

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

MISHPATIM 5785

Among the many important prohibitions in our Parsha, we have the injunction against telling a lie. The Torah formulates the prohibition thusly (23:7) - "Distance yourself from a false word..." That the Torah doesn't simply state, "Do not utter a falsehood", underscores the severity of even slightly deviating from the truth. In fact, the great Chassidic master, R. Simcha Bunim, asserts that other than this command, there is no other place in all of Scripture where one is enjoined from distancing from a sin.

Precisely because of this unusual formulation of the mitzva, Chazal were extraordinarily sensitive to any behavior or appearance - of commission or omission - that even remotely might lead to bias and error in judgment. Here are just a few examples from that discussion.

(Shavuot 30b-31a):

"Chazal taught: And from where is it derived that a student who is an ignoramus should not sit before a judge to discuss the proceedings because he is apt to cause the judge to err in judgment? From the verse states: 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'

"From where is it derived that a student who is sitting before his

teacher and sees a claim in favor of a poor person and a disadvantage for a wealthy person that he shall not remain silent but argue the proper case notwithstanding? From the verse states: 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'

"From where is it derived in a case where two individuals come to judgment, one dressed in rags and the other in wealthy garments, that the judges say to the wealthy person: Dress like the poor person or dress the poor person in garments like your own? From the verse states: 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'

"From where is it derived that a judge should not hear the statement of one litigant before the other comes to court, and that a litigant shall not explain the rationale behind his statements to the judge before the other litigant arrives? From the verse states: 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'"

That a judge had to be extremely careful that nothing might influence him - intentionally or otherwise - from rendering a judgment EMET LAAMITO - the definition of which requires that every apparent truth be fearlessly probed to ensure its absolute veracity - is rooted in a fundamental equivalence. To wit: The prophet declares (Yirmiyahu 10:10) that HaShem is truth - VASHEM

ELOKIM EMET, and the Talmud follows by stating that EMET was chosen as the very seal of the Almighty (Yoma 69b). The Torah then decides to refer to a judge by Gd's Name, ELOHIM. The conclusion: that a judge, who shares Gd's Name must necessarily be a paragon of unvarnished truth. No wonder Chazal remark that he who judges thusly becomes HaShem's partner in Creation (Shabbat 10a) and merits the indwelling of His Presence (Sanhedrin 7a).

But this theological proposition that Gd is truth itself has a far wider application. For while the cases in the Talmud narrowly deal with the judiciary alone, the ethic of avoiding any semblance of dishonesty by anyone is patently clear. And this, because of HaShem's attribute of absolute EMET, which challenges and obligates us - and not only the courts - to emulate Him! Such a mandate finds expression throughout Biblical and Rabbinic literature and in our liturgy. In the Torah, EMET becomes a prerequisite for qualified leadership and proper personal conduct and is an extolled ethical leitmotif, for example, in the books of T'hilim and Mishlei, where one is enjoined to speak truth in his heart (T'hilim 15:2) and acquire truth at all costs (Mishlei 23:23). And the list of references goes on, all with the common theme, admonishing and instructing us to be

scrupulous about ensuring that our speech and action conform to the highest standards of EMET.

It becomes thus imperative that we understand how the yetzer hara to lie finds expression in many overt and subtle ways. In fact, there is research to the effect that on any given day, a person may utter over 150 falsehoods. We are not necessarily talking about outright lies, but the little untruths that we excuse to avoid embarrassment or because we are convinced no one will ever know the fabrications we indulge in. Being late for an important meeting because you were simply too lazy is excused by the "white lie" of, "I was caught in a traffic accident". Caught speeding, the officer is told, "it's a medical emergency." Asking for a discount by falsely claiming you're a senior citizen, or claiming a free plane ticket for an underage child when that fact is simply a lie.

And then there are the far more "under the radar" lies when we are even oblivious to the lie itself. Behaving religiously, for example, when the unconscious motive for so doing is to impress others. How many of these self-deceptions do we indulge in, often without so much as a tinge of guilt, refusing to own-up to the real motivation behind our religious or general conduct and sadly fooling ourselves in the process.

But of all the falsehoods that people indulge in, perhaps the most egregiously overlooked, often undetectable and damaging, is the lie we tell ourselves; our reluctance to go deep and discover who we really are. When Polonius in Shakespeare's Hamlet (act 1, scene 3) instructs, "To thine own self be true", he was declaiming a fundamental moral imperative. But think for a moment: Doesn't this famous maxim beg the question? To wit: How can you be true to yourself without knowing who you are? Only once you've discovered the truth of who you are, can you be true to it, live by it, fashion yourself to conform to it!

All of which brings us back to the theo-ethical axiom which equates Gd with truth. If truth is ultimately to be found only in Gd, then to the extent that we connect with Gd, that is, become HaShem's companion and intimate fellow - only then can we merit the precious gift of self-discovery. And to begin to understand that connection requires that we appreciate the reality of soul which is this: that the spiritual reality of neshama is predicated upon the religious belief that the soul is "a portion of Gd from Above", and as such, becomes the spiritual channel through which the Divine flow can illuminate our self-mystery. And if that soul-reality is that which accounts for our uniqueness and

singularity, then forging that linkage between ourselves and our Maker can ultimately give us the clarity - the acute mindfulness necessary - to know what "I" to be truthful towards.

Now, the religious strategies to create that Gd-man bond are well-known. The proactive initiatives of Torah study, prayer and chesed are time-proven, time-honored methods to arrive at that elusive goal of self-knowledge. But achieving that objective requires effort and patience. Toil and diligence for Talmud Torah, focused concentration for prayer, and personal sacrifice for the performance of acts of loving kindness.

But then, there are the other unwelcome paths to that self-discovery. Often man resists the call to "know thyself", with this stubborn aversion rooted in man's fear that to engage in such brutal truthfulness will inevitably beg the question: "Now what!?" The tense encounter with his genuine "I" will likely insist upon some life-change, some character overhaul to which complacent man will typically hold out against. And then some personal storm bursts and the eventual upheavals and disruptions of life rain upon us, the failure and frustrations or, Gd forbid, worse, all of which forces us to confront and reexamine who we are and where we are heading. In a word, we are forced to come face to face with our true

self! And in that moment of self-confrontation, we can either begin the arduous climb to personal truth and fulfillment, or fall into the void of a vain and futile existence.

And to think that such a glorious journey to fulfill our personal destiny and justify our existence all begins with compliance with the mitzva to "distance yourself from a false word."

