

Truth: as Absolute, as Contingent

address at Annua Convention of R.C.A.

A. Introduction.

Theme: אמת as absolute and as contingent. Not a philosophic discourse, but an exercise in השקפה via פרשנות, concentrating on שלח--שבוע. And not just homiletics, but exegesis with eye to very serious contemporary issues.

B. Questions.

1. **Q:** spies sent to bring back report--and did so. Apparently honest/truthful. So--why punished? Vindictiveness? *Hence:* what does אמת mean??
2. **Q:** שקר ו--אמת--why doesn't Torah *command* truth-telling, & only ban lying in an affirmative commandment (מ"ע) as מדבר שקר תרחק?
3. **Q:** In Moses' prayer: ועתה יגדל נא כח ה' כאשר דברת לאמר, ה' ארך אפים ורב חסד נושא עון. ופשע ונקה לא ינקה וכו'. Cf his propitiatory prayer after חטא עגל which added, significantly, truth: ורב חסד ואמת

C. Answers. *Truth in Judaism is not always a simple absolute; often it is contingent.* 3 versions:

1. *When truth-telling has harmful and unnecessary consequences:*

In answer to Q#3, Ramban (*ad loc*): "ולא הזכיר אמת כי במדת אמת יהיו חייבים", i.e., revealing/invoking truth would be inappropriate--and harmful. סנגוריי לפי הראייה היא. --so עבודה מיוחדת, ובעבודה זו אף שיש איסור הרחקה משקר, אין מצוה לגלות ולפרסם את האמת too: answer to Q#2.

Yiddish: א ליגן טאָר מען נישט זאָגן, און אמת דארף מען נישט זאָגן.

*Indiscriminate blurting out of any impression, even if true, is reprehensible...

*"You're ugly"...SO: ב"ה ובי"ש על כלה נאה וחסודה (Mark Dratch: article in *Judaism*)

**Story:* eulogy for Rosh Yeshiva's wife--that she concealed the truth--never revealed to her family that she had been suffering from cancer for many years...

Absence of Truth does not necessarily create a vacuum to be filled w falsehood;
sometimes it is elegant/civilized/sacred
הָיָה דָּן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לַכֹּף וְזָכוֹת (צמצום ידיעתו, כן אנחנו...) on בני יששכר

Indeed: sinful/immoral when Truth can hurt & when its suppression=harmless
אפס כי עז העם היושב בארץ, so should not have said spies knew G-d wanted א"י, so should not have said
Hence: answer to Q#1...

SO: condemn R. **Ginsberg**--(press reports): "J life is worth more than gentile" life and
"technically can take liver from Goy for a Jew"*even if were true!!* But especially
since it's not--משום איבה/דרכי שלום/חילול השם--are not prudential but principles,
correctives built into Halakha...thus, part of Halakha itself and equally inviolable...

So, R. Saadia Gaon: והאמת המרה", ואולי לכן אין הגדת האמת מצוה, רק הרחקת השקר
and Hasidic interpretation of מדבר שקר תרחק: falsehood *distances you from G-d!*

2. *factual vs. contextual truth-telling*

Contextuality--focusing on facts alone w-o reference to context=distortion of truth.
Nothing exists *in vacuo*--all life is interlinked. Hence, Truth & truth-telling must be
viewed and expressed *in context*

שבת ק"ד ע"א piquant passage already evident in that narrow focus leads to distortion
אמרי ליה רבנן לרבי יהושע בן לוי: אתו דרדקי האיזנא לבי מדרשא ואמרו מילי דאפילו בימי
יהושע בן נון לא איתמר כוותייהו: אלייף בייית - אַלף בינה, גימ"ל דליית - גמול דלים...שייף-שקר
תייף - אמת. מייט שקר מקרבן מיליה, אמת מרחקא מיליה? שיקרא - שכיח, קושטא - לא שכיח

My reading of that text--not only that reason for מקרבן מיליה is that שכיח etc.
but the other way around: שכיח because שיקרא - שכיח...and same for מקרבן מיליה
Falsehood is שכיח, truth is לא שכיח--a matter of common experience--because שקר is
tightly bunched together, thus of *narrow focus*, whereas אמת covers the whole alphabet,
i.e., broader horizons. It is more comprehensive, and therefore avoids the distortion of
narrow focus. Facts must be related to their environment.

Hence, answer to Q#1--spies reported narrowly--what they saw, w-o reference to
mission assigned to them and the will of הקב"ה which was manifest to them....

Also, in same vein: because interrelatedness is a sophisticated notion, it cannot be
grasped by uneducated, simple-minded people; truth/falsehood depends on *whom* you
reveal report to! Spies should have reported to Moses who would have put proper
(=truthful) slant on report; Instead, וישיבו ... וישיבו. They reported to a naive, frightened, inexperienced people
incapable of evaluating...*Following from this*:

3. *truth includes interpretation as well as bare data*

Spies' report was *factual*--but not *truthful*, because they offered false interpretation:
...אפס כי עז העם הזה היושב בארץ... from which flowed a conclusion that was disastrous:
לא נוכל לעלות אל העם כי חזק הוא ממנו

Source of tragic error?--Two interpretations:

R. Yaakov Moshe Charlop (מי מרום): Rashi: כל דבר שקר שאין אומרים בו קצת אמת בתחילתו. But where is there a lie in their report?

Answer: their words seem true enough, yet Rashi previously (v. 18) writes that סימן מסר להם--אם בפרזים יושבין חזקים הם והערים שסומכין על גבורתם, ואם בערים בצורות הם יושבים, חלשים הם והערים. Hence, if they reported their conclusion should have been עלה נעלה, instead....*SO: falsehood in interpretation of facts....*

ShaDaL (cited in the book והקבלה): difference between לתור (=to tour) & לרגל (=to spy out). לתור means to look for rest, pleasure; לרגל - to search out weaknesses. Moses sent them "to see" and לתור, but they didn't... Hence, in דברים only find לתור, and only in מרגלים referred to as מרגלים. Thus: they misunderstood or deliberately distorted purpose of mission. Wrong interpretation.

D. Two Caveats, one at lower end of Truth, one at higher end.

1. **At lower end**: *Despite above emphasis on Truth~ harmful/context/interpretation-- never misrepresent the facts!*

a) What philosophers call "theory of correspondence" as definition of Truth must never be violated. Caution required lest "ideology" dictate interp'n and lead to wholesale שקר... Do that, and *propaganda* replaces truth. Interp'n necessary to *understand* facts, not to *replace* them.

b) Thus, when Halakha talks of שבעות in אמת ושקר, it means facts first w-o interp'n...

c) Thus, must take strong exception to recent efforts to turn history into propaganda and biography into hagiography. Late R. Schwab has proposed the banishing of history from the understanding of Torah and its replacement with selective story-telling which will censor anything negative from the Torah's description of the giants of tradition.

This is the realm of אמונה ואמת--for such truth can be apperceived only via אמונה, and אמת itself is buttressed by the sublime and transcendent אמת.

Indeed, the two words are related etymologically. According to RaDaK (in his ספר (בן-בנת-בת, אמונה--אמת--אמת (as, for instance, the change follows the pattern of (השרשים),

When you look at the empirical realm in the light of day, in our quotidian life, you affirm that truth cannot be divorced from the hard, clear, stubborn facts of experience. It is all אמת ויציב.

And when you confront yourself in your murky inner world--where commitment strives with doubt, and affirmation with denial, and where the soul aches for something beyond itself, something permanent and enduring and holy--there אמונה reaches for the heights of the purest אמת, spiritual and transcendent, and the rays of אמת illuminate the darkness of the soul and invigorate and revivify אמונה.

Indeed, as the Talmud declares:

כל שלא אמר אמת ויציב שחרית ואמת ואמונה ערבית לא יצא ידי חובתו