

The Virtue of Honesty

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A half a truth is a whole lie (Yiddish Proverb). I believe that honesty is the best policy to follow in life. The reason I believe so is because the world runs on truth. Relationships are built, government treaties are signed, and diplomas are given based upon the trust that both parties are honest with each other. Without honesty the world would cease to function as a dependable institution. To quote Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, "The world endures by virtue of three things: justice, truth and peace..." (Marcus 49). In this essay I will show that honesty is a virtue that should be practiced by all.

As a Jew I strongly believe that telling the truth is not enough, one must live truth and be an embodiment of truth itself. The Jewish Bible, the Torah is known as *Torahas Emes*, the true Torah. As a young child, I was taught that telling the truth was not an option that could be spurned; rather it was the only choice available. The reason for this is because deceiving someone is called in Hebrew *Ginavas Daas*, literally translated as "stealing their knowledge". Withholding truth from someone is belittling them, making them appear stupid. Therefore, the Torah makes it quite clear when it writes in Exodus "*Midvar Sheker Tirchak*" "stay away from saying a lie" (*The Chumash*, Exodus 23:7). The Torah does not state, "don't lie", but rather stay away from it, do not come even close to saying a falsehood.

I remember once taking a lab class that was very hard. The material was difficult to learn, and the tests were even more difficult to take. When it came time for the midterm, my friends and I noticed that there was cheating right, left and center. Everyone was cheating, and not secretly, but openly. So openly that even the professor noticed the cheating but, being intimidated by the class, he laughed and did nothing about it. My friends and I were horrified,

but what could we do except not cheat, and thereby hold on to our own values, regardless of what everyone else was doing. The temptation was there to cheat and I so badly wanted to do well on my exam, and in addition, the professor did not seem to mind. But, I knew that if I cheated, I would never be able to look myself in the face again. Cheating was not an option for me, even when it was standing out in the open like this. I wish I could say that the professor failed everyone and that I and my friends were the only ones to get A's, but that is not what happened. I got a C, while the rest of the class did very nicely. But I know that the grade I got was the one I deserved, the one I studied for and no one can ever take that grade away from me. The story does not end here. Later on I was speaking to two of the girls who were the ringleaders of the cheating crew, and we got into the usual discussion of when we would graduate and what courses we plan on taking. It turned out that those two girls were planning on becoming teachers, one was going on to become a high school history teacher and the other was to become a third grade teacher. I did not ask how they reconciled the fact that they cheated to do well and that they were planning on teaching young children not to cheat, but they offered the information themselves. They bemoaned the fact that they had to take all these useless courses that they were never going to need again and that it was going to lower their GPA. Apparently, cheating is okay so long as you do it for the "good" purpose of maintaining a high GPA.

As horrifying as this story may seem, apparently it is not at all unique. *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported that students at Stuyvesant High School cheated on their Finals and State Regents (Fleisher). Cheating exists even at the university level. In August *The New York Times* reported to a cheating scandal at Harvard. The students cheated on a take-home exam, by taking the exam together, which was prohibited (Perez-Pena).

Why would people cheat, and lie and be dishonest? In my opinion it is because too much emphasis is put on getting the best grade, an A, in order to get into the best college, in order to get the best job, so that they may live the best lifestyle i.e.: a wealthy one, but not a necessarily virtuous one. Getting average grades, like B's and C's is not good enough anymore. Only an A will suffice. I remember when I learned abroad for a year, my professor – who was from England- told us that it was fine by him if we got a 70 or higher on his exam. In his words, “girls I don't mind if you get a 70. I do not believe in the American concept that only a 90 or above is good enough”. The raising of the bar did not increase American intelligence, rather it created a system in which the only way to succeed is by doing it illegitimately. The legitimate path just means you end up with a C.

One of the ways in which this came about in the U.S. is through a system which was meant to help Americans scholastically, but unfortunately it backfired into a mess of cheating scandals in which sometimes even educators are helping with the cheating. This system is known as the No Child Left Behind Act. The Standardized English Test in New York had a passage that was ludicrous and contained absurd questions in which students were confused and amused (*The New York Times*, Hartocollis). This type of testing is intended to ensure that students are up to par educationally across the country. The scary part is that this test is also designed to weed out bad teachers who are not teaching well. This leads the teachers to feel pressured into helping the students cheat in order to assure them of their jobs (*The New York Times*, Dewan).

America has now created a society in which the highest virtue is that to be the best not to act the best. Despite all that I see around me, I know that the best way to live is to be honest. I have the authority of the Torah on this. In addition, I also see around what happens when people lie. They end up regretting it, and they end up paying much more than had they not lied. On

September 20<sup>th</sup> 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the top ten sentences dealing with fraud. All of the cases were on wealthy men attempting to get even wealthier through dishonest means (Rubinfeld). All of these men were already wealthy, yet they wanted the best of the best, to be even wealthier. The only way was through illegal activities, and they choose it rather than be honest, but less rich. Looking at these men, all caught, and facing criminal charges that cost so much more financially and in the embarrassment they and their families must be undergoing, one wonders if it was worth it? Clearly, not at all. I am sure that all these men would have been happier being honest, but a little less wealthy.

A new study done by the American Psychological Association shows that people who lie less, are healthier than those who lie more (Kelly). Reading up on this study shows how much better it is to just tell the truth and be honest. Besides practicing a virtue, a person also gains health, and gets to live longer.

I would just like to end off by saying that I am very happy to practice the virtue of honesty. I am also amazed at how much blatant cheating and corruption exists in America today, yet looking at the results I would be forced to admit that most of the cheaters are not truly happy with their lives, they always want something better, something more. I am reminded of a famous quote from Ben Zoma "Who is the rich? He who is happy with his lot" (Marcus 15). Once people are happy with their lot, they will be honest and not try to acquire more riches using illegal means.

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