

Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live and inherit the land. (16:20)

Emes, truth, is one of the most essential human character traits. Indeed, the *Torah* tells us to pursue truth. *Hashem's* seal is *emes*. An individual who desires to be close and cling to *Hashem* must cleave to the attribute of truth. One who merits to be the paragon of integrity, to have *emes* permeate his entire essence, is already close to *Hashem*.

Interestingly, we do not find a fence placed around any other *middah*, character trait, to the extent that we see occurring with *sheker*, falsehood. The *Torah* admonishes us, "*Midvar sheker tirschak*" - "*Distance yourself from falsehood.*" (*Shemos* 23,7) The danger of *sheker* is so threatening that one must distance himself from it, so that he does not risk falling into it. In fact, the **Sefas Emes** writes that the only way that one can truly protect himself from falsehood is by following the prescription of the *pasuk* in our *parsha*, "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.*" "*Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue.*" Only by pursuing righteousness, truth and justice will one be assured of not falling into the clutches of *sheker*.

The *Sefas Emes* adds that in this world one can never attain consummate truth. This world is called the "*almah d'shikra*" - world of falsehood. The *Olam Ha'Emes*, World To Come, will be the place in which we ultimately achieve our goal. This will occur, however, only after we have pursued truth in this world. Then we will "inherit the land" - *Olam Ha'bah*.

The great *tzaddikim* of old were determined never to utter an untruth - even one that might be "acceptable" in light of the circumstances. Indeed, they were willing to give up their lives for this goal. The story is told about a Jew who sinned against the government. Since the individual in question refused to confess his sin, the government ruled that he would be put to death. If, however, two distinguished rabbis would swear affirming to the Jew's innocence, he would be exonerated. Two great *tzaddikim*, *Rav Rafael* and *Rav Moshe Tzvi*, who was a distinguished student of *Horav Pinchas Koritzer, z"l*, were selected by the judges as being individuals of exemplary integrity who would attest to the defendant's innocence. *Rav Moshe Tzvi* immediately came forth and affirmed the defendant's innocence, asserting that *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, transcended the entire *Torah*. In this instance, a life was hanging in the balance. He would have to swear falsely. *Rav Rafael* asserted that since he had been raised in the presence of *Horav Pinchas Koritzer* he simply could not tell a lie. He could in no way impugn his integrity by stating a falsehood.

Understandably, the family of the defendant implored *Rav Rafael* to "relax" his standard for the sake of their father. Everyday they came to his home, weeping, pleading with him to swear on behalf of the condemned man. He did not want a Jew to die, but he simply could not lie.

The night before the scheduled execution, *Rav Rafael* could not sleep. He tossed and turned not

knowing what to do. Here was a person who had never done anything that did not reflect the height of veracity. The *tzaddik* began to cry bitter tears. He implored *Hashem*, "*Ribbono Shel Olam*! Take my soul, so that I will not be compelled to utter a false statement!" This scene continued all night until the *tzaddik's neshamah* ascended to its Maker, untainted by any vestige of *sheker*. The next morning, when they came to notify him that the defendant had confessed, they found *Rav Rafael's* body slumped over his *shtender*. He was no longer in this world. While some might argue the *halachik* accuracy of *Rav Rafael's* decision not to swear falsely, others might even view his behavior in a negative light. Most of us fail to realize that he actually prayed for his own death so that he would not be forced to swear falsely! How far removed are we from such a level of integrity! It is reassuring to know that at one time people were so discerning about truthfulness and the integrity of the image which they projected.