

Breaking Faith:

Can We Handle the Truth?

Parashat Naso 5775
Rabbi Joshua Hammerman
Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

דְּבַר, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אִישׁ אוֹ-אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשׂוּ מִכָּל-חַטָּאת הָאֵדָם, לַמַּעַל מֵעַל בִּיהוָה; וְאָשָׁמָה, הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא.

“When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow human, *thus breaking faith with God*, and a person realizes that guilt, s/he shall confess the wrong that has been done.” *Numbers 5:7*

“Every breach of faith is a form of theft, **stealing another’s trust** under false pretenses, using one’s God-given talents for a purpose other than that which God intended.”
(Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Alter of Ger)

“Most of us lie and are lied to on a regular basis. The lies run the gamut from “I like sushi” to “I love you.” Even though we are more likely to deceive strangers than friends, we save our most serious lies for those we care about the most.”
(Ralph Keyes, “The Post Truth Era”)

“Truth has been replaced by “believability.” (Daniel Boorstin)

SOURCE MATERIAL (Compiled by David Blumenthal for “Torah Sparks,” USCJ)

- 1) A form of thievery that is considered particularly bad according to our tradition is the stealing of another person's trust under false pretenses. In Leviticus 19:11, we read: "You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully with one another." Samuel said: "The Commandment 'Do not steal' includes the prohibition against stealing a man's mind with misleading words. No one may steal a person's mind, not even a pagan's" (Talm. Hullin 94a)
- 2) There are seven sorts of thieves, and the first of them all is he who steals the mind of (i.e. deceives) another person. For example, he who makes a show of wanting to give gifts to someone, knowing full well that the person will not accept them (Talm. BK, vii, 8) or a person who presses someone to come to a lavish meal, while knowing in advance that the other person will not accept the invitation. (Talm. BB, vi, 14)
- 3) A merchant may not combine different grades of produce in one bin. A wine salesman whose wine has become diluted with water may not sell it unless he makes it known to his customer, and in any event, he may not sell it to another vendor, even if he makes full disclosure, for fear that the second salesman will deceive his customers. (Talm. BM, iv:11)
- 4) What follows here is an example of how our Jewish ancestors strictly avoided benefiting from any form of behavior which even mistakenly might have been derived by deceiving others. It shows how far reaching and how serious the prohibition of mental theft was taken.

Rabbi Safra was once saying his morning prayers when a customer came by to buy his donkey. Because he refused to interrupt his prayers, Rabbi Safra did not answer. Interpreting the rabbi's silence as disapproval of the price offered, the buyer offered a higher amount. When the rabbi still did not answer, the buyer raised his offer again. After the rabbi finished his prayers, he said to the buyer, "I had decided to sell you my donkey at the first price you mentioned, but I did not want to interrupt my prayers to speak to you. Therefore, you may have it at that price - I will not accept the higher bids." (Aha of Shabha, Babylonian scholar, 680-752 C.E., She'iltot, section 252; quoted from F. Klagsburn, Voices of Wisdom, p.308)

- 5) "Whoever reports a saying in the name of its originator brings the world toward redemption" (Pirkei Avot 6:6) From Judaism's perspective, a person who takes credit for a statement made by another is a double thief, misappropriating the credit that belongs to the statement's originator, while deceiving listeners into thinking higher of his intelligence than he deserves. (J. Telushkin, Jewish Wisdom, p.52)

Excuses, excuses, excuses: Why people lie, cheat, and procrastinate

By Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D. Created May 18 2010 - (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

Have you ever lied to get out of something you didn't want to do? Do you tend to put off unpleasant jobs? In school, did you ever make up an excuse? Cheat on a test? Most people have had one of these experiences. According to my colleague Bob Feldman (Author of "The Liar in Your Life"), the majority of the population lies, often without feeling remorse. Why do people do this? And why does lying, cheating, and procrastinating prevent us from achieving fulfillment?

On college campuses, students have notorious reputations for putting things off till the last minute or failing to complete assignments or tests at all. Cheating is perceived by instructors as so pervasive that we develop elaborate honor systems and codes to prevent it. In workplaces, bosses and coworkers know that employees bend, stretch, and distort the truth. Shows like NBC's "The Office" put these behaviors in a humorous light, and everyone can relate to these plot lines, no matter how ludicrous they may get. But we know that preventing these behaviors is about as likely to be successful as stemming the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. We can put up protective barriers, try to put the lid on this behavior, or attempt to break it into small bits, but there's no way to eliminate it completely.

I have long been interested in the topic of student excuses, lying, and cheating, both from an instructional and a theoretical point of view. My interest was first piqued by an article I read in a higher education newspaper which accused college professors of killing off the grandparents. The most typical student excuse for exams, missed papers, and the like, claimed the article's author, was the death of a grandparent. Some students have, according to this article, killed off not just 4 but as many as 8 or 10 grandparents in the course of their college careers. Even in a blended family, 10 grandparents would be an unbelievable number. Obviously, said the author, these kids are just making the whole thing up.

In a previous post on the topic of grandparenting I talked a bit about the grandparent excuse, but I'd like to revisit it here from a different vantage point. Students (or should I say professors) do not actually kill the grandparents in their excuses. An anonymous survey I conducted on my college campus of several hundred students showed that students didn't use dead grandparents as excuses. Instead their most likely fake excuse was "family emergency." In fact, when grandparents die, it is a devastating event for many young people. And they don't just die on exam week or the day a paper or job is due. Instructors (and employers) only know about the death of grandparents when the event coincides with one of these deadlines. But the family emergency- that is a different matter altogether. "Emergency" conjures up the image of inevitability and unavoidability. "Family" is vague enough to cover anything from a sister's toothache to an uncle's decision to uproot his family and move across the country. This excuse is one size fits all.

As an instructor, I face these issues all the time. I try to handle each case fairly. Students in one class I teach (a very large lecture) must fill out an "Excuse Form" which my teaching assistants and I evaluate and vote on before accepting or rejecting. We are looking to weed out liars but also to make fair and consistent rulings. Most of the time, I think the system works. However, there are always exceptions, some of them quite extreme. My teaching assistants and I spend probably what is inordinate time and energy trying to sift out the grains of truth. I'm pretty sure we do a good job, but I know there are students who slip through the cracks. Let's start with the case of 23-year-old Adam Wheeler who was indicted for faking not only his college application to Harvard but also scholarship applications including the Rhodes and Fulbright. He'd already been suspended for academic dishonesty from Bowdoin College before lying his way into Harvard. Ultimately he got caught when he wrote his own letters of recommendation for those prestigious scholarships.

By about age 2.5-3 about 70% of children are capable of lying, and some can do it well. At age four, they will peek when told not to do so. Young children will lie about actions, but not about how they feel. By age 10 they are more sophisticated because they can pretend. As they get older, cheating becomes more common. In a self-test experiment in which they were asked to take a test but not look at the answers on the back of the page, 40% routinely cheated (60% if there was a reward for performance). 100% of those who cheated lied about doing so. In experiments at the University of Massachusetts, students were encouraged to introduce themselves to others. Over 60% lied about themselves (3 times every 10 minutes!), made up fictitious information to make themselves look better, yet there was no benefit to the lie. (source: <http://faculty.css.edu/dswenson/web/OB/lying.html>)

Adolescent Lying: What it costs and what to do.

Teenage lying creates problems for the liar most of all.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/surviving-your-childs-adolescence/200903/adolescent-lying-what-it-costs-and-what-to-do>

Post published by Carl E Pickhardt Ph.D. on Mar 29, 2009 in Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence

When their child enters adolescence and begins acting more evasively to get more room to grow, parents may begin to wonder: "Whatever happened to the truth?" Not that their little girl or boy was always honest, but their teenager seems more prone to lie both by commission (telling a deliberate falsehood) and by omission (not voluntarily disclosing all that parents need to know.)

Why do adolescents tend to lie more than children? Usually for freedom's sake - to escape punishment for misbehavior or to get to do what has been forbidden. To many teenagers, lying seems to be the easy way to get out of trouble or to get to do some adventure that has been disallowed. As described in an earlier blog about mid-adolescence (ages 13 - 15), because of the intense push for freedom at this stage, this is often when the most frequent lying seems to occur.

Lying is deceptive for adolescents in more ways than one because deceiving others proves deceptively complex. What seems simpler at the moment proves more problematic over time. The "easy way out" turns out to be extremely expensive, particularly for teenagers who have gotten so deeply into lying that they feel trapped in a world of dishonesty, a world of their own fabrication. To these young people, it can be helpful for parents to itemize the high cost of lying in order to encourage a return to truth. What to tell their errant teenager? Explain some common costs that liars pay.

1) LIARS INJURE THOSE THEY LOVE. Parents who are lied to can feel hurt because lies take advantage of their trust, can feel angry because of being deliberately misled, and can feel frightened because now they don't know what to believe and so feel out of control. Liars can feel guilty about they damage to loved ones that they do.

2) LIARS ARE DOUBLE PUNISHED. Lying is a gamble. If the teenager is not found out, then there is no punishment; but if the teenager is found out, he or she is often punished twice - first for the offense, and second for lying about it. Liars double up the consequences for getting caught.

3) LIARS COMPLICATE THEIR LIVES. Liars have to remember two versions of reality: what they actually did (the truth of what happened) and the lie they told about what they did (the falsehood they created.) Keeping this distinction clear proves twice as complicated as telling the truth. Liars have to manage double lives.

4) LIARS LIVE IN FEAR. Concealing the truth, liars have to live in hiding. They wonder and worry whether the deception they created will hold up or come crashing down around them if they are caught. Liars live in fear of being found out.

5) LIARS FEEL OUT OF CONTROL. Covering up one lie with another, pretty soon liars lose track of all the lies they've told. They find it harder and harder to keep their story straight. Liars can't remember all the lies they've told.

6) LIARS HURT THEMSELVES. Because they lack the courage to own up to the truth of their actions, liars live a coward's life. Each time they deny the truth, they don't dare to be honest. Liars lower their self-esteem.

7) LIARS ARE LONELY PEOPLE. To avoid questions and to keep from being found out, liars distance themselves from those to whom the lies were told. They become isolated from family and friends they have deliberately misled. Liars cut off closeness to those they care about and love.

8) LIARS BECOME CONFUSED. Lying to others can become confusing when liars start believing the untruths they've told. The more often they tell the lie, the more likely they are to believe it. Liars start by deceiving others, but they end by fooling themselves.

9) LIARS OUTSMART THEMSELVES. A lie is a trick to get others to believe what really isn't so. It assumes others are gullible or stupid. But most lies don't hold up. They don't last. They are discovered. Liars are not as smart as they like to think.

10) LIARS ARE OFFENSIVE. Each time they are found out, liars must deal with people who dislike being manipulated by lies and resent the liar. Liars live with a lot of angry people.

11) LIARS ARE HARD TO BELIEVE. The more lies are found out, the less easy it becomes for liars to be believed when they are actually telling the truth. Liars lose credibility.

12) LIARS ARE STRESSED. It takes a lot of energy, attention, and effort to keep up a false impression all the time. It's nerve-wracking and fatiguing to keep so many phony stories straight. Liars live under a lot of pressure.

13) LIARS DREAM OF GETTING CAUGHT. After paying their dues for lying by accepting consequences, liars often welcome discovery because now they can get back on an honest footing with people. They can stop living in hiding and can lead a simpler life based on truth. Liars are relieved to be found out.

14) LIARS LEARN THE LESSON OF LYING. Liars discover that it is far easier to be the person lied to than to be the one who has been telling all the lies. Liars learn that though it can be hard to tell the truth, it makes life even harder when they lie.

Whatever the teenager's reason, parents need to treat lying seriously. The quality of family life depends as much as anything on the quality of communication. Lying can erode that quality to devastating effect. An extreme example is lying about substance abuse to conceal what is really going on. There is no trust

without truth. There is no intimacy without honesty. There is no safety without sincerity. And there is no such thing as a small lie because when parents overlook one lie they only encourage the telling of another.

So, when the adolescent lies, what might parents helpfully do?

1. Explain the high costs of lying so the teenager understands the risks that go with dishonesty, and how the liar ends up mistreating himself most of all.
2. Declare how it feels to be lied to so the teenager understands the emotional impact of being lied to.
3. Apply some symbolic reparation - a task the teenager must do that he or she would not ordinarily have to do, to work the offense off.
4. Insist on a full discussion about the lying - why it occurred, how the teenager could have chosen differently so that lying did not occur, and what he is going to do to prevent further lying.
5. Declare that lying in the family will always be treated as a serious offense. Explain how now is later, how if they let his lying go now the young person is more likely to lie in significant relationships later on.
6. Finally, state that you intend to reinstate trust and the expectation of truth in order to give him a chance to resume an honest relationship and so you do not drive your selves crazy with distrust. Most important, explain you reinstate trust because in a healthy family people should be able trust each other to tell the truth. If lying occurs again, repeat the sequence. You can't stop the teenager from choosing to lie, but you can definitely treat lying as something that needs to stop.

In closing, remember the Ten Most Common Adolescent Lies:

1) "I already did it."

2) "I didn't do it."

3) "I'll do it later."

4) "I didn't know."

5) "I forgot."

6) "I didn't think you'd mind."

7) "I didn't know that's what you meant."

8) "I didn't think you were serious."

9) "It wasn't my fault."

10) "It was an accident."

The Truth About Lying

All kids tell whoppers sometimes. The way you handle it can determine whether the fibs fade or become a big, fat problem. Evie

<http://www.parents.com/kids/development/behavioral/lying/>

Spengler is a born storyteller. Nabbed standing on a step stool trying to open the front door, the quick-thinking 2-year-old claimed she was really locking it. "Fiona 'unwoked' it first," she explained, insisting that the family dog had been escaping. "She has all kinds of crazy stories," says her mother, Jennifer, of La Jolla, California. "If she wants a Hello Kitty Band-Aid, she'll say she's bleeding because a big bunny kicked a ball at her. If she makes a mess, she'll blame her older sisters, even when they're at school. My husband and I can laugh about her tales in private, but we hope they're not a sign of bigger dishonesty to come."

Child-development experts used to be unsure if young children were capable of telling a lie. Sure, they could pretend, joke around, report things incorrectly. But deliberately attempt to deceive another person? Now they know what many parents already suspected: All kids do it. Victoria Talwar, Ph.D., a leading researcher on the subject at McGill University, in Montreal, says that the act of manipulating the truth for personal gain "is a developmental milestone, much like learning to get dressed by yourself or to take turns." Indeed, studies show that bright kids (who are capable of making up a story and getting others to believe it) can pick up the skill as early as age 2 or 3. And their peers catch up quickly: By age 4, Dr. Talwar says, it's game on -- all children stretch the truth at times.

Fortunately, just because your young child is a frequent fibber doesn't mean she'll grow up to be a big, fat liar. However, you do need to nip this bad habit before it becomes ingrained. Freaking out and screaming at your kid or punishing her won't discourage her -- she may simply become a better liar to avoid getting caught the next time. Instead, follow this approach at each stage of a tall tale.

Before the Spin Begins

You shouldn't wait until you catch your child lying to start discussing the importance of truth and consequences. He'll be more likely to listen to you when he's not on the defensive.

Read All About It. Books can help introduce the subject in a way that doesn't seem accusatory. Try *Princess K.I.M. and the Lie That Grew*, by Maryann Cocca-Leffler, or *Tell the Truth, B.B. Wolf*, by Judi Sierra. You can also share stories about your own childhood lies. "I told my two kids about the time our neighbor yelled at me for stealing grapes from her yard when I was 7," says Carleton Kendrick, a family therapist and the author of *Take Out Your Nose Ring, Honey, We're Going to Grandma's*. "My mother defended me because I told her I had been playing hide-and-seek under the grapevines. But I had really taken the fruit. I felt so guilty about turning her into a liar that I ended up confessing everything."

Set an Example. Kids learn about honesty from you. Think about the message you're sending the next time you concoct an excuse to stay home from work or cancel plans with your in-laws. Even the best-intentioned lie can easily boomerang.

Explain About Exceptions. By age 7 or 8, kids are starting to understand the nuances of "prosocial," or white, lies. These are intended to protect another person's feelings (like telling your aunt you love her present even if you don't). While many experts believe that good intentions mean these non-truths are acceptable, you should make clear to your child that they're a rare exception to the honesty rule.

When There's a Whopper in the Works

You find an elaborate drawing, made in permanent marker, on the bedroom wall. Uh-oh. The culprit knows she's in for it. Can't you just see her little brain toiling to come up with a way to wriggle out of trouble? Even if you sense a con job coming, it's not too late to help her come clean.

Stay Calm. Kids are more likely to lie when they fear your response. In the past, when her daughters, Anya, 4, and Elsie, 2, squabbled loudly, Denise Pearson, of Fort Collins, Colorado, would march into the room and shout, "What's going on?" In a panic, Anya would falsely claim that her younger sister had fallen down -- until, after Pearson's questioning, Anya finally fessed up that she had, in fact, pushed Elsie. Now Pearson simply asks, "Why is Elsie crying?" in a normal tone of voice, and the truth comes out. "If Anya admits that she got angry because Elsie took her toy, I'll say, 'That's frustrating. Why don't you get a different toy to trade with her?'" Pearson explains.

Avoid Setting Her Up. There's no point in asking, "Who ate all the potato chips?" when the bag is empty and your child has greasy fingers and lips. You may want to see if your kid will come forward, but it's not a fair test. Instead, try saying something like, "I see you wanted to have a snack. Please ask next time. If it's not too close to dinner, you'll be able to have a few. Now let's wash up."

Give Kudos for Honesty. Rewarding positive behavior is the best way to make it happen again. When your 5-year-old owns up to accidentally knocking over her big sister's dollhouse, praise her for telling the truth. That doesn't mean she gets off the hook, though. She still has to clean up the mess and apologize, notes Annie Zirkel, a licensed professional counselor in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

After the Truth Comes Out

When your child purposefully lies to you, it can feel like a slap in the face. However, his dishonesty doesn't mean that he's a bad kid or that you're falling short as a parent, so it's important that you avoid overreacting.

Forgive Toddler Fantasies. A young child's lies are often just wishful thinking. "If your kid says, 'There's a pony in the backyard,' smile and say, 'Wouldn't that be fun?' and then move on," says Elizabeth Berger, M.D., a child psychiatrist and author of *Raising Kids With Character*.

Tone Down the Accusations. If your child refuses to be honest about an incident, avoid an inquisition. "Very few people will fess up to a lie when they feel pressed, and that includes kids," says Jennifer Kolari, author of *Connected Parenting: Transform Your Challenging Child and Build Loving Bonds for Life*. Instead, you can say, "I love you, and I want to understand what happened, but some parts of your story aren't making a lot of sense to me. Why don't you take a little time to think about it some more, and then we can talk again." Sooner or later, he'll probably reveal the truth.

Teach The Art Of An Apology. Let your child know that he can make amends for his dishonesty with a simple, "I'm sorry, Mommy." A lie, after all, is merely a mistake. So when he expresses genuine remorse, it's your job to display compassion and forgiveness in return. "With this approach, there's a great chance that you'll raise a reasonably truthful and responsible child," says Zirkel. You'll notice she said "reasonably." Hey, at least she's being honest.

When the Truth Hurts

By the time your child is a preschooler, you can start teaching him how to be honest without being hurtful toward others. "A gracious tone and a smile go a long way toward accomplishing that," says Louise Elerding, author of the You've Got Manners! book series for kids. Be prepared to practice appropriate responses for different scenarios at home so your child knows how to handle them in real life.

Your child receives a disappointing birthday gift.

What she's tempted to say "This isn't what I wanted!"

Tactful alternative "Thank you."

Parent pointers Before gift day, take turns giving random items to each other and then showing your appreciation. When she hands you an old toy, say, "Thanks. How nice of you to think of me." Then have her try it. For a school-age child, challenge her to find something positive (and also truthful) to say about the present, whether it's a banana ("Yellow is a very cheery color") or one of Daddy's ratty old sweaters ("Wow, it feels soft against my skin").

You're having dinner at a friend's house, and your kid is a picky eater.

What he's tempted to say "Yuck. That food looks gross!"

Tactful alternative "No, thank you."

Parent pointers If the offending food has already been dished out, tell your child to say nothing at all -- and refrain from making a sour face. Quietly suggest that he take one bite or simply eat other things on his plate. You might also ask your friend ahead of time if you can bring some fruit or yogurt to be sure there's at least one thing he'll like.

Another preschooler invites yours over for a playdate, but she doesn't want to go.

What she's tempted to say "I don't like playing with you."

Tactful alternative "I have to ask my mommy."

Parent pointers This gives you a chance to find out what really bothers her about the other child -- and help her come up with a polite way to decline the offer.