

“Liar, Liar”
Parshat Beshalach
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
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“Not upon mortals do we rely, nor upon angels do we depend, but upon the God of the universe, the God of truth, whose Torah is truth, whose prophets are truth, and who abounds in deeds of goodness and truth.” (“Bei Anah Rachel,” from the Shabbat morning siddur)

Do those words sound familiar? They should – we just recited them as we stood before the ark and returned the Torah. We recite them every week. And because I don’t want you to miss them – I frequently read them out loud in English, as I did this morning.

These words affirm that we believe that God is the God of truth; the Torah is a Torah of truth; that the prophets who followed spoke words of truth and that Judaism is dedicated to deeds of goodness and truth. Truth is very important in Judaism.

Truth is very important in America as well...or at least it used to be.

When I was a kid I was raised on a famous story that was told about George Washington, “the father of our country.” The story is told about young George and an incident with chopping down his father’s cherry tree. I suspect you are familiar with this story as well. The punchline of the story, you may remember, was: “Father, I cannot tell a lie, I chopped down your Cherry Tree.” And with this simple and by today’s standards remarkably quaint story – we were taught not only the merits of honesty but that political leaders in this great country were expected to be models of telling the truth.

When little George Washington confessed to his father that it was he who had chopped down his beloved Cherry Tree – his father believed him. He had no reason to suspect that his son would lie to him. Today we don’t know what to believe when our politicians speak. We have developed a whole new vocabulary for these things –we have fake news and we have facts and we have “alternative facts.” We are told that our “so-called” judges can’t be trusted, our politicians are not to be believed, our reporters don’t report the truth and our experts are not experts despite their credentials.

A friend and colleague of mine Rabbi Carl Perkins, reminded me of a movie from some time ago. It was not a great movie, in fact I am not even sure it was a good movie – but it was a memorable movie thanks to the acting of its star, Jim Carrey. Such is the nature of my cluttered brain, that there is still room in it to catalogue and store what probably should have been forgotten. Important things I can’t remember, but this movie – still there.

The film, as I remember it, opens with a shot of an elementary school classroom in which a teacher is asking her students what their parents do for a living. One child says that his mother is a doctor; another says that his father is a truck driver. Another boy says that his mother is a teacher. And then the schoolteacher asks, “And what does your father do?” At first, the boy isn’t sure what to say, but then he says, “Oh, my father’s a liar.” The teacher is a bit flustered, until the boy finally explains, “You know, he wears a suit, goes to court and talks to the judge.” “Oh, I see!” the teacher exclaims, “You mean he’s a lawyer!”

But the whole premise of this movie is that in addition to being a lawyer, Jim Carey is in fact a rather remarkable liar; he lies and lies and lies. The name of the film is, appropriately, "Liar, Liar." Jim Carrey's character is a compulsive liar: he lies when he promises to show up at a certain time to be with his son and then he lies again when he finally shows up several hours late. He lies when he shmoozes with his co-workers. He even lies in court. In fact, it's his ability to lie convincingly with conviction that makes him a much sought after attorney.

But then something happens. His son, who is so frustrated with his father's constant lying, makes a wish before he blows out the candles on his birthday cake. "I wish," he says, "that for one day, Dad couldn't tell a single lie." And what follows is the rest of the movie as his father is forced to tell the truth – the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The humor comes from how hard it is for Jim Carey to ALWAYS tell the truth. Especially for a man who has become so comfortable with lying. The film is humorous because of Jim Carrey's physical comedy and because we can identify how often we too resort to untruths to get us through the day. "I'm sorry I'd love to go with you tonight but I have a work commitment..." "No dear, that dress does not make you look fat!"

But, in these challenging times it has become clear that truth and lies are no laughing matter – indeed they may be the most critical issue of our day – as we try and sort out truth from fiction; as we try and distinguish between leaders we can believe and those who are lying to us and news that reports the facts rather than news that reports "alternate facts."

To be fair this is not a new development, and I am not sure if honest George Washington was more of an exception than the rule even in his own day. Even back then politicians knew how to lie. Yes, as long as we have had leaders, they have lied to us, shaded the truth for their own purposes and denied the truth even when it seemed obvious --- and learning how to distinguish fact from fiction has always been one of life's most important skills. In today's *parasha*, *Beshalach*, we reach the climax of a story that has been developing in our Torah reading over the last several weeks – and it features one of the greatest political liars in all of history – Pharaoh.

Most of us remember the story -- Moses goes before Pharaoh; Moses demands that he let his people go! Pharaoh refuses. Moses, at the instruction of God, afflicts Egypt with a plague, while again saying, "Let my people go;" Pharaoh again refuses; and then Egypt gets zapped with another plague. And on it on it goes till we come to today's reading. Sound familiar? The problem is that if you read the actual words that is not exactly the way it happened.

For example, take the second plague, the plague of frogs or *tsfarde'ah*, Pharaoh says to Moses: "Plead with God to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD." (8:4) Stop the frogs and I will let the people go – I promise! But then the text goes on to say that "when Pharaoh saw that there was relief" -- in other words, once the frogs went away -- "he became stubborn and would not pay attention to Moses and Aaron." (8:11) Translation: he lied!

A few verses later, after *arov*, or swarms of insects, come across the land (the fourth plague), Pharaoh does the same thing: He promises to let the people go -- but then, when the plague stops, he takes back his promise. And this goes on and on. Each time, the great Pharaoh

promising to let the people go, and each time, revealing that he had lied – that he had no intention of letting them go – that he just wanted the plagues to stop.

And all this lying comes to a climax in today's reading of *Beshalach* – as after the 10th and most horrible of the plagues, it appears that Pharaoh finally does relent and finally does allow the children of Israel to depart. But, even here we see Pharaoh's duplicitous nature. He orders his chariot and his troops to go out and bring the Israelites back, setting up the dramatic and final confrontation at the Red Sea every school child knows.

Pharaoh, like Jim Carrey in that movie, but much more insidiously and destructively, lies and lies and lies.

The story of the Exodus from Egypt as told in our Torah is a story of good guys – us and bad guys – them. And it seems that the Torah takes great pains to distinguish between us – Moses and the Israelites and them – Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Why? Why is it so important for us to know how bad Pharaoh was and what kind of place Egypt was?

I would like to suggest to you that the Torah which does not waste words, wanted us to appreciate that this is a story not only of a people trying to escape slavery, but a people trying to embrace freedom. It is a story of a people who were not only running *away* from a place but the story of a people who were running *to* someplace else.

The Land of Egypt, as symbolized by its Pharaoh, with his lying, his cruelty and his indifference to suffering, is an immoral place. It is degrading. It is contaminating. Think about Moses' experience earlier in the story: Raised in Pharaoh's palace in ancient Egypt, Moses could have lived out his days in luxury. And yet, when he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, he realized that the price of that choice was steep: he would have had to turn a blind eye to the wickedness inherent in that place at that time. He would have had to become indifferent. And Moses was incapable of being indifferent so, as we know, he intervened by killing the taskmaster which ultimately led to his decision to challenge the immoral regime in Egypt and help free the Israelites, his people.

The same was true of the Israelites themselves. Even if they could have lived freely in Egypt -- and some Israelites, then and later, would have preferred to do just that -- they had to leave. They had to cleanse themselves of the mendacity and the other evils of that society. Had they stayed in Egypt it would have contaminated them.

Only by standing up not only for their own freedom, but for decency and morality, could they possibly achieve full freedom. They had to leave; they had to go to Mount Sinai and receive, and confirm their commitment to, the Ten Commandments and the Torah in general.

At Mt. Sinai, we, as a nation were charged with the task of being not only a free people, but a holy people. Two of the Ten Commandments have to do with integrity, and with respect for the spoken word: "Don't take the name of the Lord in vain." This means that we shouldn't make false oaths. We shouldn't promise something, and then fail to deliver. We shouldn't be like Pharaoh for then, like Pharaoh, our word is worth nothing, and we are worth nothing.

The Ten Commandments also contain the demand: "Don't bear false witness against your neighbor." Specifically, this refers to giving false testimony in court, but understood more

generally, it means that we shouldn't say false or misleading things about other people. We shouldn't, for example, spread lies about those who criticize us or refrain from flattering us, whether out of a sense of wounded pride or for any other reason.

Honesty and truth were fundamental values upon which Judaism would be built and it was clear that we were not going to learn these things in Egypt. After all, Egypt was a land in which a fundamental falsehood -- namely, that their mortal ruler, Pharaoh, was a god, was enshrined in the culture. We had to go elsewhere, so off to Mt. Sinai we went -- and the Land of Israel which was our destination -- was supposed to be a different kind of place, the anti-Egypt, a land not only of milk and honey -- but one of truth and honesty.

And their story is our story. Just as the challenge for our ancient ancestors was to recognize evil and dishonesty for what it was and to separate themselves from it -- so to our job is to be a people who worship *the God of truth, whose Torah is truth, whose prophets are truth, and who abounds in deeds of goodness and truth.*"

The world, as Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamaliel teaches us, rests on three values: justice, peace, and truth. (Avot 1:18) Where there's truth, God is present. Where it isn't, God is absent.

So here is the challenge that lies before us -- to once again be a people who are willing to affirm truth in the face of those who would mislead us. We must distance ourselves from mendacity, for if we don't, not only will we lose the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, but we will also become distanced from our faith and our way of life.

I'm not suggesting that we pack up and move elsewhere and there are things we can and must do, right here and right now. Our job is to do whatever we can to promote truth.

For example, we can and should condemn lying, with vigor. Expressions like -- "Come on, Rabbi, grow up -- that's what politicians do -- they lie. Don't get so upset." is unacceptable. A Lie is a lie is a lie -- and we Jews are duty bound to stand up for the truth.

We must promote truth in science. The idea that scientific truths should be suppressed is absolutely appalling. Global Warming is not a matter of belief; it is a matter of scientific fact. And while science has and can be wrong -- it is still necessary to side with the cause of scientific truth until those truths are discredited.

The free press is not the enemy. If they get things wrong, if they lie to us -- it is the same free expression of ideas that will correct the record. We must also reject the odious, shameful notion that a free press is the enemy of our nation. The opposite is true: a free press -- and possibly only a free press -- can save us by exposing the truth. This was the bedrock belief of Justice Louis Brandeis, who believed that "truth ... could and would come only from the relentless, disinterested and critical study of facts." (Judge Henry Friendly, Mr. Justice Brandeis: The Quest for Reason, 108 U. Pa. L. Rev. 985, 999 (1960))

Whenever a political leader tells me to ignore the facts and "believe me" -- I worry. I can't help but think of that wonderful scene from "The Wizard of Oz" when Toto pulls back the curtain revealing that "the great and powerful Oz" is a little old man with a large and loud megaphone -- and what does he say when the curtain is pulled back revealing his ruse? "Pay no attention

to the man behind the curtain...” The job of the press is to pull back the curtain, and no matter how much the great and powerful Oz may protest – our politicians must be held accountable.

And the same can be said of our judiciary. Who determines the truth? In a democracy, it is the judiciary that has the final say. In ancient Egypt it was Pharaoh. I prefer our way of government.

In “Liar, Liar,” Jim Carrey’s character was forced to tell the truth for only one day. By the end of that one day, he came to understand just how destructive his compulsive lying had become.

But one day is not enough for us. May we hold ourselves, and anyone who speaks in our name, accountable for telling the truth each and every day.

Shabbat shalom.