

The stories in this action-packed parashah reveal the whole gamut of human nature, from evil, violent, egotistical, and thoughtless, to righteous, compassionate, forgiving, and generous. We are constantly making choices, sometimes several times a day. One of our most difficult choices concerns honesty, a notoriously complicated and slippery concept ranging from “white lies” to outright deceit. Starting with Adam and Chava after their encounter with the serpent, the people in our biblical stories have not always been scrupulously truthful. Now we are seeing Abraham continually being rewarded for a few small and two very big lies. To save his own life, Abraham twice orders Sarah to say that she is his sister. In his world, adultery is a serious infraction, but acquiring women through violence is not. In our parashah it is King Avimelech of Gerar, who like Pharaoh last week, is prevented from “acquiring,” i.e., raping, Sarah through HaShem’s intervention. And afterward, both richly reward Abraham. A close reading of both incidents reveals one more likely fabrication. Abraham tells Avimelech, “In any case, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father but not of my mother, and she became my wife.” (18:12) But in the genealogy at the end of Chapter 11 we only find, “the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nachor’s wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. And Sarai was barren; she had no child.” (11:29-30) There is no mention of Sarai-Sarah’s ancestry. Why this subterfuge? If Abraham had mentioned this “fact” about Sarah first, he could have saved all parties, most of all Sarah, from unnecessary stress and shame. Still, HaShem seems not only unbothered, but even complicit. In Abraham’s defense, before he claims that Sarah is “also” his sister, he does admit to Avimelech that he was not entirely honest, because: “I said ‘There is simply no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me on account of my wife.’” (18:11) And in HaShem’s defense, if Abraham is killed, HaShem’s promise to make him the father of a new nation will have been the greatest lie of all, something Moses will bring up twice with HaShem during those turbulent wilderness years. As we know, telling “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” is not always prudent. Sometimes a partial truth, or a “white lie” is the best option. In Talmud Tractate Ketubot 17a, the schools of Hillel and Shammai disagree on what words should be sung when dancing before a bride at her wedding. Hillel advocates “a fair and attractive bride” for all brides, regardless of appearance or infirmities. The strict school of Shammai objects, but as usual, they agree with the Hillel faction: “A person’s disposition should always be empathetic with mankind.” In other words, stretching the truth for the sake of a person’s dignity or domestic peace is not a sin, but rather, a *mitzvah*. The beginning of our parashah offers a few delightful examples of bending and stretching the truth. Abraham’s three visitors are divine messengers, i.e., angels disguised as men, who even act as though they were eating so as not to offend their host. (18:8) Tractate Bava Metzia 86b informs us that three calves were prepared, “in order to feed them three tongues with mustard,” which even back then was a special delicacy! Although they know she is in the tent preparing food, the three guests ask Abraham, “where is Sarah, your wife?” (18:9) Bava Metzia 87a explains that they did this in order to endear her to her husband by accentuating her modesty. But then, Sarah laughs when she hears that she will bear a child at her advanced age, and adds, “And my husband is old.” (18:12) To prevent friction between Sarah and Abraham after Sarah’s truthful, but tactless observation, HaShem asks a question that handily edits Sarah’s statement: “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really give birth, though I am old?’ ...” (18:13) Finally, Sarah brings all this subterfuge to a resounding close by denying that she had laughed, “because she was afraid.” (18:15) Later, her son Isaak (Yitzchak – from the root קחצ – to laugh, giggle, jest, taunt), will use the same “sister” ploy as his father to deceive King Avimelech. Lying bound on that altar, Isaak has every reason to doubt his father’s truthfulness, while at the same time Abraham is likely beginning to wonder about HaShem’s promise to make him the father of multitudes through Isaak. But this time truth prevails. I believe that Abraham’s insistence that HaShem will provide the sacrificial lamb is as much a challenge to HaShem’s sincerity as it is a statement of faith in HaShem’s promise. In a story in Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 8, the angels of truth, kindness, righteousness, and peace dispute the value of creating humanity. “Kindness said, ‘Let him be created, as he performs acts of kindness.’ Truth said, ‘Let him not be created, as he is all full of lies.’ Righteousness said, ‘Let him be created, as he performs acts of righteousness.’ Peace said, ‘Let him not be created, as he is all full of discord.’ What did the Holy One of Blessing do? He took Truth and cast it down to earth. ... And while they were arguing, man had already been created.” Our sages realized that we need truth most of all, for without it, there can be no peace. In the eloquent words of Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978): “Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not ‘happen,’ it requires work.” And this work begins with speaking the truth, but doing so with utmost sensitivity. We humans are indeed full of discord, but we also have the capacity for kindness and righteousness. We can weaponize truth to intimidate our opponents, or we can temper truth with diplomacy without distorting it. Yes, truth is slippery and complicated. It is upon us to learn how to use it judiciously in order to help HaShem achieve peace.

Shabbat shalom!