

When Honesty Isn't the Best Policy

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When I meet with a couple, in advance of a wedding, I always ask: What values would you like to bring from your family of origin into the household you are creating together? Posing that question to my own sister was particularly interesting and instructive. Her answer: honesty.

I don't know if I would have thought of the same response, though I did mention it when Toni and I met with the rabbi prior to our own wedding two years later. Alison was right: Our parents did teach us, by word and, more importantly, by example, to be unfailingly honest.

In Mussar, Jewish spiritual ethics, truth is an important soul-trait. Whenever a Mussar student focuses on a particular trait, we are seeking balance. When I began to study and practice Mussar, I came to learn my own challenge: I am not apt to lie. Quite the contrary. I can be altogether too truthful.

For example, if you ever want to get rich, play poker with me. More seriously, not having a "poker face" means that people often know what I'm thinking, even if I wouldn't dare speaking that particular truth.

Whether or not honesty was particularly emphasized in one's own childhood home, we all heard, "honesty is the best policy." As children, each of us doubtless learned the lesson the hard way. After telling a lie, we couldn't keep our story straight, and the falsehoods piled up until the entire house of cards came tumbling down. How many times did our parents tell us that our punishment was more severe because we didn't tell the truth when confronted with our actions?

Interestingly, though, Torah does not proclaim, "Thou Shalt Not Lie." Yes, we are forbidden to swear false witness against our neighbor, literally meaning that we must not give untrue testimony that would bring harm to another person. That law is so important that it makes the "top ten." The principle is one we all ought to follow: We must never lie in a way that brings harm upon others.

At the same time, we all know of situations where the truth is hurtful, and we would be wrong to utter it. For example, anybody who has ever been in a relationship knows the correct answer to, "Does this outfit make me look fat?" Hopefully, when asked to guess a person's age, we all are diplomatic enough to guess an impossibly low number. When speaking with an elderly person, who

mentions age as a factor in a health challenge, I will often remark, “Well, you are over fifty now.”

These kinds of dissimulations are permitted, or even required, in very limited circumstances. Our goal is to avoid hurting another person. We don’t use that kind of falsehood to protect ourselves.

The situation facing the spies in this week’s Torah portion is more complex. At God’s command, Moses has dispatched twelve spies to scout out the Land of Israel. The Children of Israel must conquer the Land, so they need to know something about the territory and about the enemies they may face.

The spies’ report begins with unanimity: All are agreed that Israel is a good land, flowing with milk and honey, meaning that it’s rich in natural resources. They weren’t looking for petroleum.

Soon, though, the spies break into controversy. Ten insist that the Land is inhabited by giants. The city walls are so tall that they reach the heavens.

Two spies demur. Caleb hushes the people and proclaims faith in God. He insists: With the Holy One at their side, and with faith, the Children of Israel can surely take the Land of God’s promise.

In our tradition, the ten spies are often accused of malicious falsehood. Most of the sages who comment on the portion proclaim that neither giants nor insurmountable city walls ever existed. Instead, the majority is accused of being so afraid of battle that they make up stories to dispirit the Israelites, who respond by sulking in their tents, refusing to take the Land at God’s command. One medieval commentator, though, a rabbi called Nachmanides, insists that the ten spies aren’t lying. When Caleb hushes the people, Nachmanides imagines the hero to be saying: “Yes, they are powerful, but we can overpower both them and their fortified cities.”

Let’s stick with Nachmanides’ logic for a moment, and assume that the majority is being honest. We should ask: Should the spies tell the truth about the enemies’ might and the apparent impregnability of the walls? Our answer would have to be “no.”

The twelve spies aren’t just any dozen Israelites. Instead, they are leaders of their tribes. As leaders, they possess special responsibility. The ordinary Israelite might not be expected to recall that God had overcome tremendous obstacles to free them from bondage. Even remembering, the average person

might not immediately reason that God would perform additional miracles as great as the ten plagues and parting the sea. Most of the Children of Israel “can’t handle the truth,” as the saying goes.

None of that means that the spies should lie. Consider the two spies in the minority, Joshua and Caleb. They never dispute the majority report. They don’t say: “Wait a minute, the people in the Land are no bigger than us, and the city walls are ordinary.” Instead, they respond with faith: Whatever the size and capability of the enemy, with God’s help, we shall prevail.

Honesty would seem to require that Joshua and Caleb report their findings to the Israelites. After all, they had been asked about the people of the land and their habitations. Joshua and Caleb may tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but they leave out an awful lot. They don’t tell the whole truth, whatever that may be.

The best outcome would have resulted from all twelve spies’ returning with a unanimous report. Without telling a single lie, they could have said, “The enemy is formidable, and the cities are well protected. Still, God has overcome much greater obstacles for us in the past, in Egypt and at the shores of the sea. With faith, let us keep moving, to conquer the Promised Land.”

Ironically, the ten spies’ failure is a sin of honesty. They tell too much of the truth, frightening their fellow Israelites into paralysis.

As a result, God punishes the Children of Israel. God concludes that the generation that has come out of Egypt will always be slaves at heart. They will never possess the faith needed to conquer their own Land. Therefore, God decrees forty years of desert wandering. Not until this entire generation dies will Israel dwell on its own Land.

The exceptions are Joshua and Caleb. Because their honesty is in balance – they don’t lie, but neither do they tell the unvarnished, frightening truth – they will inherit the Land of Israel together with the next generation.

In our own lives, the challenges to our honesty aren’t usually as easy as, “Does this outfit make me look fat?” At the other end of the spectrum, we don’t often face the temptation to bear false witness, to lie in a way that brings punishment upon another person.

We do, however, have to balance the truth with compassion quite regularly.

In a meeting, at work or at the Temple, we may be asked, “What do you think of that idea?” The whole truth may be that we find the proposal to be foolish, but we would do well not to say so. Our challenge is to find what’s positive about the idea, articulate that, while honestly but gently explaining what would be in the best interest of the institution or organization.

At home, too, we are challenged to measure our words. When faced with a family member’s saying or doing something we don’t like, we must strike a balance, not to lie to our loved ones, but not to criticize them more harshly than necessary for the welfare of the family and each individual.

Let each of us, with Joshua and Caleb as our guides, learn that even honesty is best practiced in balance. Then, like the second generation of Israelites, may we achieve the promise of God’s blessing.

Amen.