

PREFACE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

The word "priceless" immediately conjures up a number of images: Rembrandt's paintings, the Hope diamond, and Ming vases, among others. Most people do not associate "priceless" with value systems, however the Gemara speaks of an exceptional individual named Rav Tovyomi¹ who would never tell a lie even if he was offered "all of the world's treasures" to do so. For Rav Tovyomi, integrity was a priceless commodity.²

In order to strive to attain the exalted level of Rav Tovyomi, we must first define integrity. Children everywhere are reared on the virtues of telling the truth. In most instances "the truth" is conveyed as a direct repetition of the facts, allowing for no deviation whatsoever. As children mature, they come to the realization that it is impossible to live in accordance with this definition of truth. Often enough, they are expected to say the opposite of what they feel, to compliment things they think deserve criticism, and to act courteously to people they do not like. Compounding the intrinsic difficulty of functioning on a totally truthful level, they see that almost no one lives according to this principle. In a recent poll of 40,000 Americans, 93% admitted that they lie regularly.³ Integrity is quickly discarded as an ideal that no longer applies to our generation.

The Torah's perspective on honesty is radically different from the broadly accepted, generally impractical approach to this value. The Jewish system of values takes into account the complexity of daily life, and does not see "truth" as a mere repetition of the facts. At times, for example, when sensitive emotional issues are at stake, the Torah requires us to present information in a manner that will spare the feelings of others. When issues such as humility, privacy and protecting human life are involved, it may be proper to conceal the facts, or even, occasionally, to deviate from the objective truth.

At the same time, however, even in cases in which tremendous financial gain is likely, the Torah finds no room for even the "whitest" lie. Honesty is a halachic imperative and not an "optional" mitzvah, and as such it must be incorporated into the fabric of Jewish life, both at home and in the work place.⁴ Truth is a foundation of the life God created, and abandoning the truth in order to further one's own interests is tantamount to denying the very existence of God.⁵

The prophet Yeshiah predicted that in our times, "The truth will be concealed."⁶ Once Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, after quoting this verse, paused dramatically and asked his listeners, "Does this mean

that today it is impossible to come to the truth?" Then he answered, "The truth is with us, but it is hidden. One has to dig very deep to find the truth."⁷ If this was true fifty years ago, how much truer it is now! At the present time the truth is so hidden we do not even know where to dig.

The Gemara⁸ refers to the Book of Bereshith as "Sefer HaYashar."⁹ For this reason, I chose to use verses and commentaries from the Book of Bereshith, which describes the creation of the world and the actions of the Patriarchs, as the framework for presenting the Torah's perspective on honesty. Weaving midrashic and halachic literature with anecdotes from the lives of great Torah personalities, I have attempted to introduce Jewish standards of integrity in a way that is palatable, showing that it is altogether feasible to live a fully honest life in the modern world.

Since some readers prefer halachic themes more than midrashic ones or vice versa, and others gain more from a story, I have added a code at the top of each essay describing the basic theme (or themes) of that piece. An **H** indicates that the essay contains halachic overtones, an **M** means that it is based on Midrash, and an **S** indicates that it contains a story.

In quoting sources in which Chazal permit one to deviate from the facts, I realize that I am running the risk of providing ammunition to those who want to distort these ideas in order to justify dishonest activity. Numerous times this possibility almost motivated me to drop this project entirely. However, after consulting with several Torah authorities, I decided to continue. As the verse says, "*The ways of God are straight; the righteous traverse them while the crooked stumble on them.*"¹⁰ Often the very same path can lead the righteous to truth and the crooked to falsehood. Based on the above verse, the Gemara concludes that the proper course of action is to ignore the danger of crooked individuals, and to write the "whole truth" for the sake of the upright.¹¹

It can not be stressed enough that the purpose of this class is to kindle a desire in readers to investigate the beautiful, yet intricate, nature of integrity. **This class is definitely not meant to be used as a basis for settling Halachic disputes, especially when monetary issues are involved. A competent Halachic authority should be consulted in each case.**

My heart overflows with gratitude to a number of individuals without whose help this class would not have been written. These include Elana Schachter, Mrs. Sarah Chavah Mizrahi and Mrs. Nancy Sigal, and for their outstanding editorial work and Rav Aryeh Kruskal for his brilliant comments and suggestions regarding the content of these essays. I would like to extend a special thanks to my friends Rav Nosson Slikfin and Rav Avraham Rosenthal, and yedid nafshi Rav Yitzchak Jaeger, who helped put the finishing touches on the manuscript.

I also want to thank my parents Mr. Philip and Mrs. Nancy Travis and my mother in law Mrs. Sara Kerstenetzky whose love and kindness is only exceeded by their good nature, and to all of my teachers who gave me the tools to acquire this world and the World to Come. I must also express

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Finally and most importantly, I must thank the Almighty Himself, who has guided every step of my growth to insure that I only receive the best that this world has to offer. I can only ask that I find favor in His eyes, and that He continue to show His kindness to me and my family.

The psalmist beseeches, *"Teach me, Almighty, Your ways, and lead me on the path of straightforwardness... that I may walk in your truth."*¹² May God, whose seal is truth and whose name is truth and whose Torah is truth, lead us in the path of truth that we may arrive at the truth, amen.¹³

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1. Literally "My day is good," possibly a reference to Tehillim 34:13-14 "Who is the man who desires life, and loves days that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully." (Heard from Rav P. Krohn).

2. Sanhedrin 97a. See Maharal, Nethiv Emeth explaining this Gemara.

3. Yated Ne'eman, Dec 26, 1997.

4. See Rashbatz, Zohar HaRakiah, Mitzvah 159. Yad Remah, Bava Bathra 172a. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 402,12. Chofetz Chaim, Introduction, Positive Mitzvah 13. Responsa of Rema, 11 and Responsa Shailath Yavetz 1,5, who are among the halachic authorities who write that lying violates a Torah prohibition, both in the course of everyday conversation and in business.

5. Sanhedrin 92a.

6. Yeshiah 59:15.

7. Heard from Rav Shlomo Brevda.

8. Avodah Zarah 25a.

9. Literally, "The book of integrity."

10. Hosheah 14:10.

11. Bava Bathra 99b. See also Igroth Moshe Even HaEzer Vol. 2, p.322.

12. Tehillim 27:11, 86:11.

13. Responsa of the Radvaz 4, 1127.

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