to preserve Abraham's dignity than to repeat what could be heard as unkind words. The purpose of God's lie is to save Abraham's honor.

Saving life and honor are indeed high priorities in the Torah, and in subsequent rabbinic law as well. Some of the classical meforshim (rabbinic commentators) actually call out Abraham here, and Jacob and Rebecca later, for their actions. But it seems to me that, taken together, these two episodes delineate a system where truth is the default setting, but which also acknowledges that in some circumstances - in order to save life or honor - truth can be obscured to fulfill other, more compelling mitzvot. But the opposite should also hold true: Lies told in order to advance one's own financial interests or power, at the expense of other people, are abhorrent to God and the law.

Fact checking seems to have become a rapidly growing field. During political debates, confirmation hearings, and each day following public officials' statements to the press, fact

checkers are being kept very busy trying to parse what is true, what is misleading, and what is an out and out lie. If we view documented untruths through the lens of Jewish values, we can begin to judge whether a particular lie is meant to save life or not, to improve lives or not, to protect the environment or not, to protect the rights of minorities or not, and on and on. Even from this abbreviated list of concerns, it is obvious that too much of what constitutes public policy debate today centers not on saying what is true in order to help preserve life and honor, but on deception meant to obscure the fact of rampant harm being done to our citizens, our institutions, and to people around the world.

When it comes to religious truths, the same rules should apply. I can easily imagine a non-religious person accusing me of living a life of lies, of putting my faith in God and Torah ahead of the truths of history, archeology, astronomy, and the other sciences. Why would I base my daily actions on texts that make claims to ultimate truths, yet have no corroborating evidence outside themselves? It's a good question. My answer would be that my experience of the world demands that I face life with a certain set of values, and that those I find in Torah and in subsequent Jewish literature to be compelling ones. I admit the possibility that the Torah's language is symbolic, that the accounts in Torah representing God, God's laws, and all that flow from them are faulty, but that does not make my belief in God or Jewish law faulty. I look to Judaism to know how to live righteous life, not details on how the cosmos came into being. I believe in following religious traditions regarding Shabbat, kashrut and my relationships with other people not because I am convinced of their detailed revelation at Sinai, but despite my own doubts about that revelation. Even though I accept all modern scientific findings about the origins and formation of the text of the Torah prior to its becoming one integrated document, I

also live as if the Torah is a single, sacred work, revealed at one moment in time. I would rather adhere to that kind of bifurcated worldview than to twist the words of Torah until they resemble scientific or historical truths, and I do so for the same reason that the Torah itself allows Abraham and even God to misstate the truth: a commitment to capital T truth, even when allowing for white lies meant for honorable purposes. I prefer to live according to the large truths of Torah, knowing that many a fact along the way may conflict with biblical claims.

Frequent lying is not only a breach of trust; it is also a marker of character. Lies are meant to fool others so that one person will prosper at another's expense. The more someone lies, the less respect others will have for them, and the more their reputation will suffer. But the more we tell the truth, to ourselves no less than to others, the more we show ourselves to be people of integrity, people who deserve trust, and who are ready to act on behalf of others. The Torah teaches us that small lies can be useful in limited circumstances, and for positive ends, but that in general our charge as human beings is to show care and respect to each other, no less by telling the truth than by avoiding violence. Lies are indeed a form of violence; telling the truth is a path to peace and a form of peace in itself. As we approach the upcoming elections, my advice is to ignore all political advertising, a form of communication which is inherently untruthful, and think about the larger truths, and the character, that candidates display.

Shabbat shalom.