

Emet – Truth

*Do not allow anything to pass your lips
that you are not certain is completely true.¹*

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Since we now understand that what we heretofore called “ourselves,” that is the idea we have regarding our individual integrity, is actually a plural unity consisting of a *yetzer hara* and a *yetzer hatov*, a place for the self and a place for the other, we can appreciate the fact that what is “true for us” is likewise a function of this plural unity. What is true for “me” must also be true for the other. This helps to explain both the importance and the complexity of this *midda*.

Every statement that we make has implications for both the self and the other. Truth is a statement that serves the other while falsehood serves the self. It is important for us to frame this *midda* this way because it helps us negotiate the difficulties that arise when we try to distinguish between what we can call factual truth and what we can call practical truth. Factual truth is a report that we make of what actually is the case. Most times we are obligated to be faithful to this factual truth. As we have noted before, speech (both verbal and non-verbal) is the primary way that we engage with the world and since we are required to engage with the world such that our speech does no harm we generally understand this as a requirement to reflect in our speech the factual truth. The Torah tradition supports this as we are warned to stay far from falsehood and false witness. In general terms both our experience of the world and the tradition understands factual truth as a way of speaking ‘for the other.’ That is, when we hide the truth we do so generally because we are afraid of its consequences. Therefore falsehood is a tool of the *yetzer hatov* used to protect us from these consequences. Since these consequences are generally understood as emanating from another person (institution acting as another person) when we lie we are choosing the self over the other. In many if not most cases we discover that the fears of the *yetzer hara* are exaggerated and that, in fact, the truth not only serves the other, but more significantly serves us.

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 173.

This general approach, however, does not meet all circumstances. Sometimes it is clear that the factual truth can cause unnecessary pain to the other even when not affording any protection to the self. This is exemplified by the well-known rabbinic exhortation that we are required to praise the beauty of every bride. In the Talmud the question is asked: Is it possible that every bride is beautiful?! Since this is certainly not the case then can we conclude that there are circumstances when we are called upon to lie?! Obviously, there are two ways of answering these questions. On the one hand since beauty is also a reflection of inner truth rather than the surface truth of things, the spiritual beauty that devolves upon every bride is true. On the other hand, and I think more importantly, this is an example when the good of the other requires that the factual truth be avoided. If we gage our notion of truth as requiring a negotiation, as it were, between the self and the other, we ought to be able to be guided in knowing how to occasionally make this distinction between factual and practical truth. This is a fragile negotiation and as such requires the full compliment of skills associated with the previous *midda* of *zedek* and its components of *anava* and *shtika*.