

ABSOLUTELY TRUE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This is the statute of the Torah which God commanded . . . (Bamidbar 19:2)

Everything comes down to knowledge, to what one knows. It works both ways. Sometimes a person is in danger because of what he doesn't know. Other times his life is in danger because of what he does know. As the expression goes, "A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing," but it can be for either reason.

It is no coincidence that man's first test was with respect to knowledge. A test of loyalty only required a tree. A test of knowledge required a tree of knowledge of good and evil. As the snake told a curious Chava:

For God knows that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like angels, knowing good and evil. (Bereishis 3:5)

And, that's a bad thing? Isn't the problem when people do not know the difference between the two, making it just as easy to do evil as it is to do good?

Today, yes. Prior to man's fall from grace it was another story. Before man sinned he didn't need to know the difference between good and evil because he lived on the level of Absolute Truth. Everything was black and white, either true or false. People, as we see, can perpetrate bad, but they have a much more difficult time doing something that is false.

Something that is false can only be wrong. In a true-or-false quiz, contestants rarely argue on behalf of a false answer. If it is wrong it is wrong, at all times and in all ways. It's as if the reality it represents cannot exist.

Evil can be different. Take murder for example. Murdering an innocent person is pure evil. Murdering a guilty person is often downgraded to only "killing," and called "justice." Stealing is wrong, unless it is for a "good" reason. Then it can be justifiable.

Before the sin of the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra—the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—there were no such thing as social mores. There was no need for them. There was nothing from which to distinguish the right thing. It was all that really existed.

The sin transformed history and man within it. Life became a lot trickier, for both reasons, because history was transformed and because man was altered as well. It meant that even seemingly bad things have good applications, and vice versa, especially since man now had evil traits that had to be

tamed and channeled.

A classic case in point is the story of Ya'akov Avinu and his uncle and father-in-law, Lavan. Ya'akov was called "pure" and was known as "Ish Emes," the "Man of Truth." Yet, when he met Rachel for the first time and discussed their future marriage, they had the following dialogue:

Ya'akov told Rachel that he was her father's brother. Was he [really] her father's brother? Was he not the son of her father's sister? It means this: He said to her, "Will you marry me?"

She replied, "Yes, but my father is a trickster, and he will outwit you."

He replied, "I am his brother in trickery."

She asked him, "Are the righteous permitted to act deceitfully?"

He answered. "Yes. With the pure you must be pure, but with the crooked you're allowed to scheme." (Megillah 13b)

You can be certain that it went heavily against the grain Ya'akov Avinu, the "Man of Truth," to lie, even for the right reasons. What he could do? It was the world in which he found himself, as a result of the first man's sin and expulsion from Paradise. Ever since, it has been a world in which an evil Eisav could be in line for the leadership of the future Jewish people, and the only way to stop him is to deceive your own father, and with the blessing of God!

In fact, God Himself changed the truth to avoid offending Avraham, and its even in the Torah itself!

God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?' " (Bereishis 18:13)

Although I am old: The Torah altered [her statement] for the sake of peace, for she had said, "and my master is old." (Rashi)

As Rashi pointed out a few verses earlier (18:8), Sarah's youthfulness had already begun to return to her. She had miraculously become able to bear children once again, which was more than could have been said about her husband. By all signs, he remained as physically old as he actually was.

Nevertheless, when criticizing Sarah's lack of belief in the prophecy of a future child, God told Avraham that her doubt was in her own physical ability to have children, not in his. From this the Talmud learns that it is permissible, in certain situations, to change the truth for the sake of "shalom bayis," peace in the home. (Bava Metzia 87a).

You can be sure that many have relied upon this halachic leniency to save their own necks. It was not meant, however, as a legal loophole to do the wrong thing and then get away with it. On the contrary, that is like using the opportunity of teshuvah on an upcoming Yom Kippur as an excuse to do a sin in advance. It doesn't work. The sin will be considered a sin, and the lie will be considered a lie.

Thousands of years hence since that first sin when we lost touch with Absolute Truth and had to settle for good and evil, we have paid the price countless times. As history wraps up, good and evil insist upon going out with a bang, and that may end up being more literal than figurative. Knowledge, and the ease of access the Internet allows to it, makes that increasingly more possible each day.

We are living in a time when technology empowers some very evil individuals, or just dangerously naive people, to accomplish acts of destruction that were once only the domain of superpowers. Today, a few malicious hackers can cause the ruin, not only of businesses, but of entire governments as well. They can bring about the death of millions of innocent people, God forbid, as easily as they can doctor their test scores through a university's computer system. In the minds of such people, a little bit of the wrong knowledge is clearly a dangerous thing.

When Professor Stephen Hawking was asked what his greatest contribution to science was, he said, he proved that Creation did not need God. I'm not sure which problem that solves, but I certainly know which one it creates. Clearly, in his hands, knowledge has become a dangerous thing.

Not because what he says unnerves me. It doesn't. It can't. Whatever he says is best guess based upon current knowledge, which is always changing and being revised. Furthermore, by definition, everything Professor Hawking says, whose genius I admire and respect, will always only be part of a system that God incorporates. His own position about God and Creation, as is always the case, is actually his own self-imposed intellectual and emotional limitation.

What concerns me is the impact that he has on other people whose knowledge of God and science is weak enough to be affected by an atheist such as Stephen Hawking. There are always plenty of people who wish to chuck the whole idea of Divine morality, Hitler, ysv"z, having been one of them. They lack both enough knowledge and moral backbone to withstand the intellectual challenge.

It is the latter, more than former, that a person must cling to in order to survive the confusion that a world based upon good and evil creates. This is what the first verse of the week's Torah reading teaches, as Rashi explains:

This is the statute of the Torah which God commanded . . . (Bamidbar 19:2)

This is the statute of the Torah: Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt the Jewish people, saying, "What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?" Therefore, the Torah uses the term "statute," [to say that God says,] "I have decreed it, and You have no right to challenge it." (Rashi)

You don't need statutes in a world of Absolute Truth. On such a level of knowledge, and it is an exceptionally high one, knowledge is pristine. On such an intellectual plateau, there can be no confusion and certainly no abuse of knowledge. It is the level of the Messianic Era, and really beyond it. This is why there can be no evil inclination at this time (Succah 52a). It's just not possible.

A "chok" is to remind us that we are not there yet, not even close to being there yet. We live in a

world of good and evil, and intellectual confusion. Whatever we know, or think we understand, can only be a part of the story, and sometimes not even that. It is when we forget this and assume otherwise that we end up building golden calves, and become vulnerable to the destruction they invariably cause.