

“Distance yourself from a false word.” (23:7)

Integrity is much more than a virtue, a good character trait – it defines a human being. Indeed, there is no other negative command/transgression in the *Torah* where there is a special warning to distance oneself. Falsehood can swallow up a person, overwhelm him. We try to justify our lack of integrity, saying it is not really a falsehood; it is for the purpose of a *mitzvah*; nothing really bad will come out of it. While all this may be true, the end result is that the person has lied. A white lie today becomes a major falsehood tomorrow. *Horav Zisha, z.l., m'Annipoli* once rendered this *pasuk* homiletically: “From a word of falseness, one becomes distanced from Hashem.” When one stretches the truth he is not only transgressing the principles that govern man’s relationship with his fellowman, but he is also transgressing the principles that define man’s relationship with the Almighty.

The effect of a lie is all-encompassing. Not only does it lead to other sins, it also has a double effect on our children. First, they see and hear our bending of the truth. Children tend to outdo their parents. A white lie that a parent might erroneously justify, will, years later, become the foundation for a child’s total lack of integrity. Parents who maintain a sterling character will hopefully see it manifest in their children’s behavior. Second, *Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, z.l.*, often cited the following from *Horav Mendel, z.l., m'Rimanov*, who wondered why we notice sweet and innocent children straying from the *Torah* when they become older: He attributed this phenomenon to *timtum ha'lev*, numbness of the heart. When parents feed their children food that has been purchased with money earned illicitly they are, in effect, giving them *maachalos asuros*, forbidden foods. These forbidden foods take their toll on a child’s *neshamah*, soul, diminishing his *chein*, pleasant, sweet demeanor.

The words we write or speak, the nuances manifest in our emotional expressions, our business dealings with people are all opportunities for demonstrating our integrity and moral stature: Whether it is calling in sick when we are not, or putting on a show of emotion during *davening* when it is not really there, or taking money under false pretenses – these are all examples in which our integrity is challenged.

We live in a society where, to quote a popular American author, “Lying has become an integral part of American culture, a trait of the American character. We lie, and we do not even think about it. We lie for no reason...and the people we lie to are those closest to us.” Our *Torah*’s dictate, of course, aggressively deplores such practice. Truth is not just an important Jewish quality. It is called “*chosomo shel Hakadosh Baruch Hu*,” seal of Hashem. It is the emblem by which Hashem is known. One who lies is as if he has worshipped idols. For, without truth, there is no foundation of belief and there can be no true belief in Hashem. It has been said that one who speaks the truth need not have a good memory, since a person does not have to remember what he said. A liar, however, must remember everything he has said so that he can continually cover up his lies.

The Avos, Patriarchs, each possessed a character trait that he personified. While they all were

exemplary in their *middos tovos*, positive character traits, they each had one area which set him apart from the rest. Avraham *Avinu* personified the quality of *chesed*, kindness; Yitzchak symbolized the pillar of *avodah*, worship; Yaakov represented the *middah* of *emes*, truth. Undoubtedly, each of the Patriarchs were thoroughly proficient in the other characteristics. His individual benchmark, however, was in one particular trait. Perhaps this is why Eisav's guardian angel, the symbol of the enemy of the Jewish People, chose Yaakov as his adversary – and not Avraham or Yitzchak. Each one of the other two characteristics does not present a long-term threat. They could be minimized, even perverted, to meet Eisav's needs. In contrast, Yaakov's *middah* indicated a serious threat to the survival of *Klal Yisrael's* enemies. Avraham's kindness was distorted by Lot, when he was prepared to give up his daughter's virtue and allow her to be violated by the people of Sodom. Too much kindness can undermine the character trait and transform it into an abomination. Yitzchak's *middah* of worship has been twisted by Eisav's descendants and transformed into their medium for pagan ritual. The only way that the qualities of kindness and worship can be reinforced and tempered, so that they are applied in their proper balance, is through the quality of truth. The overwhelming power of *emes* pierces through the ambiguities that cloud the essence and true meaning of these values.

The angel waited for Yaakov, the representative of *emes*. Yaakov manifested the greatest threat to the philosophical perspective of the enemies of the Jewish People. The quality of truth, symbolized by Yaakov, would forge the nation that could prevail over Eisav. The angel had to prevent this from occurring, because he knew that with the power of *emes*, *Klal Yisrael* would triumph over its enemies. As the descendants of Yaakov *Avinu*, whose name was changed to *Yisrael* to symbolize his triumph over the forces of falsehood, we must maintain our heritage of truth and impart this legacy to our children, so that we are worthy of the title *Bnei Yisrael*, the children of *Yisrael*.