Norman Lamm June 12, 1996

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 פרשנות via פרשנות, concentrating on פרשת השבוע--שלח. 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:** אמת ושקר-why doesn't Torah *command* truth-telling, & only ban lying in an affirmative commandment (מייע) as מדבר שקר תרחק?
- 3. **Q:** In Moses' prayer: ועתה יגדל נא כח הי כאשר דברת לאמר, הי ארך אפים ורב חסד נושא עון . 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 היא העוריי לפי הראייה היא איסור הרחקה משקר, אין מצוה לגלות ולפרסם את האמת --so too: answer to Q#2.

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

- *Indiscriminate blurting out of any impression, even if true, is reprehensible...
- *"You're ugly"...SO: בייה ובייש 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...

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Absence of Truth does not necessarily create a vacuum to be filled w falsehood; sometimes it is elegant/civilized/sacred ס בני יששכר on (...) סוַני דן את כל האדם לכף זכות (צמצום ידיעתו, כן אנחנו...)

Indeed: sinful/immoral when Truth can hurt & when its suppression=harmless *Thus:* spies knew G-d wanted איי, so should not have said אפס כי עז העם היושב בארץ 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: ייהאמת המרהיי, ואולי לכן אין הגדת האמת מצוה, רק הרחקת השקר מאולי לכן אין הגדת האמת 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

That narrow focus leads to distortion already evident in piquant passage שבת קייד עייא אמרי ליה רבנן לרבי יהושע בן לוי: אתו דרדקי האידנא לבי מדרשא ואמרו מילי דאפילו בימי אמרי ליה רבנן לרבי יהושע בן לוי: אלייף בייית - אֲלַף בינה, גימייל דליית - גְמוֹל דלים ...שייין- שקר יהושע בן נון לא איתמר כוותייהו: אלייף בייית - אֲלַף בינה, גימייל דליית - גְמוֹל דלים ...שייין- שקר מְקַרְבָן מִילֵיה, אמת מְרַחַקא מִילֵיה! שִיקּרָא - שְּכִיחַ, קוּשְּטָא - לא שכיח תיייו - אמת. מייט שקר מְקַרְבָן מִילֵיה, אמת מְרַחַקא מִילֵיה!

My reading of that text--not only that reason for מְקַרְבֶּן מִילֵּיה is that שִיקרא - שְּכִיחַ etc. but the other way around: מְיִקרְבֶּן מִילֵיה because מְיִקרְבָּן מִילֵיה -and same for מְּקַרְבָּן מִילֵיה -and same for קּקרְבָן מִילֵיה -and same for פּוּשׁטא... Falsehood is שִּכִּיח truth is שִּכִּיח a matter of common experience--because שִּקר 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, וילכו ויבואו אל משה ואל אהרן ואל כל עדת בנ״י ... 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: אין מתקיים בופר פרפר שאין אומרים בו קצת אמת בתחילתו): Rashi: אין מתקיים בסופר-But where is there a lie in their report?

Answer: their words אפס כי עז העם הזה היושב בארץ והערים בצורות גדולות מאוד seem true enough, yet Rashi previously (v.18) writes that סימן מסר להם--אם בפרזים יושבין חזקים הם Hence, if they reported יוהערים בצורות הם יושבים, חלשים הם their conclusion should have been עלה נעלה instead....SO: falsehood in interpretation of facts....

ShaDaL (cited in הכתב והקבלה): difference between לתור (=to tour) לתור (=to spy out). לתור means to look for rest, pleasure; לתור - to search out weaknesses. Moses sent them "to see" and לתור, but they didn't... Hence, in שלח only find לתור, and only in דברים 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. <u>At lower end:</u> 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 not to that, and propaganda replaces truth. Interp'n necessary to understand facts, not to replace them.
 - b) Thus, when Halakha talks of שבועות in שבועות, 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.

In his own words:

What ethical purpose is served by preserving a realistic historic picture? Nothing but the satisfaction of curiosity. We should tell ourselves and our children the good memories of the good people, their unshakable faith, their staunch defense of tradition, their life of truth, their impeccable honesty, their boundless charity and their great reverence for Torah and Torah sages. What is gained by pointing out their inadequacies and their contradictions? We want to be inspired by their example and learn from their experience.

(see J.J. Schacter's article in recent vol. of Torah Umadda Journal)

There are, to be sure, attempts in חזייל to portray Reuven, David, etc. as less culpable than appears in text--but, to my knowledge, never a *denial* of facts related in Torah. They, e.g., do not deny the event of David and Bathsheba, but interpret that in a new way. There is exegesis, not censorship. Torah must prevail over all--even over the "ideology" of Torah...תוכת אמת...means_exactly what it says.

Kotzker: you can imitate any מתח--except אמת, because then it's no longer אמת...

I understand motivation of those who fear the literal reading of Torah narratives--want to protect אמת and thus curb fullness of אמת. But I disagree: real piety/ שמנה must be based on אמונה. Zohar: אמונה אתקריאת כד אתחבר בה אמת. There is no faith without truth!

Of course, this literal "truth" must be taught with delicacy and sensitivity and awesome respect for the heroes of our tradition--but never must the truth be ignored or refuted. Just as with humans, רצונו של אדם זה כבודו, so with Torah--its כבוד is what its יוה, and if Torah says David sinned with Bathsheba, then one can *interpret*--but not *deny* the facts, for that is רצונה של תורה. Torah did not want us to view the שבות העולם as infallible paragons of absolute virtue, but as the most excellent expressions of צלם אלקים in human form--which means high superiority but not total sinlessness--for then they are worthy of worship but no longer remain role-models capable of emulation.

I have a great fear that if you allow yourself the right to censor Torah and cover up the facts, no matter how noble your motives, you run the risk of letting be getting its nose under the tent, and the result may be an unconscious drift into distorting the truth for ideological purposes--and from that to perverting it for organizational ends...

2. At Higher End: Second Caveat--

At highest end of Truth, it has noi relation to facts at all, but is pure --thus: הי --thus: אלקים אמת (ירמיהו), no theory of correspondence/coherence/contextuality applies here

Thus, R. Nachman Bratzlaver: והמשכיל המבין יש לו להתפלל כל ימיו שיזכה פעם אי כל ימי חייו לְדַבֶּר דיבור אי של אמת לפני הי כראוי

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

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

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 אמנה 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 אמנה.

Indeed, as the Talmud declares:

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