LYING & CHEATING– A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – JANUARY 18, 2020

If you are obsessed with the news like I have been these last few weeks you might reach the same conclusion I have recently; there is a whole lot of cheating and lying, going on.

- Politicians who simply won't tell the truth even when caught on camera doing exactly what they said they didn't do.
- Athletes, the Houston Astros most recently who were caught in a CIA level scheme to steal baseball signs and give their players an unfair advantage
- Olympic athletes who enlist state agencies or visa versa to skirt rules against PEDs
- Parents who paid 10s and 100s of thousands of dollars so their children could cheat on entrance exams or fake grades and activities so their children could get into top level universities.
- Add to that Fake News, tax avoidance by multinational corporations, cyber espionage and the kind of everyday cheating and lying between people that seems endemic in our society

It is exhausting, soul crushing and so completely unsurprising that I point out to my kids the remarkable of example of someone telling the truth or being honest without being compelled to do so in a court of law.

Obviously, this is a Jewish issue.

Sarah Hurwitz in the still remarkable book I mentioned last week and hope to finish this weekend, "Here All Along" observed that, "while the torah may not be a history of a people in a factual sense it is a history of morality"

Our core narrative is not about getting from one physical place to another – Egypt to the promised land as is introduced in this week's Torah portion. Our story is about found in the first words of the Torah, when God creates the world and makes order our of chaos, *tohu v'vohu.*

Judaism is a I think first and foremost a moral ethic, its rituals designed to reinforce that ethic, its texts designed to challenge and grapple with that ethic. Even our view on life and the afterlife are about living not a life of faith, but a life of goodness, godliness. Its not about what you think in Judaism, we are judged on what we do. The measure of a good life is good acts and deeds.

I have shared before that the Talmud teaches that the first question you are asked when you die according to Jewish folklore is not did you keep kosher, observe the sabbath, even give tzedakah. The first question, and therefore the most important measure of your life is, "were you honest in business?"

Because to be honest in business is to have integrity, is to be in a position of power where you can deceive and take advantage of another who is nonethewiser and to not do that thing.

But to be more specific what's the issue with lying and cheating in Judaism?

First, of course, Judaism condemns lying, one need only look to the 9th commandment against bearing false witness or the 7th commandment about adultery to see in very concrete terms (that was a pun, 10 commandments written on stone tablets and all); that Judaism forbids such behaviour.

But our tradition recognizes that lying and cheating involves more than breaking the rules.

A Hebrew phrase used in the Talmud to indicate cheating is *geneivat da'at*, which literally means the theft of the mind or in other words, cheaters who intentionally mislead or deceive others to gain undeserved goodwill are considered thieves.

"There are seven kinds of people who are guilty of stealing," our sages teach. "First among them are people who misrepresent themselves to others" (Tosefta, Baba Kama 7:3)."

The 8th commandment, right in the middle of not to cheat and not lie declares Lo Tignov / thou shall not steal.

The GREATEST sin in this category is *geneivat da'at* intentionally deceiving another.

Geneivat da'at goes beyond lying. Any words or actions that cause others to form incorrect conclusions about one's motives are a violation of this prohibition.

the Torah explicitly states (Ex 23:7) 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'

The sages believed that there are seven types of thieves and, of these, the most egregious is the one who "steals the minds" of people.

The Talmud gives the following example: a storekeeper is not permitted to sprinkle his store with wine or oil because he "steals the minds" of people. The problem with sprinkling one's store with a superior-quality, fragrant wine is that it may fool customers into believing that all the wine sold in the store is of the same high quality. People tend to rely on their sense of smell when purchasing products such as wine or oil.

Sports in this instance serves as a good example of the moral world Judaism envisions. Not that Jews were ever envisioned to be great athletes, in fact just the opposite, the

rabbis of the Talmudic period rejected the Hellenistic and Roman focus on sports and athleticism.

But sports offered a world where a higher standard applied, where everyone plays by the same rules, is held accountable for breaking those rules and strives to be the very best at what they do.

Under a sportsmanship model, healthy competition is seen as a means of cultivating personal honor, virtue, and character. It contributes to a community of respect and trust between competitors and in society. The goal in sportsmanship is not simply to win, but to pursue victory with honor by giving one's best effort.

That is inseparable from the Jewish ethic on how one lives a moral life. In Judaism of course life is not a game it is deadly serious, much more like Olympic level competition, where the athlete or in this case simply the moral human being is constantly examining their actions, *hesbone hanefesh*, sharpening their tools and approach, trying to always be a better version of themselves. In sports the goal is to win the game, in Judaism the goal is to win life. To receive the greatest reward of all, to be remembered for blessing, a mensch!

Jewish ethics are grounded in the Holiness Code – *Kidoshim T'hiyu* – YOU SHALL BE HOLY, an *or lagoyim* a light or example to the nations.

The purpose of Mitzvot like *Geneivat da'at* is to inculcate character traits that make people virtuous, a task that secular ethical systems gave up on long ago.

Alan Mittleman Professor of Jewish Thought at the Jewish Theological Seminary calls this a "perfectionist ethic," and he concedes that it is "austere, demanding, and uncompromising." Nonetheless, he believes, and I and our tradition agree that such an ethic "opens up new possibilities for what a flourishing, well-lived life entails. Never being satisfied with our own behavior gives us a purpose for how we greet tomorrow."

How do we live as a good moral and ethical Jews?

- We remain unabashedly unsatisfied with our character at every moment – placing ourselves on a path to perpetual improvement.
- A good Jew says, "I can do better, I can be better' and we study, pray, practice and reflect on that at every day, 'At home and when we walk upon the way, when we lie down and when we rise up.'

I watch the news, like many of you I find it hard to turn away and I yearn for and pray for a world that maybe never existed, a world of a messianic age where among the many remarkable and sacred and holy things people are honest with each other, they tell the truth, they don't lie, cheat or steal.

As a sports fan one of the only places I thought you could get a glimpse of that was in sport, but cheating has been going on there as long as has been competition, at younger and younger levels.

So where does that world exist? It exists here in this shul, in this community, in the mikdash this sanctuary. this container of holiness and it can exist in out homes, the mikdash m'at the sanctuary in miniature.

As they say in the Broadway showtune, if we can make it here (in our homes our synagogue), then we can make it anywhere; and well that's the best news I've heard in a long time.