

"KEEP THYSELF FAR FROM AN INOPERATIVE STATEMENT"

The whole Torah, said the Kotzker Rebbe, is a commentary on the verse **מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֹק**, "keep thyself far from a false statement."

Judaism teaches not that "God is love," or that "God is pity." Pity and love are attributes, not definitions of God. There is only one definition of God in Judaism, and that was formulated by the prophet Jeremiah and introduced into our daily prayers: **יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱמֶת**, "the Lord your God is Truth."

A careful reading of our key text will reveal two interesting peculiarities in this three-word verse: **דְּבַר** and **תִּרְחֹק**.

תִּרְחֹק means "keep thyself far." Generally, it is the Rabbis who make a **סִיג לַתּוֹרָה**, a "fence around the Torah." So, when the Torah itself forbids, for instance, mowing the lawn, the Rabbis go a step further and forbid moving the lawnmower, lest one use it unthinkingly. They thus move us far away from a prohibited act. There is only one place in which the Torah itself establishes a **פֶּיגָה**, or a "zone of safety," and that is in the case of falsehood: **מִדְּבַר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֹק**, "keep thyself far from falsehood."

There is only one way to say the truth; if one wishes to be philosophical, he can allow that there are a number of ways speaking the truth. But there is an infinite number of ways to tell a lie! Hence, **תִּרְחֹק**, keep far away.

It is instructive, and a beautiful example of Jewish law and ethics, to see how the Talmud scrupulously applied the principle of **תִּרְחֹק**. The Sages understood the verse as directed primarily (although not exclusively) at judges. Thus, the Talmud (Shev. 30b, 31a) derives the following rules which together constitute part of the Jewish code of judicial conduct. A judge must not be defensive; if he makes a mistake, he must admit it and not rationalize -- thus not only not lying, but keeping as far away from untruth as possible. A judge must not permit an ignorant student to assist him; he must keep him at arm's length. A judge must refuse to sit on the bench together with another judge whom he knows is dishonest; **תִּרְחֹק**! A judge who knows that a witness is lying, but the witness is protected by legal technicalities, that judge must not ease his conscience that he is applying the law

with technical exactitude, but must attempt to disqualify him. A student of the law who sees his teacher-judge err, must not keep silent. Perhaps most illuminating, a judge who has two litigants come before him in his courtroom, one dressed shabbily and the other elegantly, must turn to the one who is well dressed and offer him the following option: either buy a suit of fine clothes for your adversary, or you yourself must dress in rags. Otherwise, there is some chance that a subliminal impression in your favor will be made upon the judge, and the judge must keep himself "far away from a false statement."

The second word of interest in this verse is דבר , keep far from a "word" of falsehood. Would it not have been simpler to say משקר תרחוק , "keep thyself far from falsehood?"

I suggest that the Torah is telling us to acknowledge a lie as a lie, and not disguise it in pretty masks. Keep thyself far from a דבר שקר , from a dishonest euphemism, from a substitute word for a lie which would make the שקר more acceptable.

If you recognize something as false, call it false! Do not misname it as, for instance: an "inaccuracy"; an "exaggeration"; a "hyperbolic extravagance"; or, a term that was popular during my college years, "a terminological inexactitude." In Washington of the Watergate era, a new term has been invented for a lie. It was first propagated by the Press Secretary of the President when, instead of saying that he had earlier lied, said, interestingly, that his previous statement was "inoperative." One can imagine a new English translation of the Torah, according to the Authorized Version of Ron Ziegler: "keep thyself far from an inoperative statement."

But דבר שקר , the semantic excuse for falsehood, is barred by the Torah. A lie is a lie -- is the truth. For, as the Hebrew writer יוחנן טברסקי once said: חצי אמת הוא שקר גמור (a half truth is a whole lie)!

Yet, it is really so difficult to attain the truth, to keep far from שקר . It is told of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the founder of the HaBaD Hasidism, that he worked 21 years on truth: seven years to know the truth; seven years to drive away falsehood; and seven years to bring the truth within himself.

But, alas, the world is not made up of Shneour Zalman's! Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his most recent addition to the latest revised version of his epoch-making Gulag Archipelago made this comment about Soviet Russia: "There is simply a Wall. And its bricks are laid in a mortar of lies."

Long ago, the Zohar taught the same about all life, all of society, all of our mundane existence: it is an עולם דשקר, a world of falsehood.

And even earlier, a Midrash, ascribed to R. Akiva (מדרש אבא דרבי), taught that אמת יש לה רגלים, "the truth has feet." This gave rise to a number of charming folk interpretations. For example, Jews conclude that since the truth has feet, hence it flees from us; but falsehood is legless, so it always remains with us!

The same Midrash is undoubtedly the source of the famous Yiddish saying: מיטן אמת קען מען אריסגיין די גאנצע וועלט "with truth you can travel through the whole world." And the Besht, in an uncharacteristically sardonic comment, explained that: ווייל דעם אמת שטופט מען ארום פון איין ארט צום צווייטן "because truth is pushed around from one place to another."

Incead, a mere glance at the daily papers or radio or television is enough to lead one to discover that אמת is being pushed around. Truth is running away, while שקר is close. Falsehood is much too close for comfort.

Consider, for instance, the case of M. Jobert, the Prime Minister of France, who fully justifies the famous acid comment that, "a diplomat is an honest man who is sent abroad to lie for his country."

M. Jobert recently went to Saudi Arabia in order to tie up an oil deal for France. King Feisal declared that Saudi Arabia must be Judenrein, and he would not permit any Jew to come with the French party, either as part of the government group or as a reporter. M. Jobert acquiesced in the most obsequious fashion, and the French government uttered not one word of protest.

Shalom Aleichem once said:

עס זיינען פאראן דריי אלזיי ליגנער --

"There are three kinds of liars":
א נעכטיגדיקער ליגנער, א היינטיגדיקער ליגנער,
אין א מארגענדיקער ליגנער --

a "yesterday liar," a "today liar," and a tomorrow liar." A "yesterday liar" is one who says, "I gave a thousand dollars to charity," when the sum total of his life's contributions is less than one hundred dollars. A "today liar" is one who tells you that he is champion chess player when he cannot even play the game. And a "tomorrow liar" is one who tells you, in all seriousness, that the day after tomorrow he will be in China when he has tickets for South America.

Why do I mention this? Because France reminds me of Sholom Aleichem.

Thus, M. Jobert solemnly promises Israel that France, despite its close association with Arabs and its identification with the Arab foreign policy, will never agree to the dismemberment of the State of Israel. M. Jobert is a מארגענדיקער ליגנער, a "tomorrow liar."

The President of France, M. Pompidou, this week declared that, "France can in no way be held responsible for discrimination by Saudi Arabia." M. Pompidou is a היינטיגדיקער ליגנער, a "today liar." The same M. Pompidou declared, in the same conference, "France has never committed acts of discrimination on grounds of either race or religion." So M. Pompidou is also a נעכטיגדיקער ליגנער, a "yesterday liar."

But why rant and rave against the French government and French gentiles, when far more serious charges of the most blatant and incredible and immoral treachery can be levelled at certain French Jews, namely, the journalists, who did finally go to Saudi Arabia with the French Prime Minister?

Instead of making an international outcry against Saudi Arabia and that primitive and malicious desert thief who heads it, these French Jews rushed headlong, in obscene and humiliating haste, to obtain forged baptismal certificates to allow them to enter the sacred domain of Saudia Arabia! They are all three liars rolled into one!

Moreover, they simultaneously insulted three great religions -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

They certainly deserved what they got: the gifts that this primitive King distributed to all members of the Prime Minister's party were all -- copies of the infamous 19th century anti-Semitic forged booklet, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. They derogated their Judaism and forged baptismal certificates, so they got in return a piece of poisonous anti-Semitism that was forged a long time ago.

An עלמא דשיקרא indeed!

And yet, despite all, as Jews we must ever retain our optimism and hope for the triumph of truth, even as we keep far from falsehood.

Thus, the Mishnah teaches (Eduyot, VIII)
אין עליהן בראשונה את המרוחקין (בזרוע)
ולקרב את המרוחקין (בזרוע).

Elijah, the harbinger of the Messiah, will come primarily to remove those who are close, and to bring close those who are distant.

What does that mean?

A great Hasidic teacher, the Radomsker Rebbe, explained that Mishnah as referring to truth and falsehood. אמת or truth is composed of the three letters at the farthest ends of the alphabet. The א is the first letter, the מ is the middle letter, the ת is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a sign that אמת is מרוחקין, Truth is dispersed, feeble, weak, disorganized, Whereas שקר, falsehood, consists of three sequential letters, one following the other. Falsehood is מקורבין. Even as the letters of the word, so the concept and practice of falsehood are strong, concentrated, focused, and effacious in the world in which we live.

Elijah and the Messiah will come not so much for political or national reasons, as for the great moral reason: to dissipate and disperse the power of falsehood, to rob it of its strength and its attractiveness; and to bring close אמת, to make it reign supreme in the life of mankind.

A sublime goal, worth waiting for and working for.