

Sermon for Yom Kippur
October 11-12, 2016 - 10 Tishri, 5777
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

In second grade, Mrs. Greene brought our class to the All-purpose room at Farmland Elementary to stand around an enormous map of the United States. She was trying to teach us about directions. So she asked, "Who here was born in a state in the eastern part of the United States?" Since most of us were born in Maryland, a lot of hands went up. She called on one girl who said: "New York!" so she said, "Good, go stand on New York - you are going to be Miss East!"

"OK," she said, "Who was born in a state in the South?" A few kids raised their hands, and she called on one boy who said, "Texas!" and she said, "Good, go stand on Texas - you are going to Mr. South!"

I was starting to feel bored and a little left out. So when finally, Mrs. Greene asked, "Ok, who was born in a state in the North?" I raised my hand. "What state were you born in?"

"Montana!" I shouted. Mrs. Greene said, "Great Danny! Go stand on Montana - you are going to be Mr. North."

I have to admit, it was a lot more fun to be Mr. North for the morning than to be a regular old nobody from Maryland. That is, until later that night.

"Daniel Edward!" my mother called. I knew I was in trouble because she used my middle name. "Why did you tell Mrs. Greene that you were born in Montana today?" "What do you mean?" I stammered.

"Well," my mother said, "I just got a call from Mrs. Paul, who told me that your friend Sarah came home from school and said you told your class you were born in Montana. She wanted to know when we lived in Montana. Danny, you lied. That's terrible."

I don't remember much else, except that I had to go to school the next day and apologize to Mrs. Greene for lying to her about Montana.

Lies, deceit, and dishonesty seem to have become a hallmark of our society and our world today. Sissela Bok in her book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* remarks that in the 1950s, most people had faith in our leaders, institutions, and each other. In 1960, "many Americans were genuinely astonished to learn that President Eisenhower had lied when

asked about the U-2 ... spy plane [that] had been forced down in the Soviet Union." But only 15 years later, in the aftermath of the War in Vietnam and Watergate, nearly 70 percent of people surveyed said that "over the last ten years, this country's leaders have consistently lied to the people."¹ According to the Pew Research Center, only 19% of Americans today say they can trust the government always" (3%) or "most of the time" (16%).² This decline in confidence spreads to our feelings about medicine, the heads of major companies, the justice system and the media. Fact checking has become a natural part of the national debate, and we hardly bat an eye when Politifact labels a lie worthy of their "pants on fire" rating.

But the practice of deception and the degeneration of public trust literally has the power to destroy our society. Bok asks us to "imagine a society ... where word and gesture could never be counted on. Questions asked, answers given, information exchanged - all would be worthless ... this is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles."³

Honesty is found in the very core of our moral tradition. In the Ten Commandments alone, two different admonitions focus on veracity - the commandment that we should not invoke God's name for a false or vain purpose, and the commandment that we shall not offer false testimony against each other. (Exodus 20:6 and Exodus 20:12). The Psalms teach us that "he who deals deceitfully shall not live in my house; he who speaks untruth shall not stand before my eyes. (Ps. 101:7)"

We are taught from the youngest of ages that we must always tell the truth. Our system of justice depends on the idea that every witness tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Trust is a social good to be protected as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink.⁴

So then why do we all lie so much? If it is so plainly obvious that the core of our morality is embedded in integrity, honesty, and truthfulness, why is it that people lie and deceive with such terrible frequency?

Sometimes it's actually okay for us to lie. A friend asks you for your opinion on their new haircut - "you look

¹Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999, p. xxx.

²<http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/public-trust-in-government-1958-2015>

³Op. Cit. Bok, p. 18.

⁴Op Cit. Bok, p. 26.

marvelous!" The Talmud permits us to lie in order to cultivate modesty or to protect someone from embarrassment. Hillel tells us that we must always compliment the beauty of a bride, even if we personally don't find her beautiful. In cases of personal danger, we are sometimes even obligated to lie. When Abraham and Sarah make their way to Egypt, Abraham says to her: "When the Egyptians see you they will say, 'this is his wife'; and they will kill me, but keep you alive. So please, say you are my sister that it may go well with me for your sake.. (Genesis 12:12-13)." When Pharaoh orders the murder of male infants, the Hebrew midwives Shifra and Puah lie to Pharaoh to protect the mothers and sons of the Israelites, and the Torah tells us they were greatly blessed with goodness (Exodus 1:15-20)

But mostly Jewish tradition represents a passionate exhortation for truth. Integrity and honesty are prized virtues. There is even a tradition in the Talmud that when Rabbi Abaye would buy meat from partners, he would pay each partner separately, and settle up later, so that neither partner would think that he left without paying.⁵

But despite the fact that honesty is rooted in our moral core, dishonesty is pervasive throughout our society. A survey conducted by Accenture found that nearly 25 percent of U.S. adults approved of overstating the value of claims to insurance companies.⁶ 75 percent of college students report having cheated at least once during their college careers. Scores of dishonest mortgage brokers deceived millions of Americans into buying homes they never could afford, setting up the financial collapse that created the Great Recession, causing untold pain and heartache for millions of people. And don't even get started with the political campaign, where even the candidates tell you to check the fact-checkers.

So why do people lie and cheat? The classic economic theory teaches that each of us are inherently selfish human beings, interested only in how to maximize our economic self-interest. The decision to be dishonest depends on how we balance the expected benefits, like getting money, increasing business, or professional advancement, and the expected cost, like paying a fine, losing a job, or going to jail. According to this perspective, people think of three things as they pass a convenience store: how much cash could I get from robbing the

⁵Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a

⁶"Dishonesty in Everyday Life and its Policy Implications" by Nina Mazar and Dan Ariely published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, No. 06-3, January 2006, p. 2.

place, what's the probability of getting arrested, and the magnitude of the consequences if I am caught.⁷

But there is also an internal mechanism that governs our decisions. Psychologists show that people internalize the norms and values of their society. If it's a general moral expectation to be honest, then when we do things that are honest, which matching up with society's values, our internal system provides a positive reward - you did good. Brain imaging studies show that the same reward centers in the brain are stimulated from doing what society teaches are good social acts with other pleasure stimuli like eating chocolate.⁸

Like most people, we like to think of ourselves as honest. Most of us have some sense of our own morality and we want to maintain our perception of ourselves as good, moral, and honest people. For example, let's suppose we're at a restaurant and when the bill comes, we see that the waiter forgot to charge us for one of the entrees. We can save a few dollars by paying the bill as is, or we can tell the waiter to add the forgotten item. If we don't pay, then our actions won't comply with our sense of honesty, and we will have to tell ourselves that we are dishonest, which is something that is naturally abhorrent. The cognitive dissonance that comes from this conflict can sometimes be enough to regulate our behavior.

The space between the reality of the world as it is and the reality of the world as we wish it would be creates a psychological and spiritual pain - and just as your hand will automatically jerk back when it touches a hot stove, so will we do nearly anything to get out of that pain.

So we lie. When I was a kid, the real life I lived was not the life I wanted to lead. I wanted to be cool and accepted, so I made up stories that I thought would get other people to like me. I couldn't handle the fear of not succeeding at school, so I would lie and say I had finished my homework when I hadn't opened the book. Someone wants to believe he's a good provider but isn't making enough money to cover everything, so he lies and moves a little money around, always intending to pay it back. Someone wants to believe she's a good person but isn't fulfilled in her marriage so she lies to her spouse and has an affair.

⁷"The Dishonesty of Honest People: A Theory of Self-Concept Maintenance" by Nina Mazar, On Amir, and Dan Ariely. *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 45, No. 6, pp. 4-5.

⁸Ibid., p. 5.

Psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson call this dissonance reduction. A person gets addicted to drugs and convinces himself that he can handle it because he simply can't admit to himself that he's lost control. We hurt someone we love, but we can't admit that. We tell ourselves, "I'm a kind person; you're telling me I hurt you? You started this fight so you deserve whatever I did to you."

The implications of these self-deceptions are immense, because they show how many problems arise not just from bad people who do bad things, but from *good people who justify the bad things they do, in order to preserve their belief that they are good people.*⁹

If we couple the natural instinct to protect ourselves from confronting painful realities with a world that is more and more dishonest then we find ourselves in a place that is incredibly dangerous. If we have a society that tells us it's acceptable to be dishonest, then we remove that internal moral mechanism that keeps our tendency toward dishonesty in check. We begin to justify dishonesty as an acceptable means to achieve some greater end. My political campaign doesn't need to be honest because it's more important to win the election. We don't have to tell the truth about a potentially fatal flaw in our company's product because acknowledging it will cost us so much money we will have to let people go or lose the business altogether.

And it's not just the lies we tell each other - it's the lies we tell ourselves. If a person begins to feel tightness in her chest, a pain in the jaw and a tingling down the arm, and lies to herself and says, "Oh, it's just a bit of indigestion," that refusal to confront reality may ultimately be fatal. If a young person starts to smoke cigarettes, and lies to himself that he can kick the habit any time he wants, that smoking really isn't that bad, and hey, there are people who smoke every day who live until their 90's, he may not pay the price right away. It may wait until he's in the middle part of his life, when his family is growing, he has kids who are depending on him, and a career that is just taking off when the doctor tells him he has cancer. If we continue to deny the reality of climate change, and insist that the science isn't conclusive, that human contribution to global warming is a hoax, and that we shouldn't have to change how we live and power our world because, after all, the Chinese are the real culprits, then we may find that our grandchildren, who didn't create this problem,

⁹ "Why We Lie to Ourselves When We Make Mistakes" by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson in *Time*, October 30, 2015.

will be forced to live in a world of ever more dangerous storms, desertification, drought, famine, and mass migration that will make the refugee crisis in Syria pale in comparison.

Eventually the slippery slope of deceit and dishonesty will rot the foundation of our society, and cause it to come crashing down around us, destroying everything we hold sacred, even our very lives.

As Sissela Bok writes, "trust in some degree of veracity functions as a *foundation* of relations among human beings; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse." Society only works if we can have some degree of trust and faith that people will tell us the truth, and it's not fair to expect others to tell us the truth if we are unwilling to tell the truth to ourselves.

Our society is not condemned to be destroyed by deceit. As this holy day reminds us, our moral lives are founded on choice. As Sissela Bok writes, "Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity [and truth]."

If we really mean it when we say we're tired of all the lying and cheating we see in our world, then we have to start with ourselves. Each of us can choose to build our lives on a foundation of integrity and honesty. We cannot confront the personal challenges we face in our individual lives and the awesome problems we face in our collective world if we cannot find within the moral courage to be honest with ourselves and each other. It may make us feel better to deceive ourselves by finding stories and random facts to fit the theories we already believe about ourselves and the world, but what we really need is to have the courage to see our world as it really is, and to see ourselves as we really are.

But it's more than that. Just as my parents taught me in my teens, if we are honest with ourselves, we may begin to really know ourselves. If we can summon the courage to look at ourselves honestly in the mirror, we may see reflected there a beauty we never saw, a wisdom we never understood, a strength we never knew. And if instead of lying to each other we told each other the truth, we might be able to rebuild the bonds of trust that our indulgence with dishonesty has torn apart.

The words of Psalm 15 teach us: Adonai who may dwell in your house, who may abide in your holy mountain? Those who are upright; who do justly; who speak the truth within their hearts. Who do not slander others, or wrong them, or bring shame upon them, who scorn the lawless but honor those who revere God; who give their word and come what may do not retract; who do not

exploit others and who never take bribes. Those who live in this way shall never be shaken.

In this New Year 5777, if we truly want to live in a world that is more honest and secure, then we need to start, each one of us, by being honest with each other, and by being honest with ourselves.