

Tiferet – Truth
By Alan Morinis

INTRODUCTION TO WEEK THREE

Tomer Devorah says:

The most important thing of all is to refine one's mind by scrutinizing one's thoughts and examining oneself in the course of the give-and-take of conversation. If one finds even a trace of impure thought, one must retract one's words. One should always admit to the truth in order that *tiferet*, the quality of truth, be found there.

In this way, Tomer Devorah directs us towards the *middah* of truth as a way of accessing the sphere of *Tiferet* (which literally translates as “beauty”).

Among the many wise and useful things that have come down to us from Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883), founder of the Mussar movement, was his simple but profound guidance in the realm of truth. “Make sure,” he said, “that your lips do not speak any words that your heart does not know are true.”

Simple enough in theory. But, in fact, the soul-trait of **truth**, or **emet** in Hebrew is anything but simple when seen through a Mussar lens. On the one hand, we get a straightforward message from the first half of a verse from the Book of Proverbs (12:22) that says, “The Lord detests lying lips.” But then the verse continues: “but God delights in people who are trustworthy.” The verse condemns lying but it doesn't praise truth as its opposite. If it would have juxtaposed true and false, it would be simple. But here we are given trustworthy and false. What's the difference? What happened to truth?

We are so prone to deceit that our teachers feel they have to harp on us to take control of our tongues. In the colorful words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1705–1744), “Our sages screeched like cranes about the promiscuous use of lips and ears.” As far back as the 14th century, when Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerondi wrote the classic Mussar text, *Sha'arei Teshuvah* (*Gates of Repentance*), we find a detailed and precise description of the various ways in which people twist and forsake the truth. Apparently, there is nothing new about lying. The text outlines the characteristics of various types of liars, and the point of his careful analysis is to awaken us to our own behavior. As you read through the nine types of liars he dissects, you can't help but identify someone you know—including maybe yourself—whose type of false speech is captured by one of these categories.

In fact, the 14th century is rather recent compared to the age of the Torah, where we also find many instances of false speech. Famous among these is Abraham claiming that his wife, Sarah, was actually his sister (Genesis 20:2). In Genesis 12, he had said the same thing to Pharaoh. Then there is Yaakov impersonating Esau before his blind father, who asks, “Who are you, my son?” to which Yaakov responds falsely, “I am Esau, your firstborn” (Genesis 27:18-19).

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1954), a great recent Mussar teacher, points out that, under circumstances like these, it would actually be prohibited to say things the way they are or the way they occurred. The main criterion to apply, he says, is whether an objectively accurate report would cause harm. If it would, then in that case you are *obligated* to misrepresent things. This leads him to define truth and falsehood in a surprising way: **“Truth is what leads to good and to the fulfillment of God’s will. Falsehood is anything that lends success to the ‘officer’ of *sheker*—the *yetzer ha’ra*—the evil inclination.”**¹ In its simplest sense, he is telling us to equate truth with good and falsehood with evil.

This definition identifies that the primary issue we need to be aware of in regard to truth is not the objective factuality of our words but whether they do or do not cause harm. While the nuances are many (infinite, really), that is the way it should be when we consider the subjective nature of our own personal spiritual curriculum and the efforts we need to make to move ourselves toward being more whole and holy.

¹ *Michtav M’Eliyahu* volume 1, page 94.